ONE SPECIES OR TWO?
KIERKEGAARD'S
ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE
FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF
THE CONCEPT OF SIN

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One need not read far in Søren Kierkegaard's literature or journals to discover that his politics and his comments on women were hardly such as would make him a hero of contemporary feminists. Politically, he was opposed to the emancipation of women.\(^1\) Philosophically, he seems to take for granted the Romantic notions that woman is mistress of heart and hearth, oriented by nature to the intuitive, the affective and the natural.\(^2\) Thus it is surprising to read in a recent work of feminist theology, *Feminism Redemption and the Christian Tradition* by Mary Grey, that Kierkegaard was one of the few to anticipate the feminist notion of distinctly feminine and masculine ways of sinning. To support this she cites a passage from his 1849 work *Sickness unto Death* in which Kierkegaard distinguishes between masculine and feminine forms of despair.\(^3\) Since Kierkegaard later transposes despair into sin, Grey rightly considers this a reference to a distinctly feminine form of sin. She goes on to say, however, that "Quite what he meant by [this feminine sin] is left maddeningly inexplicit."

It is the task of this paper to make his meaning explicit and to explore its possible contributions to the feminist discussion of the concept of sin and of the broader theological anthropology that is its context. Ultimately, the anthropological issue is most significant, for the question raised by the feminist critique is not simply whether there are feminine and masculine ways of sinning but whether women and men are, in the end, one species or

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two. Here Kierkegaard makes a significant contribution. He not only recognizes a distinction between feminine and masculine sin but more importantly he roots this in an anthropological structure that allows us to speak of men and women as one species, as sharing a common human nature, without diminishing the differences between us. To demonstrate this the first part of the paper briefly reviews the feminist critique of the concept of sin and selected issues related to the notion of a distinctive feminine experience. The second part of the paper locates Kierkegaard's remark in the context of Sickness unto Death and to a limited extent in his literature as a whole in order to show the nature of the difference between masculine and feminine and the common anthropology that is its base. Part three develops some of the implications of this anthropology for the feminist conversation.

I

From Augustine to Niebuhr, in sermons, catechetical instructions and sophisticated theological treatises, sin has traditionally been defined as a form of pride—as self-assertion, self-love, self-centeredness, as the desire to be God rather than creature; as the will-to-power.1 Valerie Saiving, in a seminal 1960 essay, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," challenges the universal claims of this traditional concept of sin.2 In what has since become a virtual commonplace, Saiving proposes that the identification of sin with pride arises out of distinctively masculine experience and that feminine experience yields a concept of sin that does not fit that standard model. Drawing on the work of Margaret Mead, Saiving relates the traditional view of sin as self-assertion to distinctive features of male psychological development and socialization. In particular, she notes the correlation between the temptation to self-assertion and the drive to autonomy and control often linked to the boy's need to create an identity distinct from that of his mother.3 In contrast, as women considered their distinctive feminine experience, they realized that the standard theology did not fit their situation. It does not account for what Saiving describes as woman's experience of intimacy with nature, her proclivity to passivity rather than self-assertion, or the paradigmatically feminine experience of motherhood. Here, argues Saiving, a woman learns that if she does not at some point put the child's interests ahead of her own, the child will not grow and might even die. However, she also learns (or needs to learn) that "a woman can give too much of herself, so that nothing remains of her own uniqueness; she can become merely an emptiness, almost a zero, without value to herself, to her fellow men, or, perhaps, even to God." 4 As a result, concludes Saiving in an oft-quoted passage:

the temptations of woman as woman are not the same as the temptations of man as man, and the specifically feminine forms of sin ... have a quality which can never be encompassed by such terms as 'pride' and 'will-to-power'. They are better suggested by such items as triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center or focus; dependence on others for one's own self-definition ..., in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self.5

Many feminist writers, while endorsing Saiving's thesis, express reservations about the strong biological basis she advances to explain the differences between men's and women's experience. Judith Plaskow, for instance, whose watershed study Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich is a detailed elaboration of Saiving's thesis, focuses more closely on the cultural factors shaping women's experience.6 Fortunately, we need not here adjudicate this variation of the ancient nature-nurture debate.7 However one explains its origin, the difference between men's and women's experience is well documented.8

In light of this difference, the feminist claim is two-fold. First, if theology does not take the difference between men's and women's experience into account, it runs the risk of being irrelevant to women's experience or actually harmful. By defining the human condition on the basis of masculine experience, theology identifies a woman's need for separation or individuation, for becoming an individual, as sin or temptation. Consequently what can sound like good news, the word of redemption and liberation to men, may sound oppressive to women, may drive her deeper into her particular temptation: the failure to become a self.9

Second, by identifying the characteristic male experience with human experience, the tradition does not treat male and female as parallel subsets of humanity. Male experience has been made normative and women's experience, to the extent that it is acknowledged as different, is defined as "the other" requiring separate study and explanation.10 But women are, after all, human. Hence, the point of the feminist critique is not simply that the traditional analysis is untrue to women's experience but that it is untrue to human experience. By omitting women's experience, something distinctively human, not just feminine is left out of account. What is needed, then, is an understanding of sin and a theological anthropology that is faithful to human experience in both its masculine and feminine forms.

Before exploring Kierkegaard's contribution to this anthropological enterprise, we should note the diversity of views within the feminist literature over the differences between masculine and feminine experience. Doing so will yield a more nuanced understanding of both the feminist conversation and Kierkegaard's possible contribution to it. One strand of feminism, and historically its original thrust, downplays the differences, arguing forcefully that men and women are essentially alike and that any significant differences beyond the purely biological are a function of cultural forces. Anatomy is not destiny.11 As with any marginalized group, the suspicion here, based on long experience, is that differences will be used to justify unequal
social standing and opportunities. On this basis, feminists across the board are particularly uneasy with the persistent notion of the eternal feminine, in which various personal attributes—closeness to nature, selflessness, nurturing, intuitiveness, passivity—are first linked with the concept of femininity and then regarded as a function not of culture but of biology and ontology. This is women’s nature and as such it is normative for her behavior and social roles. Anne Carr echoes the view of many feminists in noting that, even when put in highly complimentary language, this anthropology is often “yet another rationalization for subordination” [104].

In contrast, what we might call second generation feminists are reclaiming the distinctiveness of their experience as women. While they continue to resist the prescriptivity of the eternal feminine and the various ways the differences between men and women have been used against women, they also see that these differences are a significant aspect of a woman’s identity. They should not have to be given up—women should not have to become like men—in order to win equal treatment. Indeed, inveigling women to give them up voluntarily, to be an accessory to their own negation, could be regarded as the ultimate victory of patriarchy. Consequently, many argue that women need to cultivate their distinctiveness for the sake of their own identity as women. In addition, the world at large, the masculine world, needs to hear this different voice, a voice trained in an ethic of relatedness, care, concretion, and intimacy with nature.

Tina Allik offers a helpful review of these two perspectives under the apt headings of single-anthropology and dual-anthropology feminism. As their names imply, “single anthropology feminism holds that there is one human nature which is the same for both men and women ... Dual anthropology feminism holds that there are two human natures, women’s nature and men’s nature.” Operative in both, Allik points out, is the traditional anthropological distinction between the transcendent, distinctively human aspects of our existence—mind, freedom, imagination, self-awareness—and the finite aspects we share with other species—body, materiality, temporality. This is of particular significance to the feminist conversation because women have traditionally been associated with the finite which has been traditionally devalued as something to be overcome in order to be truly human. As Allik puts it, “the claim has usually been (and often still is) that women are constrained by their bodies, by their participation in the material and biological realm, in a way that men are not.” In response to this, single anthropology feminism accepts the traditional notion that the most valuable, most humanizing capacities are those that allow us to transcend the finite, material, biological realm of nature. Its disagreement is with the identification of women with that finite, material, biological realm. Women are no different than men, it insists, no less capable of transcendence, and should be given equal opportunities. Dual-anthropology feminism, by contrast, accepts the traditional identification of women with the finite, material, biological aspect of human existence. Their contention is that women’s experience and perspective on the world (woman’s nature?) is different from men’s and that this is in part at least a result of women’s closeness to the natural world and such biological realities as body and birth. The critique here is rather of the traditional devaluation of the finite, material, biological aspects of our existence.

The danger in these various portrayals of women’s experience, however, is stereotyping. They tend to speak of women’s experience (as we have been doing) as if it is a homogeneous whole. It is not. All women do not have the same experiences. As many feminist writers point out, the feminist critique needs to be turned upon itself to ask, “Whose experience is the basis for feminist theology?” Feminism is not immune to the temptation to a false universalization, to an ideological identification of the part with the whole that discounts experiences that are different. However, all women need not share an experience for it to be reasonably labeled ‘feminine.’ Here the distinction between gender and sex is helpful as a means of making sense of the differences within women’s and men’s experience as well as of the differences between them. In general, the sexual distinction between male and female refers to a set of biological differences; whereas the gender distinction between masculine and feminine refers to a set of social and cultural meanings associated with the sex differences. Formally, the distinction between masculine and feminine designates two conceptual possibilities. While not totally unrelated to the biological distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine are also not necessarily determined by biology.

Using this conceptual distinction, we can make the empirical observation that men tend to fall into the masculine pattern and women into the feminine. The temptation to prideful self-assertion, the will-to-power, may be more common among men and may be associated with what we have designated masculine traits, but it is neither unique to men nor common to all men simply because they are men. Conversely, the temptations to “diffuseness” and “underdevelopment of the self,” may be more common among women and identified as a feminine temptation, but it too is neither unique to women nor found in all women simply because they are women. In this way we can bring our terminology and the claims of the feminist critique in line with our experience as men and women who in various ways, I suspect, know both masculine and feminine temptations.

Finally, one of the central tenets of feminism is that no one has generic human experience. I do not exist as a human being in the abstract but as male. True as that is, it is also true that sexuality is neither the whole of human existence nor the only aspect of our particularity or difference. Furthermore, if we are to be true to our experiences and not ideological, we must recognize that in addition to experiences of difference between men and women, we also experience commonality. In spite of all the differences and difficulties, we can and do understand each other to some extent. This
understanding is made possible by some shared nature, some commonality between us which is the context for understanding the difference. This is not to deny the difference nor is it to suggest that we can ever live in only that common nature. But it is to take a position against absolutizing the differences.

II

Enter Kierkegaard. As suggested at the outset, one does not naturally think of Kierkegaard as a supporter of any analysis that might be labeled feminist. And yet it is this Kierkegaard that Grey cites as a harbinger of the feminist critique of the androcentric concept of sin. While her company is small, Grey is not alone in noting this connection. In one of the stronger claims, Wanda Warren Berry argues that "both traditional and feminist theology need a thorough and consistent appropriation of Kierkegaard's dialectical definition of the two primary modes of sin: the 'sin of weakness' and the 'sin of defiance'." So what is this definition? In the context of his analysis of the forms of despair in The Sickness unto Death, Kierkegaard argues that all despair falls into two general types: a despair in weakness ("in despair not to will to be oneself") and a despair in defiance ("in despair to will to be oneself"). He then points out that this distinction is only relative. "No despair is entirely free of defiance; indeed, the very phrase 'not to will to be' implies defiance. On the other hand, even despair's most extreme defiance is never really free of some weakness" [49].

At this point he adds, "The one form is, so to speak, feminine despair, the other masculine despair." As if taken by this image, he adds to it an unusually long explanatory footnote. Given its importance in our discussion, it is cited here at length:

I am far from denying that women may have forms of masculine despair and, conversely, that men may have forms of feminine despair, but these are exceptions. And of course the ideal is also a rarity, and only ideally is this distinction between masculine and feminine despair altogether true ... But the feminine nature is devotedness, givingness, and it is unfeminine if it is not that ... [S]he instinctively sees more clearly than the most clear-sighted reflection ... By nature, however, a woman's devotedness also enters into despair, is again a mode of despair. In devotion she loses herself, and only then is she happy, only then is she herself ... A man also gives himself—and he is a poor kind of man who does not do so—but his self is not devotion ... He gives himself, but his self remains behind as a sober awareness of devotion, whereas woman, with genuine femininity, abandons herself, throws herself into that to which she devotes herself. Take this away, then her self is also gone, and her despair is: not to will to be oneself. The man does not give himself in this way, but the second form of despair also expresses the masculine form: in despair to will to be oneself.

The strongest first impression of this passage is more than likely of Kierkegaard’s Romantic assumptions about masculine and feminine nature. Let me state clearly that nothing that follows is meant to suggest that we disregard these or any of his problematic views of women. I am not trying to make Kierkegaard a crypto-feminist. Rather, I am suggesting two things. First, that we can look beyond these Romantic assumptions, because whatever they may have meant to Kierkegaard personally, they are not a logically necessary element of his distinction between masculine and feminine forms of despair. Second, if we do look beyond those Romantic assumptions, we will find an analysis of human sinfulness more inclusive than the androcentric notions discussed in Part One. Most significantly, the theological anthropology that makes possible these twin forms of sin is also potentially more inclusive and offers some intriguing points of contact with the feminist discussion. Our task then is three-fold: first, to give an accurate reading of the text before us; second, to relate it to the concept of the self that makes it possible; third, to consider the consequences of these reflections for the feminist conversation.

Before pursuing that agenda, however, we need to explain the relevance of this analysis of despair to the topic of sin. For that, a brief orientation in the structure of Sickness unto Death is helpful. It begins with a definition of the self that describes the ideal of a healthy life. In the first of the book's two parts, "The Sickness unto Death is Despair," Kierkegaard examines the forms of despair as the pathology of this self psychologically understood. It is in this context that the distinction between masculine and feminine forms of despair is found. In Part Two, "Despair is Sin," Kierkegaard places this whole analysis in the context of the relation to God. In doing so, despair is transposed into sin, the pathology of the theological self. "Sin is: before God, or with the conception of God, in despair not to will to be oneself, or in despair to will to be oneself. Thus sin is intensified weakness or intensified defiance: sin is the intensification of despair."[77]²⁰ From the perspective of Part Two, then, it is proper to read masculine and feminine despair as masculine and feminine sin.

Returning to the passage before us, a careful reading reveals several features of Kierkegaard’s distinction between masculine and feminine forms of despair or sin. Perhaps most striking is simply the suggestion that there might be a distinctively feminine way of sinning and that this sin might be precisely not willing to be oneself. This clearly anticipates the conclusion of later feminist critics like Saiving and Plaskow. In addition, Kierkegaard seems to share an important element of their argument, especially in the form Saiving gives it, for he explains this loss of self in terms of what he
regards as a woman’s characteristic devotedness to others. To be sure, Kierkegaard, drawing on his Romantic categories, puts this in terms of woman’s nature rather than women’s experience. However, without gainsaying the significance of that difference, we should not be led by it to overlook the parallels in the arguments. Kierkegaard maintains that in her givingness a woman loses herself, or, more actively, abandons herself. She so “throws her self” into that to which she is devoted, that if the object of her devotion is taken away, so too is her self. Precisely in this loss of self—a loss which, notice, is otherwise praised as woman’s perfection—is woman’s characteristic despair and sin: not to will to be herself.

Having made this distinction between masculine and feminine despair/sin, Kierkegaard then qualifies it in two significant ways, both of which also anticipate elements of the feminist discussion. First, without naming it such, he distinguishes between sex and gender, pointing out that in actual life women may have masculine despair and men, feminine. His intent is not to describe the condition of all men or all women but to draw a typological distinction (gender). The correlation between this and sex, as noted above, while not accidental, is also not strictly necessary. Furthermore, the types are idealized such that one rarely encounters pure masculine or pure feminine despair. As he observes elsewhere, actual life is far more complex than the neat categories he presents [48]. Nevertheless, like a map that ignores many details, the distinction—precisely as idealized—is helpful in getting our bearings. It would be a misuse of this map, however, to think that it enables us to locate specific individuals simply on the basis of their sex.

Second, Kierkegaard points out that even as typological, the distinction between masculine and feminine despair is not absolute. The logic of these categories is such that masculine defiance is not without weakness (indeed, it can be regarded as a form of weakness) and feminine weakness is not without defiance (it can be seen as a form of defiance). There is what we might call a translatability between these two forms of despair/sin. We will explore this more fully in relation to his concept of the self, but we might note here that Kierkegaard is suggesting that by penetrating more deeply into one’s distinctiveness as masculine or feminine—not by denying it or abstracting from it—one can discover resources that enable one to understand the other. Even in my defiance, for example, there is weakness and on the basis of that dialectical re-cognition of my own experience I can understand one whose typical sin is weakness. As we shall see, this is possible because the two types are variations on a shared anthropological structure.

THE SHARED ANTHROPOLOGICAL STRUCTURE

Fully to understand Kierkegaard’s distinction between masculine and feminine despair/sin, we need to root it in the anthropological structure that is its foundation. We can only diagnose the disease in contrast to the state of health. Kierkegaard establishes this image of the state of health in the famous definition of the self at the beginning of The Sickness unto Death.

The self is a relation that relates itself to itself ...; the self is not the relation but is the relation’s relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self ...

In the relation between two, the relation is the third as a negative unity ... If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self [13].

The key to sorting out the convolutions of this passage is its distinction between a passive relation and an active relation (“a relation that relates”), for it is the latter that defines the self. In both the active and passive relation there are three elements: the two opposing qualities (the raw material of the self) and, since it cannot be reduced to either of its two components, the relation between them. In a passive relation, which Kierkegaard refers to as a “negative unity,” the components either butt up against each other more or less capriciously or are allowed to be related by forces beyond one’s control such as instincts, urges, talent, public opinion, socialization. Such a relation, Kierkegaard is quick to point out, is not a self.

Here we come to the heart of Kierkegaard’s definition: his contention that what is needed for this synthesis to become a self is not the addition of some new component or the discovery of a yet unknown entity that is one’s self. Rather, the components we already have, the relation we already are, must be put together in a new way. To become a self, the relation must become active. One must become an agent actively relating or ordering the raw material of the self, instead of the passive recipient of their ordering by other forces. In other words, one must take control of one’s life and transform it from something that happens to one into something one does—and for which one is responsible. As Kierkegaard makes clear elsewhere, this means making choices that matter (what he calls absolute choices) about how one is going to live and what one is going to live for. It means committing oneself to something beyond the fickle desires of the moment, for only in such a commitment does one’s self acquire constancy and definition. In the end, to live as a self, for Kierkegaard, means nothing less and nothing more than taking responsibility for one’s life. Until I take responsibility for my life I remain passively determined (“a negative unity”) and hence not a self. Furthermore, in my responsibility for my life I have a qualitatively distinct relationship to myself. I am responsible for my life in a way that no one else is. This is what makes my self mine and not someone else’s. By taking responsibility for myself I take possession of myself, I appropriate myself from the world around me. In short, I become a self.
The radical character of Kierkegaard's concept of the self is that this activity of choosing and taking responsibility for oneself is not a means to discover or produce some entity known as the self. This activity is the self. For Kierkegaard the self is not a thing at all but an activity, a way of being. If this is the case, it follows necessarily, by definition, that if one does not engage in this activity that is the self, one has no self. It is not merely that one has not found oneself, but that there is no self to be found.29 Furthermore, if the self is an activity and not a thing, it cannot be passed from one person to another but must be undertaken by each for him/herself.30 I have a unique proprietary relation to my self not because I have some privileged access to it in a private inner arena but because I have a responsibility for myself that is qualitatively different from the responsibility others have for me or I have for others.31 Indeed, Kierkegaard's point is that recognizing this and taking responsibility for myself as my self is the decisive move in coming to live as a self.

To concretize these rather abstract, even algebraic formulations, let us consider the relation of necessity and freedom in the self, an example that has intriguing implications for the feminist conversation. "Necessity," for Kierkegaard, refers to those elements of who I am that I do not control. Broadly speaking, it includes my genetic inheritance, with its legacy of talent, looks, body chemistry, intelligence and sex; my upbringing, the family and society in which I was raised and their influence on my attitudes, beliefs and personality; and, albeit in a somewhat different way, the legacy of my own past choices.32 "Freedom," or as he refers to it in the rest of Sickness unto Death, "possibility," designates those elements of my life over which I have some control.33 They range from the trivial—which socks to wear, whether to take a sip of coffee—to the momentous—what career should I pursue? Whom shall I marry? These two elements, freedom and necessity, are related in a variety of ways. Aspects of my givenness—intelligence, family background, society—affect my choice of both socks and career, for example, without making it any less free or any less my choice. Hence: "A human being is a synthesis of ... freedom and necessity."

But as such I am not yet a self. Kierkegaard's contention is that simply having possibility/freedom as a component or even exercising it by choosing among a range of possibilities does not necessarily make one a self. After all, even animals choose in this way. Such choices are in the end arbitrary and passively determined either by socialization, instinct or sheer randomness. I choose black socks today, brown tomorrow; argyle this season, plaid the next. In fashion this fickleness matters not. But if all my choices are left thus to the vagaries of the moment, to the ebb and flow of public opinion, pleasure and pain and the like; then my life, not just my choice of socks, has no constancy, no definition, no character. In a very real sense that life is hardly mine at all. To become a self one must choose in such a way that one commits oneself to something beyond the moment, something by which future choices can be judged. In such choosing, one actively relates to the whole relation of possibility and necessity and gives it some direction. In doing so, one takes responsibility for the state of the relation, for the whole that is oneself. Significantly, this means that one also in some sense chooses and takes responsibility for one's necessity, one's givenness, and in that way makes it one's own. This makes it no less necessary and Kierkegaard does not imply that I can change everything about myself, but I can and must choose how I will relate to that necessity.34

The implications of this for the feminist critique emerge when we consider one's biological sex and the inherited gender roles of one's society as elements of this necessity. As such they must be responsibly chosen in becoming a self. As with other elements of necessity, I must not fall into a role by default or allow it to be chosen for me by society or "the others."35 I must choose it or, more precisely, I must choose how I will relate to it. Kierkegaard's claim is that by choosing it, I do not make my sexuality any less necessary but I make myself less its prisoner. For example, assume for the sake of argument that testosterone makes males more aggressive and prone to physical violence. This would then be one of the given's of male nature. Nevertheless, insists Kierkegaard, that would not be an excuse for violence. As human beings we are not bound by this biological component of our nature. Because we are spirit we can transcend it. But because we are finite, embodied spirit we can never leave it behind. We can and must choose how we are going to relate to this necessary aspect of our self. Sexual nature cannot be denied (contra Firestone) and yet it is not simply deterministic either (contra Eternal Feminine).36

Taking his account of the self as the state of health, Kierkegaard defines despair as "the misrelation in the relation of a synthesis that relates itself to itself" [15].37 In the bulk of Sickness unto Death, he rings the changes on this theme by describing the various possible misrelations among the pairs of opposite qualities that are related in the self. To continue our example of possibility and necessity, Kierkegaard notes that there is a despair that arises from a lack of necessity wherein one loses oneself in possibility. This is the person who is always considering options, always wishing but never actually becoming anything. Conversely, there is also a despair in which one feels so constrained by necessity that there seem to be no possibilities. With no room to breathe, without the oxygen of possibility, the self never comes into being. Significantly, this is precisely the experience many women report and is at the root of the notion of a distinctively feminine way of sinning.

In a move that has significant implications for his place in the feminist conversation, Kierkegaard also maintains that we are responsible for being in despair. If despair is not something that happens to a person through fate or the actions of others, but is a function of how one relates or fails to relate oneself, it can only be my responsibility. As Kierkegaard puts it, "every moment [one] is in despair [one] is bringing it upon [oneself]" [17]. A self in
despair is not a victim (that takes us back to the passive relation that is not yet a self) but is always the agent, and hence responsible. Even if one were to argue that in despair one may not yet be a self, Kierkegaard would point out that this too is one’s responsibility, because every event has the capacity to live as a self. If one fails to live this way, one has only oneself to blame.

There is obviously much in this call to become a self by taking responsibility for oneself that resonates with what many feminist writers have said women need to do to acquire themselves. Before pursuing these connections, however, let us complete our exposition by following Kierkegaard’s definition of the self to its completion in the relation to God. Thus far we have considered the self only in relation to itself and only that form of despair Kierkegaard refers to as not willing to be oneself. For Kierkegaard the relation to oneself is not the ultimate relation. In the paragraphs immediately following the definition of the self cited above, he continues:

Such a relation that relates itself to itself, a self, must either have established itself or have been established by another ...

The human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another ... This second formulation is specifically the expression for the complete dependence of the relation (of the self), the expression for the inability of the self to arrive at or to be in equilibrium and rest by itself, but only, in relating itself to itself, by relating itself to that which has established the entire relation [13–14].

A few lines later he deduces from this “The formula that describes the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out,” the formula for spiritual health and life as a genuine self: “in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it.” This power, of course, is God and, as he tells us elsewhere, this formula also describes the life of faith [49, 82, 131]. Significantly, it is with a repetition of this formula that Kierkegaard closes Sickness unto Death. Despair does not have the last word. The first point that should be made here is that Kierkegaard’s claim that the self is constituted by God does not compromise his insistence on the responsibility of the self as the relating agent. On the contrary, it is God who empowers and requires us to become selves. As Kierkegaard puts it, “God, who constituted the human [Mennesket] a relation, releases it from his hand as it were—that is, inasmuch as the relation relates itself to itself” [16]. Remember, the presence of the elements of the relation does not make one a self. Thus I am created a relation, but such that I have responsibility for doing the relating. How the elements are related, the possibilities I actualize, the life I lead, in short, what I become—or fail to become—are my responsibility. The significance of being created is not that I can rely on my creator to make me a self, to hope for me, love for me, act for me or in general live my life for me. No, the logic of the self is such that not even God can do that. Rather, being created, being a derived relation means that if I am to live as a true self, I must do so in relation to God.

To attempt to be oneself in any other way, on one’s own so to speak, is an act of defiance. It is to will to be something other than what one is, namely, a creature. Ultimately, it is nothing short of willing to be God for oneself—the classic definition of the sin of pride. Kierkegaard’s analysis here helps us understand more precisely what is and is not sinful in the choice of self. It is inadequate and ultimately incorrect to say that the problem is too much self. Properly understood, one cannot have too much self in the same way that one cannot have too much virtue. Since the self is not a thing but an activity, the sin is not simply in choosing the wrong thing, the self rather than God, but in choosing in the wrong way, i.e. defiantly. It is how we choose more than what we choose that is decisive.

In the context of this complex, relational algebra of the self, we can now explain more fully Kierkegaard’s notion of feminine sin—the loss of oneself in devotement. In describing the characteristics of feminine despair, Kierkegaard explains that it is a life of immediacy, a life with no eternal referent or significance. Hence it is “a succumbing to the pressure of external factors” [51] in which one learns to live like the others and “identifies having a self by externalities” [53]. Interestingly, this is also how Kierkegaard describes what he regards as the characteristic ill of the age. In various ways and with increasing forcefulness throughout his authorship, he charges that the modern age is prone to and promotes a loss of self. The principle mechanism in this loss of self is what he refers to generically as “the crowd” or more accurately, “the crowd-mentality.” We cannot here pursue Kierkegaard’s analysis of life in the crowd other than to note generally how it manifests feminine despair and subverts life as a self.

Essentially, the crowd is a false relation with others in which “the others” and imitation of them become one’s ideal. In the crowd one defines oneself and the meaning and significance of one’s life by comparing oneself with others instead of with the ethical or religious ideal. Theologically, this can only be understood as idolatry, for it puts the others in the place of God as the source of meaning, value and, ultimately, the self. In the crowd, one remains passively determined and not a self “because others have chosen for him.” Here one is “never essentially himself,” but only “what the others make of him, and what he makes of himself by only being for others.” As he put it in Sickness unto Death, “such a person forgets himself, forgets his name divinely understood, does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too hazardous to be himself and far easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man” [33–34].

As with despair generally, Kierkegaard maintains that this loss of self in the crowd is not something we suffer against our will or are coerced into by forces beyond our control. We want to live this way. Kierkegaard sees in us
a deep desire for a life of ease, a kind of existential inertia that resists a life of responsibility. Manifesting what he terms a "demonic lust ... to lose oneself," we voluntarily give up life as a self in hopes of avoiding the strenuousness of responsible existence (JP, 4178).8 I allow myself to be determined by the others, I am willing to be whatever they might make of me; thinking that if I am shaped by others, I can not be held responsible for the shape of my life. But we can and we are, insists Kierkegaard. We are constituted to become selves, to become fully human beings, and we are responsible for squandering our birthright as human beings by living in the crowd.

III

It should be evident from this exposition of Kierkegaard's anthropology, that his engagement with the feminist conversation on self and sin goes well beyond the simple recognition of a feminine form of sin. To complete our study we will explore the contributions of this anthropology to the feminist conversation under two headings: Responsibility and Equality; Translatability, Difference, and Identity.

RESPONSIBILITY AND EQUALITY

First of all, as noted earlier, Kierkegaard's basic anthropological point that to be a self one must take responsibility for oneself sounds very much like the call of many feminist writers for women to take responsibility for their lives. In both cases this is intimately connected with the diagnosis of sin as losing oneself in what Kierkegaard calls devotedness to others. The parallels with standard feminist analysis grow all the stronger if we consider not only Kierkegaard's conceptual identification of this sin but also his indictment of the age for losing the self in the others, his analysis of the crowd as the mechanism enabling this loss of self and his repeated calls to differentiate oneself from the others and the world around one by taking responsibility for one's life. Whatever the particular differences in content or method may be, Kierkegaard's argument and that of many feminists on this issue have a remarkably similar structure. Carol Gilligan, for example, argues that given women's typical experience of losing her voice (identity, self) in the voices of others, "The critical experience [for women] becomes not intimacy but choice, creating an encounter with self that clarifies the understanding of responsibility and truth."8 As she reports of one of her subjects, "Realizing that 'it was too easy to go through life the way [she] had done, letting someone else take responsibility for the direction of [her] life,' she challenged herself to take control and 'changed the direction of [her] life'" [138].9 Precisely Kierkegaard's counsel in Sickness unto Death.

Mary Louise Bringle makes this connection with Kierkegaard explicit, noting that Kierkegaard's account of despair 'is remarkably congruent with 'the contemporary experience' of despair' depicted by women writers such as Mary Gordon and Alice Walker.9 Confirming the reading given above, she finds Kierkegaard's despair of finitude and necessity essentially germane to women's experience of being "boxed in" by a lack of possibility, of "the debilitation of 'under-choice' and the importance of too little control over one's existence."9 "The sad truth remains," Bringle observes, "that many women do get caught in the trap of looking to something or someone outside ourselves to approve of us, to give a sense of our own meaning and value ... Kierkegaard, in many ways so remote from late-twentieth century feminism, is nevertheless so astute in his description of the 'womanly' despair which arises from a 'fear of success' and an 'ethic of care' run riot."

But we can locate Kierkegaard more specifically in the feminist conversation. In an old but still useful survey of feminist literature, Mary Aquin O'Neill identifies three distinct groups in terms of where they place responsibility for women's sense of powerlessness and inferiority: those who place it on men, those who place it on women, those who place it on society or social structures.10 There can be no doubt that Kierkegaard fits best in the second group. He insists that becoming responsible (becoming a self) must include the recognition that one is responsible for being in despair and for one's failure to live as a self.11

This puts Kierkegaard in a very precarious position, for he can easily fall into the ancient and cruel pattern of blaming the victim. While this is a genuine danger of his position, recognizing it as a possibility does not mean that he falls into it. First of all, we must be clear what it is for which he would hold women responsible. It is not for the sexism of society and its consequences. Rather it is for their failures to become a self, to live responsibly.12 To be sure, we must not be naive about the power of socialization to co-opt our choices. Many feminists draw on the work of Paulo Freire to describe the way in which oppressive social systems, at their most effective, produce an internalization of their structures such that the victims actually become agents in their own oppression.13

To the surprise of many, Kierkegaard's analysis need not deny this. On the contrary, this, in other language, is precisely his point about the invidiousness of the crowd and the crowd-mentality. Moreover, the power of socialization in shaping one's life is built into his dialectic of the self under the heading of necessity. Like other aspects of a person that one does not control, the power of socialization is very real and must be reckoned with. But, Kierkegaard insists, it is not finally determinative. In addition to the power of society (necessity) there is also the power of possibility, the power to choose how one will relate to the necessity, how one will constitute oneself from the materials given. For our exercise of this power we are all—male and female—responsible. If this is not the case, if one's failure to live as a self, one's sin, is the fault of society; then there is no center of responsible agency, no self, for anyone. On the other hand, if men are responsible while
women are not, then a separate argument is needed to explain why men are able to resist and direct social pressures whereas women are not. As Ruether explains, this defense leads to yet another Romantic remythologizing of women in which women (like children or animals) are somehow less fallen than men. In the end, making women immune from responsibility dehumanizes women yet again and casts them in the role of other. This Kierkegaard’s anthropology clearly opposes.

Thus, while we must constantly be on guard against blaming the victim, the alternatives to accepting responsibility are in one way or another a perpetuation of the loss of self. For Kierkegaard—and for those feminist critics who make a similar point—the issue in the call to responsibility is not blame but empowerment. In his analysis, responsibility and power go hand in hand. As long as it is someone else’s responsibility for my not living as a self, it is also in someone else’s power to give me my self—or to withhold it. But such power over another is not possible in Kierkegaard’s dynamic definition of the self. To be a self is nothing else than to live responsibly. To deny my ability and my responsibility to do so is to make me—woman or man—something less than human. Thus to allow women to think of themselves as victims of society (the crowd) or of men, though it may seem compassionate, actually perpetuates precisely the victimization and subordination that it would redress. Women do not need permission—certainly not from men, but also not from other women—to stop being victims, to stop being passively determined, to stop being a negative unity instead of a self. It is within their power as human beings to do so. Indeed, it is their responsibility to do so. This would be Kierkegaard’s central, and most characteristic contribution to the feminist conversation—as it was central to his message to the men and women of his own day.

The inverse of Kierkegaard’s call to individual responsibility is what many see as a significant weakness in his concept of the self: a lack of appreciation for the positive aspects of the self’s relations to others. Walsh, for instance, points out that Kierkegaard’s general description of the self includes “relating to oneself and to God but says nothing about relations to others as forming an essential ingredient in the structure of the self.” By contrast, feminist writers typically point to women’s experience of interconnectedness as a source of wisdom that women need to preserve and the world needs to hear. Moreover, considered from the perspective of Gilligan’s analysis, the individuating character of Kierkegaard’s call to responsibility and his general suspicion of relations with others as potentially entrapping or sapping, make him a prototypical example of a male orientation. As a result, some might well question whether his concept of the self can be of any value to women. While I would argue that Kierkegaard is not without a sense of community, it must ultimately be conceded that his appreciation for (and experience of) community is weak. Recognizing that weakness, however, should not obscure two critical points. First, in the words of Daphne Hampl, “Women understand relatedness: they know about the web of human inter-connectedness which makes for life. What they need to learn is that necessary differentiation of the self from others.” In this lesson Kierkegaard the gaudily clearly has something to contribute. Second, this weakness does not belie the truth of Kierkegaard’s warnings about unhealthy, dehumanizing relations that seduce us out of ourselves. No matter how nurturing, even necessary, they might be, the others, the community, are not God. They ought not to be the defining other in one’s life, the source of one’s self. To allow them to be, to settle for anything less than God here, insists Kierkegaard, is theologically idolatry and anthropologically dehumanizing. It settles for less than the glory that is our birthright as humans—male and female. In the end, suggests Kierkegaard, this must also crush authentic community for none but God can bear the weight of being God.

TRANSLATABILITY, DIFFERENCE AND IDENTITY

The second major contribution of Kierkegaard’s anthropology to the feminist conversation comes from his notion of the translatability between masculine and feminine despair/sin. We noted above that Kierkegaard both distinguished these two forms of sin and relativized the distinction, maintaining that no deficiency is free of weakness and no weakness free of deficiency. His rationale for this turns on the relational structure of the self common to these two forms of despair/sin—or, if we might extrapulate, common to masculine and feminine experience. He begins with what sounds like an affirmation of the traditional monopoly of the sin of pride. The relation to God is so constitutive, the self so completely dependent on God, that “all despair ultimately can be traced back to and be resolved in” the despair of defiance [14]. Since God wills that we become a self and constitutes us to that end, Kierkegaard reasons, not willing to be oneself is in fact an act of defiance. A few pages later, however, he argues in the opposite direction. The despair of defiance, “in despair to will to be oneself, can be traced back to” the despair of not willing to be oneself [20]. Again, his reasoning is straightforward. The self the defiant one wills to be, a self apart from God, is a self that he or she is not—and cannot be. Ergo, defiance too is not willing to be oneself. As Kierkegaard puts it, such a person would “rid himself of the self that he is in order to be the self that he has dreamed up”—the self apart from God [20].

Of particular interest in this notion of translatability is the dialectic of identity and difference operative in it. The two forms of despair are different because each has its distinctive characteristics and tendencies, its distinct pathology, related to the dynamic of life as a self. They describe what seem to be the two logically possible alternatives in misrelating the self. But they are united in being forms of despair. Both are misrelations in the activity of relating the self. And for the relation that defines the self (be it male or
female), Kierkegaard describes but a single structure. It is this common anthropological structure that makes possible the translatibility between the forms of despair or sin. Kierkegaard’s analysis makes clear that this structure qua structure is meant to include both sexes as parallel subsets. The masculine is not the norm for the feminine (or vice versa) but both alike are measured against the human norm of a responsible life before God.

Against this claim, however, we must recognize two complicating factors within Sickness unto Death. First, the dialectical progression it describes in the forms of despair clearly places defiance (masculine) higher than weakness (feminine). While this remains problematic, it need not invalidate the inherent equality of Kierkegaard’s single anthropological structure. Most significantly, Kierkegaard states explicitly that because the difference between defiance and weakness is relative, i.e. because they are translatable, the progression he describes can be inverted. In one sense the defiant one is closest to the truth, to faith and self-recovery; in another he or she is farthest away [67]. Sylvia Walsh captures a significant element of this inversion when she points out that “Defiant despair ... results from an individual’s unwillingness to adopt a feminine mode of selfhood.”

Though the progression as presented in Sickness unto Death undoubtedly reflects Kierkegaard’s personal, instinctive understanding of the relation between masculine and feminine, the structure of the self he describes does not require it and, I would submit, actually works against any priority of one over the other.

A second complicating factor is noted by Walsh who observes that given Kierkegaard’s association of woman’s being with devotion and relations with others, to the extent that the structure of the self does not include relations to others, it tilts to the masculine as normative. She goes on, however, to suggest that while one might wish that Kierkegaard “had addressed the matter of relatedness to others more directly in defining the structure of the self,” it is appropriate to interpret this structure, particularly in light of Works of Love “as incorporating a social dimension in and through the relation to God or as a component in the self relation under the rubric of giving the eternal concrete expression in love, faithfulness, and so forth.” Thus, while there are inconsistencies in Kierkegaard’s works on this point, they need not derail his clear intent to describe a structure of the self common to both sexes and reducible to neither.

As if to underscore this, Kierkegaard explicitly develops his understanding of the unity and difference between men and women in Works of Love. On several occasions he explains that, regardless of worldly differences, Christianity makes all people equal by placing each of us equally before God and addressing each of us with the question of conscience. Applying this specifically to the relations between men and women, he remarks first of all that the world has seen “abominations” in this relationship wherein woman was treated almost “like an animal, ... a despised creature compared to the male, a creature of another species!” Yet in spite of these worldly differences, “the question of conscience about a matter of conscience makes her in inwardness before God absolutely equal with the man.”

Again we see Kierkegaard’s sense of a common structure of the self revolving around responsibility, the relation to God and now the related category, conscience. None of these humanizing, definitive elements of the self are the distinctive province of males or females. In this he obviously approaches what we described above as single-anthropology feminism.

However, he also approaches the dual-anthropology perspective when he insists that this equality does not mean the distinctions between us disappear. “Just as the Christian does not and cannot live without the body, so he cannot live without the distinctions of earthly life which belong to each individual, whether by virtue of birth, position, circumstance, education, etc.—no one of us is pure or essential [humanity].” Numbered among these unavoidable distinctions, of course, would be our existence as male or female. There is a common anthropological structure that unites us but as actual, concrete human beings we do not exist in the purity of that structure alone. Our existence involves irreducible differences. The self is not a fantastic creation but a concretion with a distinct past, environment and genetic endowment. These distinctions are relativized by my relation to God, but they are not eliminated. They do not define me as a person, but they are no irrelevant either. I cannot be a person, neither the person I am nor the person I strive to be, without them.

In terms of our sexuality, Kierkegaard is not saying that a man or a woman is incomplete as a human being without the other or that we should converge in some androgyne synthesis. His ideal is rather a dialectical relation in which the differences between us remain but are relative to a shared anthropological structure—responsible existence before God—that unites us as human beings. This shared structure functions as a conversion factor that allows for some mutual understanding without making each one normative for the other. As with languages, some common structure or, more profoundly, some common form of life allows us to translate from one to the other. This translatability, however, neither vitiates the distinctiveness of the languages, presumes that nothing is left behind in the translation nor requires the creation of an artificial third language. Yet the translatability is crucial for it means that the differences are not an insurmountable obstacle to communication. Indeed, it is the difference that makes genuine communication—dialogue and not just monologue—possible. So is it also in the translatability between masculine and feminine sin. We can understand each other without vitiating the differences between us and without presuming some anthropological esparanto.

In sum, Kierkegaard maintains that despite very real differences between us, men and women are one species, not two. The anthropological structure he describes, the concept of the self as a relation of responsibility, allows him not only to distinguish feminine and masculine patterns of temptation and
sin but also to explain the communication between us. In this anthropology I can understand the other without insisting that the other be just like me. Surely it would be a sad state of affairs—if not an outright self-contradiction—if otherness had to be eliminated for the sake of communication or, more intimately, love. The task and the joy of life is to understand and love the other as other, not to make her or him into another me. Again, it is Kierkegaard's account of the structure of human existence that is critical here. Our sense of how to fill in that structure, of what is necessary and what is not with regard to gender, for example, may be quite different from Kierkegaard's. But his notion of equality, even commonality, as the ground for human identity and relations with others remains a significant contribution to reflections on human nature as engendered. Though Kierkegaard does not develop this theme as consistently as he might and even seems to abandon it at times in favor of his Romantic assumptions, it remains a significant anthropological construct that merited further consideration in the conversation prompted by the feminist critique.

NOTES


2. Of the many passages that could be cited here, see especially Judge William’s eulogies on women in his discourses on marriage, Either/or: I.305–516; the speeches on women composed “In Vino Veritas,” Stages on Life’s Way, ed. and trans. Howard V. & Edna H. Hong, KW 11 (1885), pp. 9–86 (we should also note Kierkegaard’s comment distancing himself from these pseudonymous speeches, JP V:5785); Kierkegaard on woman as hearer of the Word, For Self-Examination, ed. and trans. Howard V. & Edna H. Hong, KW 21 (1990), pp. 46–51; and the journal entries collected under the heading “Woman/Man,” JP IV:4987–5008. Gregor Malentschuk offers a helpful, sympathetic discussion of this aspect of Kierkegaard’s thought in “Kierkegaard’s View of Man and Woman,” in The Continental Kierkegaard, tr. Howard V. & Edna H. Hong (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980), pp. 37–61.


4. Reinhold Niebuhr not only represents this tradition but also traces its history from Paul through Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin and Pascal (The Nature and Destiny of Man, 2 vols. [New York: Scribner’s, 1941], I:386.1). As a contemporary and Roman Catholic example we might add Robert Kress, who, writing from a Rahnerian perspective, describes sin as “hybris, the sinful, prudential act of man to become God” (The Catholic Understanding of Human Nature, The Human Condition in the Jewish and Christian Traditions, ed. Giovanni Greher [Brumley, Hoboken: KTAV Publishing Corp., 1986], p. 143).


8. ibid.


11. Perhaps best known of the growing body of literature in this area and bearing closely on the issue of sin and salvation, is Carol Gilligan’s well-known study of women’s moral development, In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982). Significantly, Gilligan’s psychological studies come to essentially the same conclusion as Savigny’s anthropological reflections: women’s typical temptation, her inertial tendency, is to a loss of self in relations (often nurturing relations) within others and a failure to take responsibility for her life. For an excellent treatment of the appeal to experience in theology generally, see George Schnör, “The Appeal of Experience,” Theological Studies 53 (1992), 40–59.


13. The standard reference here is Virginia Woolf’s account of her 1928 discovery that there are innumerable books on women, but none on men, at least not as a parallel subset of humanity [A Room of One’s Own (San Diego: Harvest-Harcourt, 1987), pp. 26–28]. Apparently men are covered in the books on human nature, women are not. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Mary Daly, each in her own way, consider this identification of woman as other as the original sin of sexism or patriarchy [Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk (Boston: Beacon, 1983), pp. 173–83; Daly, Beyond God the Father (Boston: Beacon, 1973), pp. 44–50].


15. This idea has been especially influential in Roman Catholic thought. Walter Kasper, e.g., borrowing the language of the German Bishop’s pastoral on women, writes, “Women’s vocation, in accordance with creation, is the vocation to the service of life. She is Eve to say, the mother of all the living … Responsibility for life and for humane conditions of life constitute the vocation of woman; this is what must give her esteem and dignity.”
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affirmation of Christian anthropology about the relationship of man and women is this: there is no such thing as the human being and the human person. The human person exists only in the 'dual version' of man and woman' [p. 58].

24. Wanda Warren Berry, "Images of Sin and Salvation in Feminist Theology," Anglican Theological Review, Vol. 78, No. 1 (January 1987), 45. Berry is quite helpful in bringing Kierkegaard into her analysis of the metaphors of sin and salvation written open-handedly by contemporary theologians. However, it is not part of her agenda to explore the specifics of Kierkegaard's dialectic or the contribution of his thought to feminist thought. The only extensive treatment of this issue as it arises in Kierkegaard is by Sylvia Walsh, who places Kierkegaard primarily in the context of contemporary personality theory and "recent findings on sexual differences," rather than in the theological discourses of sin and salvation. ["On 'Feminine' and 'Masculine' Forms of Despair," in International Kierkegaard Commentary 19: The Sickness unto Death, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macao: GA: Mercer Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 121-34]. Noteworthy also is Mary Louise Bringle's chapter on Sickness unto Death in her book The Practice of Radical Discipleship: Suffering and Healing in the Christian Life (New Brunswick: Abingdon Press, 1990), pp. 83-111] in which she notes parallels between Kierkegaard's analysis and contemporary feminist literature (see below p. 18). Daphne Hampson notes Reinhold Niebuhr's indebtedness to Kierkegaard for his anthropological and maintains that "Kierkegaard's analysis is more subtle and more complex' than Niebuhr's because "He keeps a balance between the two kinds of sin, pride and sensuality ..." ["Reinhold Niebuhr on Sin: A Critique," in Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time, ed. Richard Harries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 47]. Dorothee Soelle mentions but does not develop Kierkegaard's distinction between two types of sin in a broader theology of liberation in her Political Theology [trans. John Shelly (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), pp. 51-48].

25. Here I follow Walsh's correction to the Hong translation. The Danish is "Tages du Dette bort ..."); [Soren Kierkegaard, Samlde Værker 15, 3rd ed., ed. A.B. Drachmann, J.L. Heiberg and H.O. Lange (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1962), p. 107]. As Walsh points out, the antecedent of "Dette" is clearly the object of devotion, not the devotion itself [p. 123]. The implication of this will be developed in our reading of this passage.


27. This, of course, is also Kierkegaard's procedure in depicting the various stages or forms of life in his pseudonymous literary work.


30. The definition of the feminist perspective as simply the one where the world is divided into male and female and that those categories of race, are not to be changed or exchanged] [Florence Howe, "Feminist Scholarship: The Extent of the Revolution: Change," A Magazine of Higher Learning 14 (April 1982), 19]. Though he does different things with it, Walter Kasper makes this very point when he states, "The second


17. "Human Finitude and the Concept of Women's Experience," Modern Theology 9/1 (January 1993), pp. 67-85. She cites as her primary sources for this distinction the works of Grimsaw and Carr already noted. Also noteworthy here is the use of this typology in the Catholic Theological Society of America's 1978 Research Report: Women in Church and Society [ed. Sarah S. Karlin, ed. (NJ: CTSA, 1978)], esp. pp. 30-49 (where we find a full discussion of the "Grimsaw-Carr") In this report the dual-anthropology position is tied to the magisterial rationale for prohibiting women's ordination but that is certainly not the conclusion drawn by all who advocate such an anthropology, especially those who do not see it as a distinctively feminist position.

18. Allik, p. 69.

19. Ibid.

20. Using a Lindbeckian analysis, Allik goes on to argue, persuasively, that "both single- and dual-anthropology feminism -- deny the full scope of human finitude" [p. 73]. Women's experience of finitude, nature, and bodiliness, especially as typically described by dual-anthropology feminists, is not pure or brute or immediate but is itself mediated through cultural-linguistic systems. On this latter point see also Paula Cooey, "Experience, Body and Authority," Harvard Theological Review 82/3 (1989), 325-42.


22. Indeed, the definition of the feminist perspective as simply the one where the world is divided into male and female and that those categories of race, are not to be changed or exchanged] [Florence Howe, "Feminist Scholarship: The Extent of the Revolution: Change," A Magazine of Higher Learning 14 (April 1982), 19]. Though he does different things with it, Walter Kasper makes this very point when he states, "The second
difference [between men and women] is not such that man and woman are not essentially alike despite the dissimilarity" [64].

30. Elsewhere Kierkegaard describes this as the life of aesthetic immediacy.

31. Kierkegaard makes this point throughout his literature, but it is most extensively developed in "The Balance between the Esthetic and the Ethical in the Development of the Personality," Either-Or II:155–333.

32. In The Concept of Anxiety this passive relation is likened to a dream-state from which the spirit/self needs to be awakened by an absolute choice [pp. 41–44]–a situation strikingly similar to that described by many feminists in speaking of a woman’s need to acquire herself.

33. The decisive task then, as Either-Or II explains at length, is not becoming aware of oneself (knowing oneself) but becoming responsible for oneself (choosing oneself).

34. I can give someone a thing and I can even engage in an activity in the place of another if the point of the activity is to produce a result that can be corrected from the activity and transferred to the other. But if the activity itself is the point (digesting food or making love, e.g.), I cannot do that for another. So it is with becoming a self.

35. This is certainly not to say that I have no responsibility for others.

36. This is in large part what Alilk designates as finitude, a category Kierkegaard also uses in Sickness in the pair finitude/infinitude [pp. 29–35].

37. His use of "freedom" to designate one side of the pair here is a slip, for later, in discussing the forms of despair related to this pair, he observes that "The self is freedom. But freedom is the dialectical aspect of the categories of possibility and necessity" [29]. See also Either-Or II:214. Ironically, freedom or possibility is one of the givens, part of the necessity, of human existence. We are necessarily free. Whether we exercise it or not, we all have the capacity to do so. We are all free to become a self. As such our freedom stands as both a task and a potential judgment of us. This is why Kierkegaard can speak of something as odd as unconscious despair—a concept that has intriguing connections with the concept of original sin [42–47].

38. Kierkegaard begins to articulate the key to an anthropological model for any successful therapy. One must be realistic about what is "necessary" or given but one must also relate to it responsibly and at some point cease to be its victim. As Kierkegaard describes the forms of despair, this therapeutic model becomes all the more appropriate and effective.

39. This, of course, is no less true of non-traditional gender roles than of traditional ones.

40. To become, in realistic sense, a necessary "other," one must be willing to abandon roles than most do today, but that is not finally decisive. What is distinctive in his contribution is the structure, the algebra of the self, not how he happens to define the variables. The point here is to noting that Einstein’s E=mc2 would still be the proper formula even if he had used the wrong value for the speed of light.

41. For Kierkegaard, despair properly so called is always over the self, the self one has become or the self one has failed to become. We often act as if our despair is over something (the loss of a car, the failure to win a prize) and assume that if we could only acquire that missing thing, our despair would be gone. Kierkegaard maintains that this condition is indeed symptomatic of despair, but it is not the disease itself. Caring up, we seek may give us symptomatic relief, but the underlying disorder, the misrelation in the self or the lack of self, remains. Indeed, suggests Kierkegaard, I may well seek the things I do precisely to cover up my despair, my lack of self [48].

42. What Kierkegaard means by "the crowd" is more a way of thinking than a group of any particular people. Thus the crowd-mentality can be present in a situation where there is only one person or where there are many. Among Kierkegaard’s more comprehensive analyses of the crowd see especially Two Ages [KW, 14, trans. Howard V. & Edna H. Hong (1978)], pp. 62–68 & 78–96 and the first of his "Two Notes" on the concept of the single individual, [bound with The Point of View for My Work as an Author, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper, 1962)], pp. 107–120.

43. Either-Or II:164.


45. [JP, 4178. Or as he puts it in a different entry, "man is an animal who can become spirit [self], something he qua animal fears even more than to die" [JP, 4885]. And we have

46. Kierkegaard’s Anthology and the Feminist Critique of the Concept of Sin

47. made life easy—by making it meaningless, devoid of spirit" [JP, 5031]. The journals are full of such comments, see esp. 1803, 2048, 2993, 4348, 4887. What Kierkegaard would call attention to here is that desire we all have at times to be anonymous, invisible—a desire that, he point out, does not typically encourage the best, most responsible behavior. This desire is the guiding force of the crowd-mentality. There are intriguing similarities between this notion of a lust to lose oneself and what Freud would later refer to as "thanatos."


49. Ibid., p. 138. Where Gilligan uses actual interviews to ground her conclusions, Plaskow comes to much the same conclusion reflecting on loss and recovery of self by Lessing’s fictional Martha, [Sex, ‘Sin & Grace, pp. 66ff.]

50. Bringle, p. 84. Specifically, she develops the parallels between Kierkegaard’s analysis and Isabel in Gordon’s Final Payments and Celie in Walker’s The Color Purple.

51. Ibid., p. 91.

52. Ibid., p. 91.


54. This is why he maintains in Either-Or II that becoming a self always involves repentance, see esp. 216–18 & 247–49.

55. Feminist sympathizers with this position and with the defense that the call to responsibility does not ipso facto amount to blaming the victim include Daly, pp. 49–54; Grey, pp. 20, 24, 92; Reuther, p. 165. In her survey, “Sin and Evil in Feminist Theology,” Christine Smith observes that “Because Daly holds women accountable for how they will respond to their own original sin, she comes perilously close to ‘blaming the victim,’ even though she suggests that women have been forced to be complicit in the original sin they have inherited” [Theology Today 50 (July, 1993), p. 210]. She also points out that Mary Potter Engel and Rita Nakashima Brock both see “much of what is damaging in our human relations” springing from “an unwillingness to be accountable for the evil we participate in while sleeping in that denial” [p. 215].

56. See for example Daly, p. 49; Paolo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1992), pp. 29–40. This is also a major theme of Daly’s Gymn/ Ecology: The Metaphysics of Radical Feminism (Boston: Beacon, 1978).

57. Reuther, pp. 165, 104–109. This defense also plays right into what Reuther describes as the patriarchal assumption that “Men occupy the sphere of freedom and … women … the reality of woman’s sphere” [p. 75].

58. Kierkegaard’s challenge here is expressed well by Wanda Warren Berry when she observes that “feminist theology’s emphasis on the corporate, systemic nature of sin … might raise the question of whether feminist theology thus far tends toward a symbolism which loses the element of personal responsibility belonging to sin-consciousness” [p. 45]. And, “If feminism is to help women become fully human, it must make central an image which facilitates the assumption of responsibility for one’s own life—past, present and future.” There is a danger here, concludes Berry, “of losing our humanity by blaming our culture for the failure to become ourselves” [p. 51]. Though she places much more weight on the “corporate power structure” of a patriarchal society, Mary Daly makes a similar point when she argues that sexism produces a “psychological paralysis” in women that “arises from a general feeling of hopelessness, guilt, and anxiety over social disapproval” [Beyond, p. 51]. To counter this she argues that women must develop “the self esteem that comes with affirming an unaltered self” [Beyond, p. 52].

59. Ibid., p. 125.

60. The argument is not one we can or need pursue here, but I would call attention to three elements of it: Kierkegaard’s explicit distinction between the false community of the crowd and genuine community [JP, 2952], his unqualified affirmation in Works of Love of our need for community as something belonging essentially to being human [pp. 150–53] and his understanding of himself as a corrective. Unifying these is the scholarship in this area, p. 52n.6. On the social dimension of Sickness into Death in particular see Bruce Kirmmse, “Psychology and Society: The Social Falsification of the Self in The Sickness into Death” in Kierkegaard’s Truth, pp. 167–92.


63. Walsh, p. 128.
64. On the surface this is contrary to Walsh’s assessment that “In substance, Kierkegaard’s analysis of feminine and masculine despair is in line with that of proponents of androgyne inasmuch as he diagnoses woman’s despair as a lack of masculine self-identity and man’s despair as defiance against feminine devotedness and submission in relation to God” [p. 130]. However, as Walsh goes on to note the various views of androgyne among feminists, this reading of Kierkegaard on this point and that advanced here seem to come closer together. On the various interpretations of androgyne among feminists see Daly, *Beyond*, p. 166; *Gyn/Ecology*, pp. xi, 386-8; Naomi R. Goldenberg, “Jung after Feminism,” in *Beyond Androcentrism*, pp. 53-66; O’Neill, p. 725.
65. To shift metaphors, the relation between masculine and feminine can be likened to the relation between binary stars: Their orbits can be defined by a common point of reference but neither star exists at that point nor does any third star.