

# **An Application of Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Freedom to Psychotherapy and Philosophical Counseling**

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**ABSTRACT:** Kierkegaard's philosophical writings in the area of human freedom have great explanatory powers and strong relevance for philosophical counseling and psychotherapy. This paper will explore those principles that have a bearing on helping people deal with life's issues. Freedom is an overarching term that encompasses many concepts. All of these concepts, in turn, describe different manifestations of the self. The self is central to Kierkegaard's philosophy of freedom. He describes the self in dynamic and structural terms and by levels of consciousness. Despair is a key concept in this philosophy; it is a deep level of anxiety that signals whether the self is moving forward in freedom, or withdrawing into unfreedom. A case study will be used to exemplify these concepts within a psychotherapeutic milieu.

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After years of being a psychotherapist and counselor working with children, adolescents and adults, I have been fortunate to witness the growth of some people, and come to understand the stasis in others. I have relied upon and appreciated the clinical value of many theoretical approaches. The explanatory power of some systems of theory on human development and function has positive and practical applications in the helping of people. Certainly it is comforting to all those who seek our assistance to place their often chaotic and seemingly driven behaviors into an organized and meaningful form; theory does this well. But in my observations, the act of change occurs on a different level of intra and interpersonal interaction. This level refers to the active and independent function of choice and the freedom to choose. The concept of human freedom and choice is crucial to the practice of psychotherapy and philosophical counseling. It is the recognition of choice and the deep respect for the freedom to choose that has spirited on this paper. I assert that all successful work with clients directly or indirectly helps

increase a person's freedom and extend their understanding that they control their freedom. It is to this beginning that my interests as a psychotherapist and counselor expanded to include the philosophy of freedom.

This interest, or more accurately, passion, brought me to the writings of Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's philosophy of freedom salutes human potential, celebrates individuality, and respects the anxiety that accompanies creation. His writings are deeply personal and in his sometimes ponderous writing style, he asks the reader to wrestle with his work. He wants the reader not to look to his words, but from his words. His teachings strongly suggest that the answers to being human are to be found within oneself. Kierkegaard's views would not support a therapy that offered the client a template for living. No, that would make the client dependent on someone other than himself for his living. (Since Kierkegaard's philosophy of freedom is applicable to certain forms of psychotherapy and philosophical counseling, I will from here forward use the term practitioner to refer to the philosophical counselor or psychotherapist who utilizes the existential concepts put forth in this article.)

### **The Philosophical Underpinnings**

Freedom cannot be taught directly because it signifies the unique individual struggle of the person to attain and maintain adulthood; and since freedom can only be self-defined, it is up to each individual to find it for himself. I am using global terms for a reason, because freedom is not merely a struggle for the client, but for the practitioner as well. In the consultation room, where it is a given that everyone who seeks counseling or psychotherapy has some limit to their exercise of freedom, it is imperative that the practitioner be relatively free. Kierkegaard's writings support the view that to know the struggle in others you must know the struggle in

yourself. He urges us, in many of his most important works, to maintain an eternal self-conscious existence (Climacus, 1844a, Haufniensis, 1844b, Anti-Climacus, 1849). This is especially important to the mental health professional whom he feels cannot do her job if she uses a textbook to shield herself from the personal and experiential tool of empathy. After all, empathy is the spontaneous ability to understand someone from an understanding of oneself. As Kierkegaard stated, “When he (professional) has perfected himself, he will have no need to take his examples from literary repertoires and serve up half-dead reminiscences, but will bring his observations entirely fresh from the water, wriggling and sparkling in the play of their colors” (Kierkegaard/Haufniensis, 1844b, p. 55). And since freedom must be worked on in every moment, the practitioner has the possibility of finding something deeply human to identify with in each person as they struggle with freedom. The practitioner teaches freedom by helping clients find the place where freedom originates: in themselves. The therapeutic alliance creates a space where the therapist or counselor demonstrates freedom in interaction with the other. In this place freedom lays bare unfreedom. I will attempt to describe Kierkegaard’s philosophy of freedom as it is relevant to the practice of philosophical counseling and psychotherapy, and illustrate some of the salient points through the presentation of my work with a 16 year old adolescent male who sought help for depression.

Kierkegaard’s writings range from the philosophical to the deeply religious. I have drawn from both streams of his thinking but have secularized his more religious concepts. I believe that his writings so powerfully portray a genius’ incisive observations of human struggle, that even when his religious intent is de-emphasized, the concepts that are distilled can greatly empower the process of psychotherapy and counseling.

The secularization and use of Kierkegaard's works for psychotherapeutic theory and practice is not unique. Many psychotherapists including Guntrup (1969), Binswanger (1944), and Loewald (1980) utilized Kierkegaard's writings to enhance their work. Guntrup (1969) expressed that Kierkegaard, as part of the body of existential philosophy, helped to describe in detail the experience of what Guntrup called "schizoid despair" (p. 48). His praise for existential thought came in his recognition that the existentialists were asking people to face and deal with the real problems of the human condition (Ibid).

Ludwig Binswanger (1944) in his brilliant anthropological-clinical study of Ellen West directly credits Kierkegaard for capturing the essence of this woman's psychological struggle. As he stated, "she (Ellen West) reveals that throughout her entire life she has suffered from that sickness of the mind which Kierkegaard, with the keen insight of a genius, described and illuminated from all possible aspects under the name of 'Sickness Unto Death.' One might say that in this document, Kierkegaard has recognized with intuitive genius the approach of schizophrenia; for at the root of so many 'cases' of schizophrenia can be found the 'desperate' wish--indeed, the unshakable command to one's Eigenwelt, Mitwelt, and 'fate' -- not to be oneself, as also can be found its counterpart, the desperate wish to be oneself" (p. 297). I must emphasize that, *Sickness Unto Death*, was written by Kierkegaard (under the pseudonym Johannes Anti-Climacus) in the category of religious works. Yet Binswanger, who clearly distances himself from Kierkegaard's religious views, was able to use Kierkegaard's ideas for humanistic and non-ecclesiastic purposes.

Freedom is a concept of the individual. As Kierkegaard (1849) said, the single individual is more than the species (p. 121). In fact, he felt the only way to help mankind is by saving each

particular individual in the human race (Kierkegaard, 1844b). Freedom is not some fantastic abstraction; it can only be understood in a personal way and only as the particular individual produces it in action. Kierkegaard (1844b) actually talked about producing truth in action, but for Kierkegaard it is freedom that constantly brings forth truth (p. 138).

Kierkegaard's freedom is not defined as it is in general usage as: personal or political independence; exemption or immunity from controls, duties, etc., or, unrestricted use, access, etc. (The Random House Dictionary). In fact, in many ways, freedom is opposite the general usage. It is not the unrestricted ability to do; it is the ability to know one's limits, and at the same time to know that it is one's self that is limiting. Freedom is not exempt from controls or duty. Instead, for Kierkegaard freedom is qualified by ever-present responsibility (Kierkegaard/Anti-Climacus, 1849). Freedom is not a hypothetical construct. It is a quality that in its various manifestations can be experienced by every individual. And this experiencing happens within the nexus of the self. Therefore, Kierkegaard's freedom is inextricably interwoven into his concept of self. He said numerous times, the self is freedom (Kierkegaard/Anti-Climacus, 1849, p. 29 and Kierkegaard/ Judge William, 1843a, p. 214). As Kierkegaard wrote, "[Freedom is not] freedom to do this or that in the world, to become king and emperor or an abusive street corner orator, but freedom to know of himself that he is freedom." (Kierkegaard/Haufniensis, 1844b, p. 108). This pithy statement links the notion of freedom and self with self- knowledge. Freedom is self-conscious freedom. It is the ever expanding awareness of one's self such that hidden disharmonies of the past are viewed as a threat to the self's continuity; because an unresolved past is brought into the present as a possibility for the future. For Kierkegaard freedom is not won, but constantly worked on, and it is not earned in the search for pleasure.

The central organizing concept of freedom, the self, is both dynamic and structural. Kierkegaard's idea of the self is dialectic in nature. It is built upon dipolar opposite qualities. This is not simply a conflict model, but a dynamic movement of tension and fluid creative resolution. Health is perpetually being worked on in the resynthesizing of positive and negative elements.

Kierkegaard's poetic style of writing is particularly stunning in his description of the self. To give the reader a sense of his style the following is an excerpt from Kierkegaard's, *The Sickness Unto Death*:

A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self... Such a relation that relates itself to itself, a self, must either have established itself or have been established by another... If the relation that relates itself to itself has been established by another, then the relation is indeed the third, but this relation, the third, is yet again a relation and relates itself to that which established the entire relation... The human self is such a derived,

established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another... (Kierkegaard/Anti-Climacus, 1849, pp. 13-14).

Kierkegaard was describing that the self always exceeds the unity of its parts. It is that which is derived by turning any interaction back onto itself. The self is not simply the subjective part of "psychic structure," it is the quality that is derived by the active interrelating of the various components of the psyche and then reflecting back onto that relation. This continuous self-reflective movement is as Kierkegaard put it the self's inwardness. The self's character of inner relating is an aspect of the self's freedom. Importantly, it is not only self-awareness that is freedom, but also that the self presides over itself (Westphal, 1987). More specifically, freedom is the term given to a self that in its consciousness of relating itself to itself the self acts toward its inner and outer world with balance, productivity and independence.

For Kierkegaard, human essence is about relationship; it's about relating to oneself, within oneself and to other self (Kierkegaard/Anti-Climacus, 1849). It is the picture of an active existence where everything is dialectical, and responsibility is ever present.

To more fully understand freedom, one must explore the dynamic structural aspects of the self. The self is the derived relation that comes about by the active synthesizing of its dialectical components. These components are: the psychical and the physical, infinitude and finitude, the temporal and the eternal, of possibility and necessity. For purposes of this paper I will focus on the latter three.

Kierkegaard used the biblical story of Genesis to capture the development of the self. This is the movement from the childhood state of immediacy to the moment that a person has the

capacity to become an adult in freedom. Not all people freely choose to take this developmental leap.

When the moment arrives, and the adult self is posited, the foundational unity of the self, the dialectic of the temporal and the eternal declares its existence. Glenn (1987) defines this synthesis as "a tension between the self's capacity for unity through time and the tendency of its existence to be dispersed into different moments" (p. 9). This definition, however, doesn't quite underscore the importance of Kierkegaard's concept of eternity, and its inextricable relationship with the self and freedom. Kierkegaard says repeatedly in his works that spirit (self) is eternal (Haufniensis, 1844b, p. 90; Anti-Climacus, 1849, p. 17, Climacus, 1844a, p. 58). What this is referring to is the self's most basic quality of self-conscious existence. Since a self, by definition is a relation it is imperative that it is aware of itself as a relation. For a relation that does not know that it is having a relationship is meaningless. Once more, for Kierkegaard, the notion of eternity is a plea for people to become conscious of themselves. This is not simply a call to self-awareness; it is a beckoning to self-empowerment. He is asking people to know where they have been, so they know how they got to where they are, in order to decide where they want to go next. Kierkegaard rings an alarm throughout many texts trying to awaken people into the knowledge that they have a hand in shaping their own misery, and therefore, have a hand in straightening out their own lives. Eternity is about consciousness interwoven with responsibility.

The tension between the temporal and the eternal lies in the self having to negotiate being fully present in a current moment, and yet understanding its victories and failures of the past, and looking forward to learning in the future. This is the dialectic of the actualized self and the possible self (McCarthy, 1985). That is, a person at any given moment is a concretion of



objective, measurable characteristics, but he/she is also a coalescence of self-awareness, external awareness, and creativity that in potential can be more than he/she is in the next moment. An individual who has halted their process of becoming by any self-encumbrance, be it conflict, fear, or defense has traversed freedom to despair.

For the purpose of explanation Kierkegaard's concepts have been described in distinct ways. However, in his actual writings his terms flow into each other in a more symbiotic way. For example, he said that when the temporal and the eternal meet the future is generated. He goes on to state that the future is the first expression of the eternal (Kierkegaard/Haufniensis, 1844b). In Kierkegaard's work, *The Concept of Anxiety*, he said, "The possible corresponds exactly to the future. For freedom, the possible is the future and the future is for time the possible" (1844b, p. 91). This links the temporal and the eternal closely with the next components of the self, possibility and necessity.

The dialectical components of the self, possibility and necessity, like infinitude and finitude, are true antitheses. In the self's task of becoming itself in freedom, both possibility and necessity are equally important (Kierkegaard/*Anti-Climacus*, 1849). Possibility is the nothingness of potential. It is "that-which-is-not-yet," but can be, as opposed to that which is not and cannot be (McCarthy, 1985, p. 95). Possibility that is expressed in freedom begins as a pre-ideational belief in oneself that moves to thought, which is transformed into action which becomes actuality. People who attach possibility to all circumstances in their world and never take the gradual steps to move possibility into actuality are in despair.

Freedom is an expression of the self's executant which relativizes its component qualities. Possibility represents a quality of unrestrictedness. For a self to operate in the real world it must

balance such a quality with limits. For a self to become in freedom, possibility must be infused with necessity. Necessity is literally, the "specific limitations of a self's actual situation" (Glenn, 1987, p. 9). Kierkegaard likened this situation to a child's birthday party. The invitations evoke immense possibility in the children invited, but they must receive the necessary permission of their parents to go (Kierkegaard/Anti-Climacus, 1849). This balance, which is freedom, is the ability to transform oneself within the confines of one's environment.

Despair is constituted when an imbalance occurs in the opposite direction. If a person lives life dictated solely by necessity, then the world becomes a maze with impenetrable walls built upon the trivial. This would describe a life of helplessness.

The self that is evolving in freedom must synthesize a balance between the dialectical relation of infinitude and finitude. This unity is so intimately connected to possibility/necessity that Kierkegaard himself sometimes merged the concepts in his writings. For example, infinitude is an expansive quality of the self. It is the self's ability to dream past its given reality. The apparatus for such an ability is the primary capacity of imagination. Kierkegaard (1849) called imagination "infinite reflection" (p. 31). With respect to the merger of concepts, Kierkegaard stated, "the self is reflection, and the imagination is reflection, is the rendition of the self as the self's possibility" (Kierkegaard/Anti-Climacus, 1849, p. 31). Simply, the self, which is derived by how it relates itself to itself, and by reflecting back on the outcome of the relation, can additionally potentiate reflection with the use of imagination. But imagination is driven by the self's creativity. It is at this juncture that the concepts have continuity. Possibility is the self's creative potential. In order for it to be actualized, it must move through the medium of imagination, and end in the movement of conscious action.

Just as possibility needs to be grounded in necessity, the process of infinitizing needs to be grounded in finitude. Unyielding infinitude is the imbalance of despair. Unchecked infinitude turns a concrete self into a fantastic or unreal self. Kierkegaard (1849) related imagination to three main areas: feeling, knowing, and willing. Inordinate imagination transforms feeling into an "abstract sentimentality" for all of mankind, compromising personal or intimate feeling (p. 31). Fantastic knowing wants knowledge for knowledge's sake and loses the importance of self-knowledge. And lastly, fantastic willing gets caught up in planning and plotting, but never carrying out the tasks needed for completion of the task.

When Kierkegaard shifts his focus from the despair inherent in the extreme of infinitude, to the despair inherent on the other end of the dialectic, the self-grounding factor of finitude, he subtly moves from an emphasis on imagination to a sociological framework. Despairing finitude is a shift from going out beyond reality to a return with a myopic look at reality. Kierkegaard stressed that an over reliance on finitude would lead to a narrowed and restricted self-existence. Specifically, his concern was on the people who would lose themselves in the busyness of everyday living. He worried about those who would be willing to risk their individuality for the comfort of blending into the crowd; he called this, the "mass man" (Kierkegaard/ Anti-Climacus, 1849, p. 34). Whereas necessity is the specific limitations of a self's actual situation, finitude is the search for and acceptance of givens in one's existence (i.e.: a career, or social status). Just as possibility touches infinitude, possibility needs finitude. When Kierkegaard (1844b) states, "...anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself" (p. 61); he was referring to anxiety as a seductive fear that expresses the "selfish infinity of

possibility" (Ibid). In other words, one could not live in a constant state of primary creativity, a perceptual place where all things are possible. This would be insanity. A self's limits and givens allows one to operate in the real world. Freedom is the ability to negotiate the components of the self. This does not mean a strict walk down the middle of the road. It pertains to an organic process whereby an extra measure of imagination might be added to lift one from an existence that has become reified by daily living; or, it is the stimulus that moves one to engage people when a reliance on dreams only leaves one alone in reality.

As the ideas contained in the concept of freedom reach clarity and depth, the equally important notion of despair becomes manifest. Kierkegaard (1849) termed despair "the sickness unto death" (p. 13). It is a sickness of the self, a dialectical malady that Kierkegaard said was "the worst misfortune never to have had the sickness: it is a true godsend to get it, even if it is the most dangerous of illnesses, if one does not want to be cured of it." (Kierkegaard/Anti-Climacus, 1849, p. 26). Kierkegaard was referring to the nature of despair. It is a deep level of anxiety that if properly recognized can be used as a guide in the self's process of actualization. If understood, despair is a judgement that tells the self whether its decisions, actions, and experience are promoting growth and becoming, or leading to self-entropy and withdrawal. Despair is evoked if one is choosing to live in unfreedom. The danger is in burying despair's signal and losing an important beacon to self-awareness. Despair is not an illness you catch; it is a self-inflicted discomfort for which one is always responsible.

As Kierkegaard (1849) pointed out, physical illness is experienced as a crisis in the continuity of health; however, in the life of the self, man is critical both in sickness or in health, because either state is being decided in every moment of living. For some, despair is a suffering,

a weighty burden that has been placed upon existence from without. But this view is a sign that despair's purpose has been lost. Despair is an inner communication that warns oneself that they have lost, or are losing their freedom. One does not have to be conscious of the feeling of despair to be in it. In fact, Kierkegaard (1849) felt that the ignorance of being in despair is the most common form of despair. He also felt this is the most insidious form, because if one does not know that they are ill they cannot effect treatment. Despair is the border where the self, responsibility and freedom meet.

Despair is the outcome of a misrelation within the self. To be unconscious of despair is to be unaware of the misrelation. This can only happen if one is not conscious of oneself, or conscious of being a self. If one is not conscious of oneself then one cannot act from a position of responsibility. A self that is ignorant of itself and does not take responsibility for itself cannot act in freedom. For freedom is the expression of a conscious, integrated and forward moving self that takes responsibility for every aspect of itself. This is what Kierkegaard (1849) meant when he said, "...The more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self" (p. 29).

Kierkegaard described the formula for a self that is in a state without despair. It is: "in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it" (Kierkegaard/Anti-Climacus, 1849, p. 131). Kierkegaard called this the definition of faith. It is equally his formula for freedom.

It seems logical to ask, why would anyone choose to surrender their freedom? To stay unaware of oneself so that opportunities for growth pass by unnoticed; to avoid the responsibilities of adult reality to such an extent that all that is left to envision is an endless

repetition of an unhappy childhood. Many people maintain the fruitless cycle of trying to build self-esteem through a dependence on the outside world instead of onto themselves. Every moment of life offers the opportunity to express personal creativity. That is, to view daily existence with new attitudes, new perceptions and new responses. Often people prefer to step back and view life from afar, fearing to grasp it with vigor and commitment. As Kierkegaard lamented, “As a rule, men are conscious only momentarily, conscious in the midst of big decisions, but they do not take the daily everyday into account at all; they are spirit of sorts for an hour one day a week... (Kierkegaard/Anti-Climacus, 1849, p. 105).

There are many motivators tempting people to avoid their freedom. Certainly Kierkegaard knew how stressful it was to negotiate an outer world with a inner world that contains an ever changing balance of dipolar opposite qualities. To endure the tension of a self that is in contradiction within itself is seen by Kierkegaard as the principle pain of existence (Kierkegaard/Climacus, 1844a). Avoidance of this level of intra and interpersonal interaction is the flight into despair that Westphal (1987) termed “laziness.” As he said, “The task of living the tension of the dialectical simultaneity of di-polar categories is an extraordinarily demanding and strenuous task” (p. 64).

The conscious recognition that you are freedom breaches the childhood myth that life is suppose to take care of you. This aspect of freedom’s responsibility brings with it the awareness that one stands apart from their natural surroundings, that one can demand absolutely nothing of life. Such knowledge is for Kierkegaard a confrontation with the terrifying (Kierkegaard/Haufniensis, 1844b). This grounding experience either catalyzes a person to evolve forward in a creative living process, or to withdraw from self-knowledge into a self-inclosure, what

Kierkegaard (1844b) termed, “inclosing reserve” (p. 123). The decision to recluse into a citadel of ignorance is the despairing existence called unfreedom.

Other social observers have certainly noted the fear of freedom. According to Fromm (1969), the initial recognition of one’s separateness from the environment leaves one feeling alone, fearful and bewildered. Hall (1985), highlighted the idea that the burden of awareness leads to a knowledge of personal guilt, mortality as well as the responsibility for one’s own living.

Hitherto I have tried to create a picture of the self as described through the words of Kierkegaard. His self symbolizes the centrality of human existence, an abstract center where spirit, volition and creativity coalesce. Freedom is the expression of the ever-maturing, unobstructed self. This does not mean a self without difficulty, for a self in freedom is only free by accepting and actively dealing with the burdens of freedom. This self is the experiential centrality of living. It is a self, free to experience its history, to fully engage in the present moment, and to maintain an open space from which to create its future. Freedom is the ability to negotiate dialectical living, especially the tension of existing in both an inner and outer reality. And freedom is the consciousness of knowing that one is the author of oneself.

This human organic entity called the self is not some theoretical construct only given life in a textbook. It is a central experience that can be seen and felt in everyone. The self in freedom is not hidden, it is always communicating and always reaching beyond itself (Kierkegaard/Haufniensis, 1844b). It is this latter fact that is crucial for psychotherapy and philosophical counseling. Even when the self’s freedom is obstructed, this condition is communicated by the self. This is what Kierkegaard (1844b) tried to explain in his book, *The Concept of Anxiety*,

when he stated that the body is the organ of the psyche and of spirit and that the self in unfreedom can be expressed in bodily symptoms. He was describing how the self will use whatever medium it has available to express its inner state with whatever freedom it has.

As expressed earlier, one of the primary expansive dimensions of the self is infinitude. Infinitude is expressed through the capacity of imagination (Kierkegaard/Anti-Climacus, 1849). Since imagination is a reflection of the self, it will betray all states of the self both in freedom and unfreedom. Language, like imagination, is an inner production of the self, but where imagination can stay within the borders of the self, language seeks to carry the inner productions of the self to the outside. The importance of language to the self cannot be understated for the very nature of consciousness is built upon language's coalescence of reality with ideality (Kierkegaard/ Climacus, 1844a). That is, language is the subtle melding of external and internal perception.

Philosophical counseling and psychotherapy use the self's ability to communicate, both verbally and non-verbally, to understand the present state of the client's self. The practitioner must assess, based on the client's communications, how much of his/her freedom is being used in despair. It is important to determine how conscious the client is of himself: Does the client feel he has any power to change his/her life? Does he/she see the difficulty as centered from within his/her self and therefore has alternatives to change, or, is the difficulty from without, and the subject is powerless to change things? The practitioner should see if the client's primary creative abilities are using imagination/phantasy to dwell on a lost past, or focused on the possibilities of the future. It is necessary for every practitioner to be aware that language expresses both the actual and possible self; the self is creative and always being created. In the dialogue of



counseling and psychotherapy, words are used in their concrete denotative meanings and in abstract connotative ways.

It is imperative for the practitioner to learn how the client is using words, because behind them lies the different dimensions of the self. To this end, I find the use of metaphor to be an important tool in therapeutic communication. It appears to touch the many levels of the self. This is not a new technique, certainly Freud (1900) found this out many years ago. I just want to reassert its value here, because if I can help a client be more deeply conscious of their fear of, and conflict with freedom, then I can at least free a person up enough to choose if they want to continue a life in despair.

### **An Application to Practice: A Case Example**

All people who seek assistance from a professional counselor or psychotherapist are struggling with their exercise of freedom. As a way of demonstrating how philosophy guides practice, I will present the therapeutic process of a teenage boy, whom I call Logan. Logan suffered within the self-inclosed unfree state of depression.

Logan was a very bright and creative young man who was able to express himself on many levels using the rich colors of metaphor painted in the wide and subtle strokes of words and actions. I worked with Logan for two years at which point therapy ended in the natural conclusion of him going off to college. The work was driven by more than one theoretical approach, but for purposes of this paper, I will describe this therapeutic process as it unfolded with a stress on those interventions that characterize an existential approach influenced by the philosophy of Kierkegaard.

When I first heard about Logan he was sixteen years old and attending a local high school. Apparently, he had told some friends in school that he was seriously thinking about killing himself in a violent way; his parents kept a gun in the house. These friends told the school guidance counselor who phoned Logan's mother. Logan's mother in turn called her daughter's previous psychotherapist for help. This therapist referred them to a psychiatrist and me. Two days later Logan's mother called this practitioner for a consultation. I agreed to meet with both of Logan's parents.

Logan's mother was a strikingly attractive woman who contracted polio as a child and could only ambulate with the assistance of leg braces and crutches. Logan's father was rather reserved, letting his wife talk for most of the session. The mother noted that Logan didn't seem happy over the past 2 years. This was around the time they moved from another town. The mother quickly turned the focus onto how difficult the move was for her. She voiced how hurt she was over the loss of her friends. When I was able to return the focus onto Logan, both parents proudly spoke about how Logan was a, "well-behaved, serious, quiet and thoughtful youngster". The father stated with pride, "he never has expressed his anger. He won't even scream when angry". He went on to say, "He won't talk back. Oh no, he was never allowed. I remember at age 3, if he talked back he was punished double". The mother praised Logan for being her helper since he was young. The father said, "we were really on top of him; watched him constantly". By session's end, both parents voiced how dumbfounded they were over Logan's symptoms. They never saw their son as depressed. The parents agreed that Logan needed more than the medication prescribed for him by the psychiatrist, and I set up a time to

meet with him for the following week. What was significant about this session was the sense I got from Logan's parents that his self was being ignored and buried.

I recall my first meeting with Logan. He was such a serious young man. His eyes were transfixed to the floor, his face so somber. Logan felt his depressive feelings had been most pronounced since he and his family moved two years ago, but he could recall having suicidal ideation since fourth grade. Most of his thoughts about death were organized around two reoccurring phantasies. He described one, where he was at his own funeral and no one attended. The scene was sad and empty. In the other phantasy, he attends his funeral, but there is an outpouring of friends and family. This latter experience felt pleasurable to him. In the early sessions, Logan tended to be closed off to himself and could not expand on many of the experiences he shared. However, in the first session, after exposing the phantasy material, he spoke of the independence he felt when he had a part-time job the previous summer.

Logan was expressing two levels of experience, one attached to early passive desires, and one attached to independent action. In the next few sessions, Logan taught me how well he learned house rules. The rule learned most severely was never to express feelings directly, especially not anger. He became so adroit at this that oftentimes he reported feeling numb, or he'd transform affective experience into concrete experience or physical action. For example, he would demonstrate some of the contempt he had for his parents by antisocial acts for which he would inevitably be caught (cutting school, stealing). On one such day, when his mother discovered him truant from school, she reacted by yelling at him in an out-of-control manner. Logan withdrew into the phantasy of seeing a bullet crash into his skull and rip through his brain.

As the therapy progressed, Logan began being comfortable adding words and feelings to these pictorial experiences. With an enhanced ability to use words and feelings, he voiced a developing knowledge that he was the originator of his experience. With this knowledge, Logan said he got a glimpse that life is worth living. Additionally, he got the sense that his thoughts of death were linked to "not being himself". His consciousness of being a self, and of wanting to be himself, came up in conjunction with the desire to individuate from his parents. He began expressing anger directly in words. About four months into our work together, he lamented, "for 15 years I have done, felt and acted as my parents wanted. When I try to assert me, my mother tries to push me back with, 'I don't know you anymore'. She didn't know me, just herself. I cared for her so much that I don't know how to care for myself." He said that his parents never asked how he felt until they found out about his suicidal ideation. His lament laid bare his conflict with wanting to be an autonomous self and wanting to be cared for. With his increase in the consciousness of his struggle between dependence and independence, Logan became aware that depression does not overtake him, but is generated by him.

Six months into therapy, at a point when Logan was trying to assert himself with his family, his mother restricted his use of the car. In an impotent rage he ran to his basement and made small cuts into his arm. He voiced an enjoyment of his action. He said the anger helps him to feel alive or he feels nothing, like the empty funeral. When he reflected on the event, he spoke of how he felt his mother's restrictions were a direct attack on his independence. He got so overwhelmed with anger that in fear of what he would do to his mother he regressed to an earlier level of experiencing. In his action, he merged feeling cut emotionally with being cut physically. The cutting was an act of violence against his mother in effigy and an archaic, masochistic

connection with her. It took many weeks to explore this action, but the outcome was a request by Logan for a family session. The goal of this session was to help his parents understand Logan's need for greater independence. The outcome of this family session was that Logan's mother gave Logan the responsibility to remember and to drive to his own therapy sessions. His mother had always acted as the reminder and chauffeur of important events.

Logan's response was to miss the succeeding two therapy sessions. When he did come in for his session, he entered 15 minutes late. There was a tense silence at the beginning of the session. I asked him what this meant. He was amazed that I was not angry with him for missing his therapy. In answer to his amazement, I asked him why I should be angry when it is he who was missing his therapy. This intervention placed the work back onto him. Logan responded by stating that he was late today hoping to "piss me off". His hope was that I'd get so disgusted with him that I'd walk away from him. This scenario only tenuously covered his wish to withdraw from therapy. Apparently, his parents' positive response to the family session stood him face-to-face with the possibility of freedom and his independence. He got frightened and wondered if change "would cause him to lose his friends, or be like what his mother wanted him to be". This session uncovered his fear of freedom. In this same session, he voiced a relief at being able to provoke an adult and not have that adult retaliate.

In the months that followed, Logan became aware of his tendency to withdraw from people, and how his withdrawal kept people away from him. In this consciousness, Logan pieced together how he perpetuates his own feelings of isolation and aloneness. He noted that he could turn an internal state into an external reality. He deemed this increase in his self-knowledge as empowering.

Although Logan's non-verbal behaviors and rich phantasy life continued to be a significant focus of the work, by the end of the first year of therapy, his active participation in the therapeutic process was flourishing. Whereas earlier on in the therapy, I was doing most of the interpretations of the phantasy material, now he was becoming the primary investigator of himself. At this juncture, Logan seemed less pensive in session and he reported having better relationships with family members and peers in school. He even began making friends with girls, a gender that he used to say he hated. And he began expressing himself in creative ways, especially in writing. Perhaps most significant, Logan began sharing his creative writing with his teachers, an exposure that used to evoke too much anxiety inside of him.

His dating became the neutral ground for the displacement and working through of his dependency needs. I recall the anticipation he had over one of his first dates. Logan said he was "looking for a woman who could love him and make him feel accepted and loved". Since such an externalization of early needs can never be fully met by another in reality, the relationship proved to be disastrous. The day after the relationship ended, Logan walked into session with his hands clasped together. After a short silence, I asked him if there was anything wrong with his hands. He replied that his hands were filled with hate, and he "feels like hitting something". This opened up a discussion of the frustration Logan felt when he found his girlfriend couldn't give him what he was looking for. My intervention consisted of highlighting, in a reality-based way (as a balance to his material), what one can ask from people and what one can only ask of themselves. This intervention stood him alone with his needs. This type of aloneness is not the kind experienced by withdrawal, this aloneness is derived by the awareness of one's singular responsibility of one's self in freedom. Logan responded with a phantasy of drinking turpentine.

I asked him what he wanted to burn out of himself. He replied, "hope, because the future is scary."

Two weeks later, Logan came in wearing gloves on a warm day. I asked him if he was angry. He just smiled and talked in a vague manner. I noted that gloves won't keep the anger away and covering it up only builds a wall around himself. He then opened up how his rage for others sometimes comes out in his thoughts about me. He then cautiously admitted that a few weeks back, when he felt like hitting "something", that something was me. When I didn't act surprised, he voiced a relief and a sense of confidence that he's getting better at recognizing himself. He took off his gloves and then left. After this session, Logan had a flurry of insight.

A few sessions after the above session, Logan had a dream where he was at the beach and his sandcastle was being destroyed by a strong wave. He screamed to his mother for help, but she was too busy to hear him. In anger, he takes revenge on everybody else's sandcastles. Now, his mother notices him and responds with swift punishment. The punishment stood out; and he interpreted the dream in terms of being connected, and only recognized by his mother, in punishment. He also voiced his fear of rejection by women.

Logan's feelings were becoming more vivid and more varied. He was allowing himself to associate off of the material he was generating. In one such session, he focused on his alcohol use, smoking and occasional stealing. He felt that all three of these events evoked an excitement in him that somehow connected him to his father. As he continued with the feeling, he gave an example of how he cut school recently and was caught in the act by his father. Logan felt that all of his negative tendencies were a wish to be caught by him. It was the same type of excitement as in being punished by his mother, but something was added. Further associative material

revealed a wish for his father to take control over him. With sadness, he said his anti-social acts don't have a long-term effect, because his father returns to "the normalcy of indifference". His passive wish was the prominent focus of the session as was his search for external validation and the futility of getting these needs met in the present. Uncovering his wishes or making them clearer was not in itself the agent of change. The idea of making things conscious is to give the self more options from which to choose. Therapeutic support always focuses on the self's ability to choose or, at least, on whatever capacity the self has to choose at that time. After Logan began to recognize his passive longings for his father, he actively tried to engage him in a more mature relationship. He voiced what he wanted from his father. For example, he asked his father to spend more time with him on the weekends. His father listened. Logan discussed this as a cleansing, "like a coating of dirt was lifted off of him".

Logan continued to struggle with his independence. He wanted to get a job so that he could pay for his own expenses, but he kept procrastinating. In one session where he was discussing his ambivalence about working, he switched scenes to his sorrow for a childhood lost. He said his mother "missed her freedom" when Logan was young because of her braces. She could not run around and missed sharing so many early experiences with him. He felt her missed freedom was his missed freedom. Using Logan's metaphor, I helped clarify the images and asked him why he was still wearing the braces. He acknowledged the interpretation as it related to his conflict with work. My intervention highlighted the idea that freedom is not something lost once and for all, but is given up in every moment.

As therapy progressed, Logan's masochistic connection to his family became even more evident as its displacement in peer relationships was made clear. A girlfriend had broken up



with him, and he noticed that he was enjoying the sorrow that this experience evoked. When his connection to people in a painful way was illuminated, he said he feels like he's in the darkness of the past and should "just run into the light". Since flight is not freedom, I said to him that darkness must be accepted as a contrast to the light that he is moving toward.

As the second year of therapy approached, Logan found himself in a crisis. He had been revisiting his old funeral phantasy and came to see it as a passive wish to be cared for. It was around this time that he began missing sessions. I called him one day when he was rather late for his appointment. He got on the phone and asked me if I thought it was still worth him coming in that day. I told him yes. Logan came in with a solemn look. He told me how he used to lower his grades in school so as to force his father to check his homework before going out. Logan said, "I forced him to care for me". He then went on to state that he didn't think he needed therapy any longer because he found a girl "who makes me feel handsome". I connected his use of his father to correct his homework with his having me ask him to come in that day.

Former themes came up in connection with his wanting to leave therapy, most notably his fear of independence. Before Logan left the session, he said, "In the last 1-1/2 years of therapy, I started to know there is something inside of me. I don't know, you can call it a soul. Well, it has been sleeping, or I have never recognized it. But you know how when you sleep for too long you feel kind of groggy? Well that is how mine is. It has to be exercised. It is always tempted to lie down. Especially when I get angry--it goes back to sleep. I have also become aware of my wishes, and I can use them destructively to just think of what I needed, but then I don't get to know what I need now." This was Logan's acknowledgment of his struggle with freedom and a recognition of the freedom he had attained.

Logan's fear of freedom centralized onto a reality-based issue that was quickly coming upon him, the decision to go to college. In one session where he wondered if he should go away to school, he discussed how he had "given everything" to his mother, and now he wants her to give him permission to leave. Logan associated to a phantasy he had: He was walking down a long corridor. He sees a door and opens it. There this practitioner is sitting in a chair in this big open space, and Logan, looking to me as a teacher, sat at my feet. With his fear of freedom in mind, I asked him why he was not sitting in that chair. In a serious tone he replied, "it's more comfortable to look up at, then to sit in the chair". This phantasy illustrates Logan's passivity and fear of taking responsibility for living. This was connected to waiting for his mother to give him permission to leave.

With this theme still active, Logan and his family went to visit a relative in the week succeeding the above session. Though his mother was extremely against it, she allowed Logan to bring his girlfriend with him. While in the relative's house, he went into the bedroom assigned to his girlfriend and laid down beside her. He "forgot" to close the door and this room faced his mother's room. Of course his mother saw the event and began to scream. When Logan came to therapy the week following this incident, he described feeling hurt. I asked him why and he said, "His mother proved that she did not accept him as a man". My intervention consisted of asking him if he accepts himself as a man. The burden of freedom weighed heavily on him.

In an important session that occurred just two months before he was to leave for college, Logan came in telling me he was tired of his mother always trying to give him ideas for his writing. He figured as a compromise, he was going to just let her edit his completed papers. Logan had this uncomfortable look on his face as he was describing this compromise, and so I

felt he was still trying to work something out here. I let him wrestle with the issues. Toward the end of the session he began staring at me. He said in a serious tone, "I never really gazed at you before". In the next session, he excitedly told me he wanted to share all that happened in the last session. He said he really thought letting his mother edit his work was a compromise to telling him what to write, but when he waited for my approval, I stayed silent. Logan stated that at first he read my silence as a disagreement of his decision. He then tried to get me to talk as an attempt to force me to accept his opinion. Then, however, he realized that he would be inflicting his views on me, which is the very thing he hates other people doing to him. Logan then got anxious, feeling that his thoughts of wanting to inflict his views on me would hurt me. Further, he interpreted my silence as an attack on him because I should have known that his compromise was wrong, and was still leaning on his mother for approval. Then he felt embarrassed, a feeling he usually had a difficult time experiencing. Logan put this sequence together by himself.

My silence was needed because it did not "scoop him up". It gave him his freedom to struggle and to unfold to himself. Instead of forcing me, like he does with his father, to give him something, which would only support his dependency, he got to look at his dependency. At the end of this session, he asked if I could renegotiate the fee because he'd like to pay for the therapy by himself with the money he made from his part-time job. I agreed.

In the termination phase of the work, Logan described independence as an "it" that he could only possess at the expense of his family. He feared that he must take it from them. I moved his focus from the outside to the inside (the place where freedom is found) by telling him that his family did not possess "it." I stated that, "You must give 'it' to yourself, and it can only

be kept alive by you". Logan ended this specific session by saying, "it's hard for me to be in the chair."

In the final session, Logan and I summarized our work together. He was very conscious of his tendency to try to push people into meeting his early desires. Logan said he had a tough time, "raising himself out of the grave", but he no longer reclused from the struggle toward independence. Logan stated he would strive to be his own example. He left for college.

When I first met with Logan, he was in mergence with the world around him. In this state of being he could not recognize himself. Early interpretations helped him clarify his feelings and desires and introduced him to himself. Once he had even a vague notion of his own qualities, the process of separating himself from other emerged, as did his ability to lift himself above himself. Established as a self, he moved from being in his depression to looking at the meaning of his depression. This forms the juncture where despair is no longer unconscious, but becomes a signal that can move the individual in the direction of freedom. As Logan stopped cutting off his feelings, and therefore felt less split off from himself, he experienced a deeper sense of inner unity. His piecing together of his personal history and experiencing how he let the past repeat itself in the present gave him a sense of inner continuity. This conscious unity and continuity in time is eternity. Once touched by eternity, Logan transformed the despairing sorrow of looking at the past into an optimistic vision of the future. Instead of taking in the world, he began producing-in-the-world. My interventions, always based on his capabilities, supported his conscious responsibility for his experiences in living. And whenever his fear of freedom acted as an impediment to his becoming, it was brought to his awareness so that he

could decide on what direction he wanted to take. In the final analysis, it was Logan who chose to progress.

### **Conclusion**

The proper application of Kierkegaard's writings can help an individual recognize and expand their freedom. This I believe is crucial to productive change. My interventions, influenced by the philosophy of freedom, always respects the responsibility of the client creating action, whether psychological or physical. For example, every client is quite capable of throwing up one defense after another in an almost endless struggle against his or her own freedom. What must be done is to acknowledge the person using the defense. Psychotherapy and philosophical counseling becomes interminable if you try to do battle with a defense. Only the person can choose to put down a defense, and to do this that person must know that he/she is their own creator. Responsibility in living is key to Kierkegaard's philosophy and important in psychotherapy or counseling. You can help people to ask questions about themselves, but you can't actually tell them which question to ask or when to ask it. This has a specific bearing on some of the structured, short-term therapy models where inner process is dictated by external constrain. Such a structured model is counterproductive to supporting self-initiation.

Since this philosophy of the self describes people as being inherently creative, so too must be any therapy or counseling that supports human potential. Psychotherapy is not about sitting back and analyzing a client, it is about interacting with and spiriting on the creation of the possible self. I have found that metaphor opens the channels of communication to the creative aspects of the self. Sometimes when I reframe a client's conflicts in metaphoric terms, it gives the client a wider space to play with the experience. After awhile, the client and practitioner

form co-created metaphors that allow much more subtle gradients of experience to be communicated, experience not just of fears, but also of aspirations and hidden hopes.

Kierkegaard's philosophy adds to the theoretical literature by demonstrating that the separation anxieties first expressed by Freud (1926) are not the only motivators of defense, but that the awesome responsibility of adulthood can equally render life stationary. Just as important is the expansive notion that anxiety is not simply a signal for defense, but a beacon calling for the person to work through the very thing they fear (Kierkegaard/ deSilentio, 1843b). And lastly, the philosophy of freedom can be used to both compare and contrast differing theoretical models and to unify various constructs.

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