

The Naked Woman and the Naked Self:  
Two Parables about Bodies, Clothing and Selfhood

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I want to begin with two stories about the relationship between selfhood and clothing.

One such story is from Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*:

. . . a peasant . . . went barefooted to town with enough money to buy himself a pair of stockings and shoes and to get drunk, and in trying to find his way home in his drunken state, he fell asleep in the middle of the road. A carriage came along, and the driver shouted to him to move or he would drive over his legs. The drunken peasant woke up, looked at his legs and, not recognizing them because of the shoes and stockings, said: "Go ahead. They are not my legs."<sup>1</sup>

The other story is "The Parable of the Naked Lady", written by Anne Spurgeon in a class given by Rosemary Radford Reuther:

The young women gathered round him and one of them asked, "Master, tell us what is the best image of womanhood that we can become? We feel uncertain about the ways of our mothers." And Jesus said to her, "Women, what you ask is something I can not decide for you." And he told them a parable, saying: A naked woman sat at the crossroads where the road that went north and south met the road going east and west. People passed her; some were ashamed, some were angry, but most looked upon her with disapproval. Some threw clothes at her -- all different types, colors and sizes. The woman knew she was naked, but did not lift a finger to cover herself.

There was a woman in a golden gown who stopped her journey and went to the naked woman saying, "Take my dress. See how beautiful it is, a golden brocade covered with pearls and diamonds." She took off the garment and handed it to the naked woman who instantly

felt its weight. "This is very heavy," said the naked woman. The elaborate woman nodded. "The wearer of that gown must always look beautiful, must always act charming, must remain still and maintain beauty for her husband. She must constantly display her husband's wealth no matter what its cumbrance. She must not lose her figure nor grow old. She must put up with her husband's temperament, appetites and decisions."

"I do not want this dress," said the naked woman. "Here, take it back." But instead, the elaborate woman threw the dress in a heap by the side of the road. She sat down next to the naked woman.

There was a woman in a simple gray dress who stopped her journey and went to the naked woman saying, "Take my dress. See how simple it is; it takes no special care and is easy to move in." She handed the dress to the naked woman, who felt that its burden was also great.

"What causes the weight of this dress?" she asked.

"Thankless toil," said the simple woman. "Years of washing, scrubbing, vacuuming, diapering, cooking, chauffeuring, arguing, punishing, remembering, organizing and catering. The wearer of that dress is forever the backbone of her home -- she can never tire, get sick, leave, be alone or cultivate her own interests. She loses her color and her youth and watches as her man's eye looks elsewhere for beauty."

"Here, take back your dress," said the naked woman. But the simple woman put her dress with the golden dress by the side of the road. She sat down next to the elaborate woman and the two began to argue about whose garment had been the heaviest. The three women sat at the crossroads.

There was a woman in a short red dress who stopped her journey and went to the naked woman. "My dress might suit you. It is easy to get in and out of and is very soft and alluring. Here." She handed the dress to the naked woman. "Don't be deceived," said the sensuous woman. "It too is heavy laden."

"Why?" asked the naked woman.

“The wearer of this dress must bear the burden of frigid wives. She must always be available for the sexual demands of men. She is the keeper of lies and deceits, and must endure the hate of women who do not like what she does, but wish they had her power. The woman who wears this dress must open her legs to feed herself, to clothe herself, to house herself, and to care for any misbegotten offspring. She must always be soft and sensuous, bold and enterprising, calculating and owned. She lives with the knowledge that she must always welcome men who never stay.”

“This dress will not do either,” said the naked woman. “Take it back.” But the sensuous woman tossed the red dress among the others at the side of the road and sat down next to the simple woman. She joined in the argument that had not let up.

There was a woman in a long black habit who stopped her journey and went to the naked woman. “My child,” she said, “you are naked, let me clothe you. Here, take my habit. It is warm and safe.”

“Safe?” questioned the naked woman. “It’s weight is very great.”

“Yes,” said the holy woman. “It holds the secrets of a hundred thousand souls. One must be very strong to wear it, but must show that strength in silence and servitude. The wearer of this habit must understand birth, but never bear; must understand the cravings of the flesh, but never experience them; must understand the ways of the world, but never be part of it. The woman who wears this must sacrifice herself constantly for the needs of others and never fill her own. She must punish herself for thoughts and longings that extend beyond the confines of cloistered walls.”

“I am neither cold nor fearful,” said the naked woman. “Take back your habit.” But the holy woman placed the habit with the other dresses at the roadside and sat and entered into the argument that continued between the elaborate woman, the simple woman and the sensuous woman.

There was a woman in a grey suit who stopped her journey and went to the naked woman saying, “Here, this tweed would look smart on you. Its lines are professionally tailored to give a serious appearance.” She handed the suit to the naked woman.

“Now why does *this* garment carry so much weight?”

“Don’t be fooled by its professional appearance. The wearer of this suit must live in the sterile world and must never be part of any of the worlds you have seen so far. This woman must never be beautiful and artistic, for that would distract people from the business at hand; she must never bear children or have any relationship that would slow her progress to the top of her field. She must never be sensuous, for she would then be the mark of wolves who would find any way to destroy her and her power. She must also endure being mocked as a dyke by those who fail to understand the purposes behind her sexlessness. She must never be holy, for the world of the spirit weakens the power of the world of the rational. It is seen as foolishness and gets in the way of advancement with its silly notions of ethics and morality. So the wearer of the dress must remain closed like a prison against all outside forces that would drain her of her power.”

“Your world is frightening,” said the naked woman. “Take back your suit.” But the professional woman tossed her suit among the other garments, sat and joined in the argument, insisting that of all the other garments, hers had been the heaviest.

The women argued beside the naked woman far into the night. At some point their argument changed from self-pity to blame upon the other. As each experienced the pointed finger of the others, she began to see that there were things about her dress that were worthy and good. There were things that each was not ashamed of or encumbered by.

“I know how to enjoy my body, to feel the pleasure of physical love,” said the sensuous woman.

“Oh, teach me that,” said the holy woman, “and I will teach you the wonder of the quest for union with God.”

“I know how to organize a large business and make it run smoothly, and how to handle many things in the face of emergency,” said the professional woman.

“Oh, teach me,” said the elaborate woman,”and I will teach you how to make yourself beautiful so that you can enjoy the appearance of your body.”

“Teach me my attraction also,” said the simple woman,”and I will teach you how to bear and love a child.”

New life sprang up among the women and they fashioned for themselves garments out of the clothing that had piled at the side of the road, each unique and sharing parts of each. As they taugth and worked, the naked woman got up and walked to the next intersection east of them; and sat down.

And Jesus said to the young women, “Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.”<sup>2</sup>

These two stories, through the metaphors of bodies and clothing, depict the relationship between selfhood and the “externals” of one’s life (including the contingent or accidental relationships one has with other people; the physical, social, cultural, and political circumstances of one’s life; and the way in which these contingencies or accidental features leave traces upon one’s inner world). Despite their differences, both stories illustrate a view of selfhood in which the core identity of a person is arrived at by means of abstracting the self from externals.

I will begin with a discussion of Kierkegaard’s view of selfhood (based on his book *Sickness Unto Death*). Next I will discuss possible interpretations of “The Parable of the Naked Lady” in light of Kierkegaard’s views. Finally I will provide brief sketches of some psychoanalytic theorizing that exemplifies an alternative view of the tension between what is “internal” and “external” to the self and suggest some advantages of such a view.

### **Kierkegaard's Anthropology**

*The Sickness Unto Death* presents Kierkegaard's view of the healthy self as a conscious and responsible relating of one's finitude and infinitude, necessity and possibility, determinateness and freedom. For Kierkegaard, the healthy self is the process of choosing and maintaining a tension between these opposing aspects of one's nature, a process that is possible only through faith in God.

Despair and sin, on the other hand, are ways of talking about illnesses of the self to which we are prone. For Kierkegaard, both despair and sin can take the form of either a lack of acknowledgement of one's determinateness and one's limits, on the one hand, or a lack of acknowledgement of one's capacity for agency and freedom and the responsible appropriation of the givens in one's self, on the other hand. Defiant despair and sin (or masculine despair and sin) are, in effect, a refusal of one's determinateness and finitude. The despair and sin of weakness (or feminine despair and sin) are a refusal of the freedom and agency that are essential to the self.

This is where the story of the peasant comes in. The peasant cannot recognize himself because he has forgotten that he changed his appearance by putting stockings and shoes on his feet. He is the "man of immediacy" who identifies his self with externals. For Kierkegaard, he illustrates the type of person who lacks virtually any reflection or consciousness and thus lacks selfhood. He is the type of the despair and sin of weakness which lacks inwardness or self-consciousness.

In Kierkegaard's analysis of the gradations of despair, the despair of this type of person is the lowest form of the despair of weakness. According to Kierkegaard, when this type of person despairs, he wishes to be someone else. In other words, he wants to exchange the externals of his life for those of someone else. Kierkegaard intends for the story to show how comical the man of pure immediacy is, since he has mistaken his self for something that has nothing to do with who he really is. In fact, for Kierkegaard, this kind of person has no self because he/she does not recognize the eternal in the self.

The precondition for a healthy self is the “consciousness of a self that is won by infinite abstraction from every externality” or a “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.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus the images of clothing and nakedness in Kierkegaard’s story of the peasant and his subsequent use of the terms “naked self” and “fully clothed self” demonstrate Kierkegaard’s conceptualization of the inwardness of the self (which for him means the possibility of consciousness and choice) as something achieved by abstracting the self from externals. For Kierkegaard, the way out of despair lies through an increase of consciousness and the taking on of responsibility for oneself. Consciousness and taking responsibility for oneself do not necessarily lead to a healthy self (they can just lead to the more defiant forms of sin), but they are preconditions for authentic selfhood.<sup>4</sup> And for the self to achieve consciousness and responsibility involves an abstraction of what is eternal in one’s self from the transient externals of one’s life.

One might jump to the conclusion that Kierkegaard excludes external (physical, social, cultural) determinations from having an input into the structure of the self (just as in the story, one might come to the conclusion that Kierkegaard thinks that clothes are completely irrelevant to an individual’s selfhood and identity). This is not so. For Kierkegaard, the “naked self”, abstracted from every externality, becomes responsible for the actual concrete self. The actual concrete self includes all kinds of externally determined qualities. By reflection, the self abstracts itself from externals and becomes infinite but also assumes responsibility for the actual, concrete self.

Benevolently interpreted, it is as if Kierkegaard first has a person remove the clothes from his/her essential self and then has the person put them back on and say, “I take possession of my self as both having been given and also in the past having chosen these particular articles of clothing.”

### **Clothing and Nakedness in “The Parable of the Naked Lady”**

In “The Parable of the Naked Lady”, the images of clothing represent the attempts of women to construct new identities for themselves. At first reading, one might think that this parable highlights the importance of appropriate clothing as constitutive of one’s selfhood and identity. However, upon further consideration, the significance of nakedness in the story seems to be purposefully ambiguous.

In discussions of this parable in undergraduate feminist theology classes, I have found that the role of the naked lady elicits different kinds of reactions. For some students, the naked lady is clearly the most attractive role model in the parable. She is a challenge to the status quo by virtue of her nakedness. She does not soften the impact of her nakedness by joining in the activity of the other women who first take off their clothes in disgust and anger, fight with each other, and then start combining bits and pieces of each other’s clothes/social skills and functions. In effect, she is interpreted by some students as a symbol of ideal purity of identity -- a woman who has not compromised herself by taking on any of the externals that are a product of our interactions with others.

For other students, the women who resourcefully patch together more comfortable identities out of what is available to them in the stereotypical feminine roles of their culture are the heroines and the potential models to be imitated. These students see the naked woman as a useful catalyst. She disrupts settled patterns and initiates useful change, but the naked woman, for these students, is not a model for a possible way of living one’s life in the world.

I am sympathetic to both kinds of interpretations of the parable because I suspect they come from different patterns of experience of formative interactions with others. The two interpretations are, I would suggest, motivated by the attempt to find conceptual solutions to differing kinds of emotional problems.

For many people, including women who have become aware of the liabilities of a stereotypically feminine personality, relationships to others are perilous, the worst peril being the



inability to even see that a relationship is crippling and destructive to one's selfhood. One can be tempted, seduced, compromised, restricted, and violated by the expectations of others and by the social roles available in one's culture. In such a context, the strength and purity of the self that abstracts itself from externals and maintains its nakedness as inviolable is understandably heroic and attractive.

For other people, including women who have become aware of the assets of a stereotypically feminine personality, the idea of living naked, without clothes, without the influence of social roles and relationships and the symbolic structures of one's culture seems undesirable as well as being an impossibility. For such people, the abstraction of a self from relationships may buy one independence and freedom, but the existence that one has acquired seems cold and lonely.

I tend to think that people whose experience has included some benevolent nurturing and cooperative relationships with others (such as parents, mentors, spouses, and friends) are more likely to think of who one is as constituted by one's social relationships in such a way that the self cannot be extracted from those relationships, whereas those for whom the preponderance of early relationships with others has been unsupportive of their autonomy, integrity, and separate agency are more likely to think of one's identity and selfhood as something that must be won by extricating one's self from the temptations and entanglements of relationships.<sup>5</sup>

Kierkegaard's dialectical view of the self comprehends both kinds of interpretations of the parable. In Kierkegaard's view, the individual needs to divest him/herself of externals in order to become aware of him/herself as having a self that is eternal. Thus the role of the naked lady in getting the other women to take off their clothes is essential to their becoming aware of their selfhood. But, in Kierkegaard's view, the individual also needs to choose how he/she will live in relation to the world and to take responsibility for his/her concrete self. Thus the process of the women arguing and choosing bits of available clothing to clothe themselves is a depiction of the women piecing together concrete identities and taking responsibility for their concrete selves. In

Kierkegaard's view of the self, both the act of divestiture and the putting on of clothes are essential to the process of becoming a self.

From a feminist point of view, Kierkegaard's anthropology is useful, first, because it points out that being a self is an activity. If one takes the position (as many feminists have) that women tend towards an excessive acceptance of the determinations made upon their lives by external others,<sup>6</sup> then Kierkegaard's emphasis on consciousness and on taking responsibility for one's self encourages women to take responsibility for their lives by rising above the externals of their lives. On the other hand, from the point of view of those feminists who value the receptive and relational aspects of femininity, the danger of an emphasis on taking responsibility for oneself as a deliberate and conscious activity is that the capacities of women for relating to external others may be lost in the quest for a transcendent subjectivity and agency that is defined as ever increasing individuality and separateness.<sup>7</sup> Kierkegaard's dialectic between the self as inwardness and the self as concrete is thus potentially useful to both types of feminist concerns about the self's relation to externals--the concern that women not be submerged in and obliterated by their relationships to external others *and* the concern that women not lose their capacity to be sensitive and receptive to their environment.

However, for me, the main problem with Kierkegaard's anthropology (and thus also any feminist use of it) is that it is still a dialectic. What I mean by a dialectic is a model consisting of two polar opposites that are defined by contrast and exclusion of each other, in this case between what is external to the self and what is internal.<sup>8</sup> The questions that I would address to Kierkegaard as well as to feminists who would make use of his anthropology are the following: Is it really necessary or useful to conceptualize what is internal as, essentially and by definition, the opposite of what is external? Is it possible and perhaps useful to conceptualize some things as simultaneously both internal and external to the self? In other words, if we understand the motivation for conceptualizing the self as a "naked self" that also consciously and deliberately chooses to put on certain items of clothing (the motivation is to achieve a leverage point from which we can criticize destructive and corrupting effects of relationships on the self), we can also

ask whether there are other, perhaps better, conceptual tools by which we can achieve the same ends.

### **Psychoanalytic Theory and an Alternative Concept of Selfhood**

My own sources for models of the self that skew the modern exclusionary logic between determinateness and agency--what is external to the self as opposed to internal--are in recent psychoanalytic theory. The psychoanalytic theorists who break new ground on this issue are, for the most part, influenced by object relations theory. According to object relations theory, our selves are put together out of our construals of our relationships with significant others.<sup>9</sup> The self and what is “inside” has its sources in actual early relationships to external others. In infancy and in childhood, these relationships to external others are not and cannot be deliberately and consciously chosen (although from the very beginnings of its existence, the infant already has a temperament and a constitution and thus provides cues and input into the relationships it has with others). In the course of human development, the infant’s social relationships and its experience of the external environment is internalized, thereby constituting the structure of its self. The structure of the self then provides a “set” in the child’s and later in the adult’s relationships with yet more external others.

The individual’s so-called higher capacities (including the capacities for consciousness as reflection and deliberate choice) are not exempt from this process. They also are constituted by means of the individual’s interactions with important others in the early years of development. As pathological cases demonstrate, there is virtually nothing in human development that is inevitable, i.e., that cannot be derailed by the failure to provide an environment that nurtures and facilitates what we take as “natural” and “essential” human capacities. Thus human beings in their development are like plants and non-human animals; they are thoroughly contingent and both sensitive and vulnerable to their environment, even as they develop capacities to rise above, act upon and modify their environment in ways that differ from the ways in which plants and non-human animals can act upon their environment.

Although early childhood is the window of opportunity for the constitution of the self, we continue to use our encounters with others to revise and restructure our selves in important ways. The school of psychoanalytic theory known as self psychology, based on the work of the American psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut<sup>10</sup>, focuses particularly on how all humans, whether mentally ill or normal, need the nurturing soil of actual relationships with others to maintain a healthy sense of self. In self psychological theory, relationships in which one uses others to regulate one's sense of self are called selfobject relationships. Narcissistic personalities are particularly prone to need and, paradoxically, to be unable to use others as selfobjects, but one of the foundational claims of self psychology is the universality and the normality of our use of other people, organizations, situations, and even inanimate objects as selfobjects. Selfpsychology is thus one way of conceptualizing the self as perpetually afloat on the sea of its relationships with others, and thus permanently capable of being helped and hindered by those relationships.

Those psychoanalytic theorists who emphasize that relationships with others are both developmentally constitutive of our selves and also continue to be the basis of one's sense of self throughout the course of a human lifespan are sometimes referred to as relational theorists. Some relational theorists show evidence of a conceptual movement towards what I label as a conceptualization of relationality and individual identity in that they do not construe these two aspects of human selfhood as necessarily opposites. I will focus on two such relational theorists, Jessica Benjamin<sup>11</sup> and Adam Phillips<sup>12</sup>.

Both Benjamin and Phillips rework the persistent dilemma of the developing self with regard to what is "other" -- a dilemma that is already part of Freud's hypotheses about the mental life of infants. Freud assumes that the infant has a primitive fantasy of omnipotence, which is the corollary to his assumption that the infant is, at first, unable to distinguish between the ego (which begins as a body ego) and what is external to the ego.<sup>13</sup> The infant's dilemma is the conflict between a sense of omnipotence and the increasing realization that the external world and external others are genuinely external, i.e., things over which he/she has little or no control. One solution to the dilemma is the attribution of omnipotence to the other. Another

solution is the persistence of the attribution of omnipotence to the self. The solution that is necessary, if the infant is going to mature into a relatively healthy adult, is the giving up of the notion of omnipotence altogether.

Benjamin compares the two pathological solutions as to what to do with the other (maintaining the sense of one's own omnipotence versus attributing omnipotence to the other) to Hegel's picture of the master/slave relationship.<sup>14</sup> The position of attributing omnipotence to the other is an attempt to find one's own agency, subjectivity, and desire in the agency, subjectivity, and desire of the other. This is the masochistic position. The slave subjugates herself to the master in order to find her own desire in the master's desire. (The master does not need to be another person; the master could be contingency or fate.) This position is, in effect, a subjugation of oneself to external determinants in the attempt to find one's self through one's relationship to these external determinants.

The attribution of omnipotence to oneself is the sadistic position. For Benjamin, the master must subjugate the slave in order to get confirmation of his omnipotence. The impossibility of the situation is that, if the master completely subjugates the slave, the slave no longer has enough subjectivity in order to confirm the omnipotence of the master. In effect, the sadistic position can slip into a complete denial of the other and the external and thus of one's own finite nature and one's relation to real others.<sup>15</sup>

One of Jessica Benjamin's arguments is that, although psychoanalytic theory universally acknowledges the need for the developing child to give up on the notion of omnipotence, the model for the development of the individual's relationships to others is also implicitly based on the assumption that human beings will not and cannot give up their yearning for omnipotence and that recognition of others as subjects and agents with whom we can have genuinely mutual relationships is virtually impossible.<sup>16</sup>

She contrasts the infant - mother studies of Daniel Stern<sup>17</sup> to those of Margaret Mahler<sup>18</sup> in order to present a model of relationships where the baseline is not one individual's assertion of omnipotence over the other. The main contrast between Mahler's and Stern's models for infant

development is that in Mahler's model, the infant starts from a sense of oneness and connection with the mother and goes through developmental stages in the direction of an increasing sense of autonomy and separateness. Stern's model reflects the fact that already in the first months after birth, one can find evidence that shows that the infant has both a sense of connection with others and a sense of separateness from others (and thus a primitive notion of "the other"). In Stern's theoretical model, both senses develop. In other words, development is not a matter of the sense of independence gradually wiping out the sense of connectedness.

On the basis of Stern's empirical evidence and his theoretical constructions of the infant's internal world, Benjamin comes up with a model for the self in which the recognition of the other as an independent subject and agent is the baseline. This does not mean that the pathological solutions to the dilemma of what to do with "the other" are not persistent and pervasive.<sup>19</sup> It does mean that conceptually, her model is not skewed towards the inevitability of the master/slave seesaw.

Adam Phillips talks about the human dilemma of what to do with "the other" in terms of the process of illusion and disillusionment. "[I]t is as if the infant -- and later the adult -- has three choices. Either the infant is omnipotent, or the mother is omnipotent, or neither of them is".<sup>20</sup> Using terminology first introduced by Melanie Klein, he says that the third choice is what we can call the depressive position which includes "the acknowledgement that there is no such thing as omnipotence." Phillips himself wants to suggest (and I concur with him) that there is a fourth choice "which looks as though it's somewhere between belief in omnipotence and the abrogation of that belief -- though in actuality I think it is something quite different." Phillips calls this position the acknowledgement of contingency, i.e., of "luck, fortune, accident, coincidence" or "nonintentional or random agency".

According to Phillips, this nonintentional agency says nothing about our own power. It neither enlarges it nor diminishes it.<sup>21</sup> From my point of view, that is why those things that are contingent to our selves as conscious subjects and as agents can both enlarge and diminish our selves, alternately or sometimes simultaneously. In this picture of the self's relation to the world,

contingency is not the polar opposite of agency and freedom. Rather, contingency can be the nurturing soil and very foundation of agency. But it can also be something that limits, hinders, or even totally destroys the possibility of agency.

It is the second role for contingency that has usually dominated our view of it. Nonwilled and thus contingent influences from both animate and inanimate others are (in what I would characterize as modern views of human selfhood) thought to compromise our sense of an agency and subjectivity that is truly our own. In this picture of selfhood, otherness and contingency inevitably (because the self is defined by excluding them) confront us in an intrusive and violent way. Consequently, if the acceptance of otherness and of contingency are also deemed necessary, they are a bitter pill that must be swallowed. In this picture, confrontations with otherness and contingency force us into positions of resentful and obsequious humility, since, after all, it is not natural for us to want to acknowledge otherness or contingency.

One of the virtues of Phillips' discussion is that it brings to the fore the pleasurable possibilities of contingency. Otherness and contingency can just as easily be conceived of as a source of pleasure, stimulation, or as an elicitation of desire. An object that is other than my body and which I do not intentionally manipulate can touch me as a tickle, as a caress, as a stimulating pressure, as an interesting smell, as an invitation to further contact (or in an infinite variety of other ways). My relationship to another subject, whom I do not control or manipulate, can be perceived as a delightful opportunity for a temporary merger of an altogether different kind, or an opportunity to taste something completely new. Even if my relationships with other subjects and with contingent circumstances are constitutive of my very capacities to function as a human person (as they are in early childhood), they can be pleasurable, stimulating, and the ground for increased spontaneity and creativity, rather than restriction and limitation. In other words, the fact that they are contingencies and in some sense external or nonwilled (by myself) does not necessarily make them either nurturing or restrictive.

Particularly relevant from my point of view here is that according to Phillips, in this fourth position, the view of contingency is as something that is neither external nor internal. I

think that the key here is the traditional modern conceptualization of what is external to or other than myself something as what is “not me”, in the sense of a negation of what is “me”. The shift to an alternative conceptualizations of selfhood begins with the realization that the relationship between “me” and “not-me” can be interpreted, on the one hand, as negation and opposition or, on the other hand, as a difference and otherness that does not necessarily include opposition and negation.

Our experience of what is external and of contingency includes our experience of our body as well as what is felt not to be the body. The psychological structure of the self can also be experienced as other and as a frustratingly persistent contingency, if it does not accord with what we would ideally choose to be. It is these oppositions between what is external and what is internal to the self that need to be mitigated and revised if one wants to conceptualize human selfhood as genuinely contingent and as rooted in the realm of created, contingent reality.

Thus the same kind of dilemma as the dilemma of whether to assume the position of slave or master takes place within the self when one acknowledges elements or aspects of oneself which seem alien and foreign to oneself as a conscious and deliberate agent. In any view of the self which acknowledges complexity and the impossibility of complete consistency and conscious and deliberate integration, there will be an acknowledgement of aspects of the self and impulses and thoughts that arise as “other” in one’s self. How one deals, both conceptually and emotionally, with the “other” in one’s self is usually in tandem with how one deals with other people as external others<sup>22</sup>.

## **Conclusions**

The picture of the self that is suggested in my brief sketches of some relational psychoanalytic theorists takes us beyond the conceptual means of defining the self in terms of a tension between two contrastive polarities (inner, outer; determinateness, freedom; self, other). As we have seen, for Kierkegaard, the inwardness of the self-conscious self that makes it possible



for the self to take responsibility for its concrete self is conceptualized by him as the opposite of a self that allows itself to be carried along by externals. This means that there is a sense in which the self as spirit is not contingent, since the sense of self as spirit is defined by means of exclusion of “external” determining factors.<sup>23</sup> What I have been suggesting is that we need a conceptual schema for selfhood that allows us to fully acknowledge the role of contingency, both as nurturing and founding human agency and as capable of dealing blows so destructive to the human self that the capacity for being a subject or agent is curtailed or even destroyed.

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1. Soren Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening (hereafter referred to as SUD), Howard V. Hong and Edna H Hong, eds. & translators (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 53.

2. Anne Spurgeon, “The Parable of the Naked Lady”, in Womanguides: Readings Towards a Feminist Theology, Rosemary Radford Ruether, ed., (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985) 248–251.

3. Idem.

4. For an example of a critical analysis of Kierkegaard’s concept of authentic selfhood as overly focused on consciousness and deliberate action see Haim Gordon’s “A Rejection of Kierkegaard’s Monism of Despair” in International Kierkegaard Commentary 19: The Sickness Unto Death, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987) 239–257.

For a positive evaluation of Kierkegaard as implicitly advocating an ideal goal of the absorption of what is unconscious into consciousness see C. Stephen Evans, “Kierkegaard’s View of the Unconscious” in Kierkegaard in

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Post/Modernity, eds., Martin J. Matustik and Merold Westphal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 76-97.

5. See Carol Gilligan and Grant Wiggins, "The Origins of Morality in Early Childhood Relationships" in Mapping the Moral Domain, eds., Carol Gilligan, Janie Victoria Ward, and Jill McLean Taylor (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988) 116.

6. See Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View" in Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper, 1979, 25-42, [originally published in The Journal of Religion 40 (April, 1960), 100-112].

See also Judith Plaskow, Sex, Sin, and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich (Lanham: University Press of America, 1980).

7. Catherine Keller in From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism and Self (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) criticizes Kierkegaard for proposing a transcendent subjectivity that gives priority to the individual's separateness from others.

For a criticism of Keller's reading of Kierkegaard see Wanda Warren Berry's "Kierkegaard and Feminism: Apologetic, Repetition, and Dialogue" in Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity, eds., Martin J. Matustik and Merold Westphal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 110-124.

8. For a definition of postmodernism in terms of the abolition of the oppositional polarity between freedom and determinism see Nancey Murphey and James McClendon,

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"Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies," Modern Theology 5/3 (April 1989) 191-214.

Sylvia I. Walsh, in "On 'Feminine' and 'Masculine' Forms of Despair" in International Kierkegaard Commentary 19: The Sickness Unto Death, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987) 121-134, offers the opinion that "[i]t is the integral intertwining of these two components of selfhood [separateness and relatedness] that Kierkegaard does not sufficiently recognize and incorporate in his analysis" (133). I myself am not sure how Kierkegaard might have done this any better than he has, given the consistently oppositional dialectic in his anthropology between the inwardness of the self and the externals of one's life.

9. Stephen A. Mitchell in Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988) shows that there are, already in Freud's writings, two approaches to explaining the development of the human mind: one explains the development of the mind as the unfolding of the contents of the drives. The other explains the development of the mind as the product of the individual's interactions with objects, i.e., with other people, things, and situations in the environment. Mitchell also elaborates how some recent psychoanalytic theorists have taken hold of the second of these two approaches in Freud and developed the concept of object relating as constitutive of the contents of the mind.

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10. See Heinz Kohut, How Does Analysis Cure? (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), The Restoration of the Self (New York: International Universities Press, 1977), and The Analysis of the Self: A Systematic Approach to the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorders (New York: International Universities Press, 1971).

11. See Jessica Benjamin, Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) and The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

12. See Adam Phillips, Terrors and Experts, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996 ), On Flirtation: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Uncommitted Life (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994 ), and On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

13. See, for example, Sigmund Freud, "Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning" (1911) The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII, James Strachey, transl. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958), 219-220, fn.4 and "On Narcissism: An Introduction" (1914) The Standard Edition, Volume XIV, 90-91.

14. See Jessica Benjamin, Chapter Two, "Master and Slave" in The Bonds of Love , 51-84.

15. There is a clear parallel between Benjamin's description of the respective psychological positions of the

slave and the master and Kierkegaard's two categories of the despair of weakness and the despair of defiance. The despair of weakness is a losing of oneself (one's freedom, agency, subjectivity) in others. Defiant despair, especially in its strongest, demonic version, is an affirmation of one's own power and virtual obliteration of the rest of the world. Thus both of Kierkegaard's basic forms of despair are pathological ways of dealing with the other, i.e., with what presents oneself as outside the sphere of one's own agency.

16. Benjamin also argues that the normative model for masculine sexual identity assumes that the boy will develop and maintain the illusion of omnipotence over the sexual other and thus necessarily fail to recognize the sexual other as an independent subject and agent. In other words, boys are unconsciously and consciously socialized into a normative role which is invested with the illusion of the self as omnipotent whereas girls are unconsciously and consciously socialized into a normative role in which they attempt to find their omnipotent agency in the other. This again parallels Kierkegaard's typing of defiant despair as masculine and the despair of weakness as feminine.

17. See Daniel Stern, The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

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18. See Margaret Mahler, Fred Pine, and Anni Bergmann, The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

19. Benjamin addresses criticisms of her theory as being overly optimistic in Like Subjects.

20. Adam Phillips, On Flirtation 19-20.

21. Ibid. 20.

22. I have discussed the issue of how and why Christian theologians should strive to conceptualize human personhood in a way that acknowledges the genuine finitude and persistent (and nonsinful) nonintegratedness of the structure of the self in "Religious Experience, Human Finitude, and the Cultural-Linguistic Model" Horizons, 20/2 (Fall 1993) 241-259, "Human Finitude and the Concept of Women's Experience" Modern Theology, 9/1 (January, 1993) 67-85, and "Nature and Spirit: Agency and Concupiscence in Hauerwas and Rahner", The Journal of Religious Ethics 15/1 (Spring, 1987) 14-32.

23. For a discussion of this issue in modern theological anthropology see David Kelsey, "Human Being" in Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, eds. Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks, revised and enlarged ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 167-93.