

# IN DEFENSE OF DEFENSELESSNESS: KIERKEGAARD'S CRITIQUE OF AN ACCEPTED NARCISSISM

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In *The Revolt of the Masses*, José Ortega y Gasset wrote,

The man with a clear head is the man who . . . looks life in the face, realises that everything in it is problematic, and feels himself lost. As this is the simple truth – that to live is to feel oneself lost. Whoever accepts this has already begun to find himself, to be on firm ground. Instinctively, as do the shipwrecked, he will look round for something to which to cling, and that tragic, ruthless glance, absolutely sincere, because it is a question of salvation, will cause him to bring order into the chaos of his life. . . . He who does not really feel himself lost, is lost without remission; that is to say, he never finds himself, never comes up against his own reality.<sup>1</sup>

Lostness is the starting point for philosophical self-reflection. It is, somewhat ironically, the firm ground from which we begin our quest for ourselves ('a question of salvation,' as Ortega puts it). The Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard passionately examined this lostness, because he thought facing it was a doorway to hope in an otherwise desperate situation. His writings are a plea to Western Christendom, as well as Western civilization, to face their lostness; in this he desires to put us on the firm ground of our own helplessness and creatureliness, with the hope that we will seek for something to which to cling, something that will save us from our own destitution. For Kierkegaard, this 'something' is God. Not the God of the 'found,' or strong, or those who have it together, but the God of the lost, the helpless, and the broken. Or better, the God of those who know they are lost, sense their helplessness, and have faced their brokenness.

This paper is not about salvation, but about the shipwreck Kierkegaard hopes to create in his readers. Actually, it is more about gaining a recognition of the shipwreck: it has already taken place, but the passengers have somehow become convinced that what they are experiencing is all part of the 'cruise experience,' and there's nothing to worry about. It is an elaborate fantasy created to keep people from panicking, or becoming anxious. The passengers are all in despair, because the hope of rescue does not exist without the recognition of the need to be rescued – even passing ships would be waved on, as if everything is just as it is supposed to be. Kierkegaard sees this as an attempt to create one's own reality, because reality as it truly is, is too difficult, painful, and offensive to face.

**Narcissists are masters at creating their own reality. A narcissist is someone who is in a perpetual state of creating a reality of his or her own making. In the face of a world where one does not count for very much, or have much value beyond one's own little realm of influence, narcissists convince themselves they are not merely powerful, but are all that really matters in**

any given situation. Reality, as they see it, revolves around them, and no matter how lost and chaotic life may be, they create an order in which they are the masters and sustainers.

Narcissism presents an interesting case in relation to Kierkegaard, because narcissists are people who had a particularly rough go of it in their early childhood development, and the defense mechanisms they have created in the face of this experience of the world are an extreme case of the defenses Kierkegaard sees in most people. Accordingly, while a narcissist's sense of grandiosity and self-sufficiency is more blatant than most people's, this blatancy allows us a means to examine the way we create our own fantasies to defend ourselves against the helplessness of our situation – that is, our own tendencies toward grandiosity and self-sufficiency.

I will begin this paper by examining Kierkegaard's view of the structure of the self, and comparing it to Heinz Kohut's view of the self. Kohut has written extensively on narcissism, and has influenced current understanding of the workings of the pathological narcissist's personality. I will then turn to examine Kierkegaard's analysis of how the 'spiritless' individual evades the task of becoming a self, a task which is, as we will see, imposed on the individual by the structure of the self. Spiritlessness is a fundamental dishonesty with oneself as to the nature of one's life, one's identity, and one's significance. It is an attempt at self-grounding and self-sufficiency, which Kierkegaard views as an ultimately despairing enterprise, because it is an evasion of our basic helplessness in the face of the world, and an attempt to ground the self in what is arbitrary and conditional. We will come to see that the workings of the spiritless, while not as intense and obvious as those of the pathological narcissist, have as an important characteristic in common with narcissism an arbitrary and conditional grounding of the self. It is only by recognizing this arbitrary nature of the spiritless self that we are first able to find ourselves, since the acceptance of our lostness and helplessness puts us on a firm grounding from which to begin the task of self-becoming. Our defenses, especially those which are built upon narcissistic tendencies, must be dismantled in order for us to begin this process; Kierkegaard's writings are an attempt to dismantle these defenses.

#### KIERKEGAARD'S VIEW OF THE SELF

The self is not a ready-made substance for Kierkegaard. It is not something finished, out of which one lives one's life, but a task to be picked up. The self's structure allows for the possibility to become a more self-conscious and free individual, but this structure also allows for the possibility of not becoming a self – of becoming immersed in illusions and entanglements that keep one from becoming more and more a self. Clarifying what it means to be a self for Kierkegaard (or, perhaps more importantly, not to be a self) is intimately related to the structure that allows for one to become an authentically self-conscious and free self. Therefore, I will begin by examining the structure of the self as Kierkegaard conceives it.

Kierkegaard gives an infamously convoluted definition of the self in *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 that 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 the two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self.<sup>2</sup>

This definition of the self points out that the self is made up of opposing and contradictory poles, such as the finite and infinite, necessity and possibility, external and internal, actual and ideal, temporal and eternal, and so forth. The self-structure is a synthesis of these various contradictory poles, but as this synthesis, the self is not yet a self – it is a mere potential self. To become a self is to pick up the task of relating to both poles of the self in an authentic and cohesive manner. This is ‘the relation’s relating itself to itself in that relation.’ These contradictions are what allow one to transcend one’s own situation, to reflect on one’s life and the direction one is going, and so not to be lost in the life of the world. These contradictions also allow for the freedom necessary to move within these reflections. We are not simply immersed in our social settings, locked into a social determinism, but we can transcend our social settings, and move into a freedom from those things that have entangled our lives. To become a self, a person must relate to both poles of the self, but, as we will see, it is just this self-relating relation that most people are unwilling to undertake – most people shrink before authentic self-consciousness and freedom.

Kierkegaard adds to his definition of the self, that ‘such a relation that relates itself to itself, a self, must either have established itself or have been established by another.’<sup>3</sup> In other words, we are either able to be the ground of our own selves, by which we define who we are and our relation to the world, or we are grounded by something outside ourselves. This is another way of saying that we are either self-sufficient, or dependent on something outside ourselves. Kierkegaard argues that the self has been established by another, and so is neither self-grounding nor self-sufficient; therefore, the self must not only relate itself to itself, but in relating to itself it must relate itself to this other. For Kierkegaard, the ground of the self (that which established the structure of the self) is God, and so the task of becoming a self requires the recognition of failed attempts at self-sufficiency and self-grounding. Kierkegaard believes it is the God-relationship that ultimately grounds the self, which keeps the structure of the self from becoming a mere phantom of a self (an arbitrary and conditional entity).

Self-grounding is most often attempted by relating to only one pole of the self-contradiction, which alleviates the tension and struggle the contradiction creates within the self (a tension and struggle which causes the individual to feel his or her helplessness). The self-contradiction creates anxiety in humans, which is due to the ambiguity of the self-contradiction, and our powerlessness in the face of it. In *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker writes, ‘Man’s anxiety is a function of his sheer ambiguity and of his complete powerlessness to overcome that ambiguity, to be straightforwardly an animal or an angel. He cannot live heedless of his fate, nor can he take sure control over that fate and triumph over it by being outside the human condition.’<sup>4</sup> What Becker refers to as ‘ambiguity’ Kierkegaard calls the self-contradiction, and both agree that facing the reality of this ambiguity creates anxiety. From a Kierkegaardian perspective, while anxiety is a symptom of a dis-ease within the individual, those who possess this symptom are in better shape (more spiritually healthy) than those who do not, because it is a sign that the individual is still maintaining some type of relation to the contradictions that make up the self. Anxiety is a sign that spirit is present in the individual: only the spiritless feel no anxiety, because they have completely evaded the ambiguity that makes up the self.

Anxiety also arises because of the self-consciousness the self-contradiction produces. To be self-conscious is to be honest with oneself: it is to face the reality of one’s situation as it is, which is not simply a recognition of one’s lostness, but also that one exists between non-being and non-being – we come from out of ‘nowhere,’ and we return to ‘nowhere.’ This can create a sense of dread, as one comes to recognize that the only ‘solid’ boundaries one confronts in human life are those of non-being (e.g., death, losses of all kinds, impoverishment, loneliness, illness, confusion, and so forth). As we honestly reflect on this situation, we come to realize that

we are not the author of our own being (we simply ‘showed up’), nor are we in control of where we are going. In reality, we spend our entire lives fighting our ultimate destiny, which is death (a losing battle, if ever there was one). It is just this unmanageability, helplessness, and the ever-present possibility of non-being that we seek to hide from ourselves, and yet, as Ortega points out, by coming up against our own reality we move into the potential of becoming ourselves.

In order better to grasp what Kierkegaard sees as spiritlessness, I want to examine pathological narcissism, and compare its motives and mechanisms to what I will call the ‘acceptable narcissism’ of spiritlessness.<sup>5</sup> Pathological narcissism will be like a magnifying glass we will hold up to spiritlessness in order to see the defense mechanism of creating a false self, and the evasions at work in spiritlessness. By ‘magnifying glass’ I mean that the characteristics and despair of the pathological narcissist, while more intense than the narcissistic tendencies of spiritlessness, may not be qualitatively different, and so their intensity can give us a better grasp of what Kierkegaard believes operates within each of us as we seek to find personal worth, and evade the task of self-becoming. As Christopher Lasch notes, ‘The pathological narcissist reveals, at a deeper level, the same anxieties which in milder form have become so common in everyday intercourse.’<sup>6</sup> Given Kierkegaard’s view of the self, he would see the seeds of pathological narcissism in every individual, and would be less concerned about the pathological aspects of narcissism than its ‘acceptable’ or ‘healthy’ forms – that is, those forms that one’s society and established order values.<sup>7</sup>

#### KOHUT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF NARCISSISM

Narcissism is complex, and while there is a general consensus on its specific characteristics, there is much less consensus on the development of pathological narcissism.<sup>8</sup> Heinz Kohut has had a major influence in the understanding of how pathological narcissism develops, in that he has shown the dependence of this development on the structure of the self, as well as the early influences of the parents or care-takers in the developing child. We will briefly examine Kohut’s understanding of the development of pathological narcissism, and then return to Kierkegaard’s understanding of how the self evades its self-becoming, showing the relation between pathological narcissism and spiritlessness.

Unlike Freud, Kohut thinks that the problem of narcissism does not stem from an inner conflict of basic drives, but from a lack of inner cohesion. Kohut recognizes the importance of the inner conflicts created by our drives, but thinks the deeper, and more foundational problem with narcissistic personality, is the disintegration of the self: the signs of a self’s fragmentation, instability, and impoverishment.<sup>9</sup> Kohut’s view is not unlike Kierkegaard’s, in that both focus on the structure of the self, the need to strive for individuation, and the importance of an inner freedom. For both writers, the structure of the self is dynamic and lacks an inner cohesion. In other words, the structure of the self is not the ground of the self, but is that which allows for the individual to choose what he or she will seek in order to ground the self. Cohesiveness focuses on the ground around which the self can gain and maintain a *consistent* cohesion (what Kierkegaard calls an unconditional or absolute passion). The structure is not self-grounding; if it were, then the self would be complete or fulfilled in itself, simply due to its having a structure. For both Kohut and Kierkegaard, the groundlessness of the structure itself is what allows not simply for freedom, but also for the possibility of becoming a non-self – a disintegrated, groundless, inchoate amalgamation of forces, which seeks to maintain an illusion of cohesion through the creation of a false reality (whether personally or socially constructed).

In looking at Kohut's view of the development of narcissism, we will see that he views narcissism as a normal developmental stage (that is, like Freud he sees the infant as being narcissistic), which has the potential to transform into either a pathological condition, or a healthy valuing of the self.<sup>10</sup> He views the infant as having two 'archaic' configurations of narcissism: the grandiose (omnipotent) self, and the idealized 'parent imago' (the perceived perfection of the parental object). In healthy development, the infant's feelings of omnipotence are greeted with joy and empathic mirroring by the parent or caregiver, which allows for a healthy transition from a sense of omnipotence to the troubling realization that one is not in control of most of the things in one's world. Kohut thinks that this empathic mirroring allows the child, and later on the adult, to be neither obsessed with ambition, nor inhibited, shamed, or plagued by guilt. In other words, the grandiose self becomes the root out of which the realistic ambitions of the child, adolescent, and adult arise. At the same time, the child internalizes the parental system of values in the structure of the self, and these become the ideals for the child.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, not unlike Kierkegaard, we see that Kohut develops his structure of the self in terms of contrasting poles (a synthesis), which are mediated by a third aspect. The 'firm' self has a pole that strives for power and success (the expanding part of the self), a pole of idealized goals (the limiting part of the self), and the mediating area of basic talents and skills that are activated between the ambitions and ideals (an aspect of the self that seeks to relate to the relation of the poles).<sup>12</sup>

A narcissist did not receive a good transition from the narcissism inherent in infancy, into a world that does not revolve around the infant's needs. As Sam Vaknin puts it,

If abrupt, capricious, arbitrary, and intense injuries are sustained by the tender, budding, self-esteem, this can become irreversible narcissism. . . . Narcissistic adults are the result of bitter disappointment, of radical disillusionment with their parents. . . . *Healthy adults accept their self-limitations.* . . . Their self-esteem is constant and positive, not affected by outside events, no matter how severe.<sup>13</sup>

In order to defend against the harshness experienced in this transition, Vaknin says that the narcissist 'reacted by retreating to his private world, where he was omnipotent and omniscient and, therefore, immune to such vicious vicissitudes. He stashed his vulnerable True Self in a deeper mental cellar – and outwardly he presented the world his False Self.'<sup>14</sup> The 'budding' child feels lost and frustrated in the face of the challenges to his or her perceived omnipotence. If the adjustments to these challenges are met with further challenges presented by the parent imago (rather than empathic encouragements), the child will seek to overcome the anxiety and terror of this sense of lostness by retreating into a world of his or her own making. The lost, helpless, and vulnerable true self becomes buried and evaded in favor of the fantasy of an omnipotent and grandiose false self.

These ideas of the 'true self' and 'false self' will be important in understanding how narcissism, whether pathological or acceptable, is a defense against the reality of the self's relation to itself and the world it lives in. This brief examination of Kohut's view of narcissism shows us that narcissism is a defense created by a child who did not receive a smooth and gentle transition into the harshness of the reality of living in this world. Pathological narcissists react to this raw confrontation with the world by creating their own fantasy world, in which they are omnipotent and omniscient; this serves as a defense against ever having to face the harsh realities of existence, or feeling the sense of lostness within it, again.

Narcissism shows how the structure of the self does not allow for self-grounding – that is, how a self-created self is an illusion of a self. Narcissism's failed attempts at self-grounding are

so obvious and recognizable because they lead to continual conflict with others and the narcissist's own circumstances – that is, the false self has no grounding in anything other than its own illusions of grandiosity. As we will see below, however, the 'smooth transition' that allows for a more 'firm self' is not a smooth movement into reality, but involves the setting up of what Ernest Becker calls the 'vital lie' of character. It is just this vital lie that Kierkegaard seeks to dismantle in his writings. Spiritlessness and acceptable narcissism are ways of evading the reality of one's self and the world, in such a way that this evasion remains hidden from oneself. We will come to see that what Kohut refers to as the 'firm self' or 'nuclear self' is also a type of self-created false self. However, rather than being 'grounded' in its own personal illusions, as the pathological narcissist is, it is grounded in the illusions of its culture, illusions that were passed down to it by the parent imago.<sup>15</sup> In order to understand this, we will take an extended look at Kierkegaard's and Becker's understanding of spiritlessness (the vital lie), and its particular style of evasion or defensiveness against reality.

#### GAINING ONESELF FROM THE WORLD

When Kierkegaard says we are not ourselves, part of what he means is that we have lost ourselves in the immediacy of the world, and are pursuing what is external to ourselves. In other words, we pursue and define ourselves by what is not the self: we define ourselves by the possessions we own, the titles we hold, and how we compare to others. All this takes place within the boundaries of acceptable human practice, and human value and significance is understood within the boundaries created by one's culture. This is what he means by relating only to the finite and external pole of the self.

Becker's analysis of the nature and purpose of defense mechanisms will help us understand the relationship between being lost in the world, and the desire to evade the task of self-becoming. He says that the earth, our own physicality, and the world we live in, is a harsh and unforgiving place. The problem is that we must not only live in such a place, but also live in it without succumbing to the horror it can so easily produce. Blaise Pascal paints an interesting picture of the human condition. He writes, 'Imagine a number of men in chains, all under sentence of death, some of whom are each day butchered in the sight of the others; those remaining see their own condition in that of their fellows, and looking at each other with grief and despair await their turn. This is an image of the human condition.'<sup>16</sup> No doubt, this is rather bleak picture of the human condition, but it also has a realism that is difficult to deny – though we do our best to deny it. The fact is, death always has the final word for a human life, and not only one's own, but all those who one loves as well. It is just this type of knowledge, and its attending anxiety, that each person seeks to hide from consciousness. As Becker says,

Man is reluctant to move out into the overwhelmingness of his world, the real dangers of it; he shrinks back from losing himself in the all-consuming appetites of others, from spinning out of control in the clutching and clawing of men, beasts, and machines. As an animal organism man senses the kind of planet he has been put down on, the nightmarish, demonic frenzy in which nature has unleashed billions of individual organismic appetites of all kinds – not to mention earthquakes, meteors, and hurricanes, which seem to have their own hellish appetites. Each thing, in order to deliciously expand, is forever gobbling up others.<sup>17</sup>

A smooth transition from infancy into adulthood consists of building defense mechanisms against the harshness of the world, and our ultimate helplessness in the face of it. As adults we

have gotten used to such a world – that is, have found defenses against confronting the world in such a raw and unfiltered manner. But this is also the type of world each child grows up in, and must come to terms with. Becker regards this ‘coming to terms with’ in relation to psychoanalytic theories of development:

The great scientific simplification of psychoanalysis is the concept that the whole early experience is an attempt by the child to deny the anxiety of his emergence, his fear of losing his support, of standing alone, helpless and afraid. The child’s character, his style of life, is his way of using the power of others, the support of things and the ideas of his culture, to banish from his awareness the actual fact of his natural impotence. Not only his impotence to avoid death, but his impotence to stand alone, firmly rooted in his own powers.<sup>18</sup>

The child, and we adults, do not simply seek to hide from ourselves the harsh reality of life, but perhaps more importantly, we seek to hide our powerlessness and helplessness against it (our lack of self-sufficiency). Becker says that each person’s character is developed out of, and for the sake of, hiding one’s helplessness in the face of a cold and uncaring world, a world that is ultimately indifferent toward one’s well-being.<sup>19</sup>

This reality, along with the growing realization that we will be let down by those we have put our hope and trust in, is where our defense mechanisms are created. We are defending ourselves from the world, from our helplessness within it, and an anxious sense that it may all be without meaning and purpose – that all our suffering and labor will come to nothing, and mean nothing. Our defense mechanisms are an attempt at some basic sense of self-worth and meaning. They also give the illusion that one controls one’s life and future. But none of this is true to reality, which is why Becker calls character the ‘vital lie’: ‘We called one’s life style a vital lie, and now we can understand better why we said it was vital: it is a *necessary* and basic dishonesty about oneself and one’s whole situation.’<sup>20</sup>

The vital lie basically consists of the personal and cultural ways we hide our true condition from ourselves. As Becker says, ‘He doesn’t have to have fears when his feet are solidly mired and his life mapped out in a ready-made maze. All he has to do is plunge ahead in a compulsive style of drivenness in the “ways of the world” that the child learns and in which he lives later as a kind of grim equanimity.’<sup>21</sup> We are seeking to give ourselves a sense of manageability and control within the world. Culture creates a kind of façade of manageability, but hides the fact that this manageability is extremely limited in scope, and ultimately futile in overcoming the unmanageability of non-being. In the midst of the vital lie, it feels as if one has control over so much of life, and that one is creating a significant life for oneself as one moves within the avenues and routines provided by one’s culture; eventually, however, this lie can come crumbling down, as one faces the ultimate insignificance of all one’s busyness, and the realization that it is, as the writer of Ecclesiastes put it, ‘striving after the wind.’<sup>22</sup> This vital lie also gives a sense of grounding for the self. It is the grounding for what Kohut has described as the ‘firm self,’ which finds its cohesiveness in worldly ambitions and cultural ideals, out of which and toward which it points its talents and abilities.<sup>23</sup>

An authentic choice for oneself cannot be made while one is lost and enslaved in the world. This is especially true when one’s lostness appears to oneself as anything but lost, and one’s enslavement appears to be freedom. As Becker puts it, Kierkegaard wants to ‘ferret people out of the lie of their lives whose lives do not look like a lie, who seem to succeed in being true, complete, authentic people.’<sup>24</sup> For Kierkegaard, the ‘firm grounding’ of the self is not found in one’s culture, but begins with the recognition of one’s lostness within what Becker calls one’s ‘cultural heroism’. According to Becker, the cultural heroism of a society is,

a symbolic action system, a structure of statuses and roles, customs and rules for behavior, designed to serve as a vehicle for earthly heroism. Each script is somewhat unique, each culture has a different hero system. What the anthropologists call 'cultural relativity' is thus really the relativity of hero-systems the world over. But each cultural system is a dramatization of earthly heroics; each system cuts out roles for performances of various degrees of heroism: from the 'high' heroism of a Churchill, a Mao, or a Buddha, to the 'low' heroism of the coal miner, the peasant, the simple priest; the plain, everyday, earthly heroism wrought by gnarled working hands guiding a family through hunger and disease.<sup>25</sup>

The cultural heroism is what grounds, and brings cohesion to Kohut's healthy self; however, it is an essentially relative system, which maintains an illusion of being a firm ground through numbers – the crowd or herd moving according to an accepted 'heroics.'

It is within this cultural heroics that the vital lie (as well as our acceptable narcissism) is maintained and supported. Culture provides a sense of significance and meaning for one's tasks, as well as laying out the paths and goals for one's life. The self loses itself within this 'worldliness' or cultural heroics. Kierkegaard writes,

But his self does not exist; his innermost being has been consumed and depithed in the service of nothingness; slave of futility, with no control over himself, in the power of giddy worldliness, godforsaken, he ceases to be a human being; in his innermost being he is as dead, but his loftiness walks ghostlike among us – it lives. When you speak with him, you do not speak with a human being; in his hankering after loftiness, he has himself become what was coveted: a title regarded as a human being.<sup>26</sup>

The individual defines himself or herself by externals, which are constantly changing, and whose value is an illusion, having been grounded in mere cultural traditions and fabrications. As to the self-conscious and free task of becoming oneself, this is forsaken in order to put on the titles and other external garb provided by one's culture. This is a false self, which works well within a society because its grounding is the cultural heroics of the society. It feels firm and cohesive because one succeeds in achieving the goals provided by society, and has the continual support of one's society in this endeavor.<sup>27</sup>

All of this is not unlike what Tolstoy's Ivan Ilych tells the reader as he is facing death and looking back over his life:

Then all became confused [for Ivan] and there was still less of what was good; later on again there was still less that was good, and the further he went the less there was. His marriage, a mere accident, then the disenchantment that followed it, his wife's bad breath and the sensuality and hypocrisy: then the deadly official life and those preoccupations about money, a year of it, and two, and ten, and twenty, and always the same thing. And the longer it lasted the more deadly it became. [Ivan reflects], 'It is as if I had been going downhill while I imagined I was going up. And that is really what it was. I was going up in public opinion, but to the same extent life was ebbing away from me. And now it is all done and there is only death.'<sup>28</sup>

In the face of the reality of non-being, as Ivan looks back on his life, and the success he has attained as a jurist, he comes to realize that the success was an illusion, and the cost of this illusion was a draining away of his spirit into the spiritlessness that undergirded the entire illusion. It is telling that, in the beginning of the novel, what really concerned those who knew Ivan, who were reflecting on his death, was the opportunity his death opened for them: his death meant an opportunity for their own promotion in life. In the end, there was a veiled sense of happiness that Ivan would be out of the way; of course, they were blind to the fact that this is

all their own lives would come to as well. We find here the image of one generation waiting for another generation to get 'out of the way,' so that the former can take the latter's place. The established order takes as its task the job of continually convincing us that we are progressing, that we are becoming better and better, more fulfilled human beings (the 'unbroken continuum that permits joyful creative activity,' as Kohut describes it), and yet by turning away from the infinite and unconditioned requirement (our lostness and helplessness), we become less and less human. Kierkegaard asks his readers to move out of the manageability of one's cultural heroics into the 'unmanageable,' where one reflects on one's helpless and vulnerable situation.

For Kierkegaard, there is nothing more precious, sacred, and valuable a person possesses than the task of becoming oneself (gaining one's soul). As Socrates says in the *Apology*: 'it is my belief that no greater good has ever befallen you in this city than my service to my God. For I spend all my time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to make your first and chief concern not for your bodies nor for your possessions, but for the highest welfare of your souls.'<sup>29</sup> Or as Jesus puts the same idea, 'For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?'<sup>30</sup> Kierkegaard thinks those lost in the established order are no longer concerned about this self, but about what is not the self – what is outside the self, what the self can own or accomplish, the titles it can possess, and the material position of its life. The essential goal of our lives has become to secure for ourselves an earthly comfort, in the midst of, and in line with, our established order or cultural heroics.

As for the task of becoming oneself, this sounds like a meaningless goal, for the point is not to gain oneself, but to achieve self-satisfaction – to feel comfortable, normal, and satisfied with one's life. Few ask whether this whole process is ultimately shipwrecked, or whether it is a case of the blind leading the blind; without asking these questions, the self does not take on infinite importance, only comfort does. The spiritless are not concerned about whether they are living lives of futility and emptiness – that is, whether the time, energy, and personal resources they spend on life will end in spiritual bankruptcy – but about whether they are happy and feel normal. Kierkegaard says that 'the lostness of spiritlessness, as well as its security, consists in understanding nothing spiritually and comprehending nothing as a task, even if it is able to fumble after everything with its limp clamminess.'<sup>31</sup>

From the perspective of the infinite and expanding poles of the self, the busyness people surrender and enslave themselves to looks meaningless and futile. It is reminiscent of Sisyphus rolling his rock up a mountain, only to have it roll back down, never accomplishing anything of any significance, or that lasts. Every day we spiritlessly roll our rocks up the mountain of success and consumerism, only to roll the same rock up the next day. The infinite in the self allows us to transcend this, and see it from a different perspective. In his book, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus writes,

It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm – this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement.<sup>32</sup>

That 'why' is the infinite in the self, seeking to awaken to a new beginning, and to break out of the spiritless routine of one's life.

From within the finite pole of the self, this meaninglessness and futility is hidden from view, which is just the point, because it relieves one of anxiety. In anxiety, the cultural heroism to which one's vital lies are connected is beginning to crack, and anxiety is the realization of the

futility, meaninglessness, and loneliness that is oozing through those cracks. Kohut also recognizes this aspect of anxiety. He writes,

[T]wo basically different classes of anxiety experiences exist. . . . The first comprises the anxieties experienced by a person whose self is more or less cohesive – they are fears of specific danger situations (Freud, 1926); the emphasis of the experience lies in essence on the specific danger and not on the state of the self. The second comprises the anxieties experienced by a person who is becoming aware that his self is beginning to disintegrate; whatever the trigger that ushered in or reinforced the progressive dissolution of the self, the emphasis of the experiences lies in essence on the precarious state of the self and not on the factors that may have set the process of disintegration into motion.<sup>33</sup>

Kierkegaard believes the state of the self remains precarious even while functioning and succeeding within one's culture, though the precarious nature of the self remains hidden. This can bring on anxiety that is the result of a sense of self that has become ungrounded – namely, that the grounding of the self is built upon an illusion or 'stage set' that has been propped up by the 'crowd.' In a group 'One becomes a human being by aping others. One does not know by himself that he is a human being but through an inference: he is like the others – therefore he is a human being. Only God knows whether any of us is that!'<sup>34</sup> As Becker puts it, such people 'avoid developing their own uniqueness; they follow out the styles of automatic and uncritical living in which they were conditioned as children. They are "inauthentic" in that they do not belong to themselves, are not "their own" persons, do not act from their own center, do not see reality on its terms. . . .'<sup>35</sup> In this, we end up living a mediocre life of daily routines, in which we find little true satisfaction, but since others seem to be satisfied, we pretend to be as well – pretend not only to them, but to ourselves.

The vital lie served a good purpose for the child, who was defenseless against the onslaught of 'bad news' he or she was facing: one is neither omnipotent nor in control (even of one's own body), one is not the center of the universe, things do not go one's way, and ultimately one faces a tragic world where loss is not only the norm, but the direction in which we are all heading. Defense mechanisms allow the child's psyche to survive this onslaught. However, we are not to remain children, and live by these illusions; we are to become ourselves from out of these cultural constructions, and the world in which we are lost: 'What people foolishly and impatiently crave as the highest without really knowing what they want, what is horrifying to see when someone succeeds in doing it – namely, to win the world and to have won it – this is what a person begins with, and it is so far from being the goal that it is the very thing he should abandon.'<sup>36</sup>

This 'winning' of the world is related to the cultural heroics within which the child is brought up, as he or she seeks to find a sense of worth and value. What Kohut regards as the 'firm self' is closely related to what Kierkegaard calls the 'hypothetical self.' To understand this, I will return to the issue of narcissism, in order to examine what our particular cultural heroism is moving toward. I take as my point of departure a picture of the 'false self' given by Kierkegaard in *The Sickness Unto Death*, which has a strong affinity to the narcissistic personality. Kierkegaard writes,

The self is so far from successfully becoming more and more itself that the fact merely becomes increasingly obvious that it is a hypothetical self. The self is its own master, absolutely its own master, so-called; and precisely this is the despair, but also what it regards as its pleasure and delight. On closer examination, however, it is easy to see that this absolute ruler is a king without a country, actually ruling over nothing; his position, his sovereignty, is

subordinate to the dialectic that rebellion is legitimate at any moment. Ultimately, this is arbitrarily based upon the self itself.<sup>37</sup>

The hypothetical self attempts to be self-grounding, but has neither the absoluteness nor the unconditionality necessary for such grounding. As we will see below, this attempt at self-grounding by way of a hypothetical self relates very well to the narcissistic self. This is not accidental, but is due to the cultural heroics within which we find ourselves at the beginning of the Twenty-First Century. As Christopher Lasch has argued, ‘Narcissism appears realistically to represent the best way of coping with the tensions and anxieties of modern life, and the prevailing social conditions therefore tend to bring out narcissistic traits that are present, in varying degrees, in everyone. These conditions have also transformed the family, which in turn shapes the underlying structure of personality.’<sup>38</sup>

A cultural heroics is about gaining a sense of value and meaning for oneself.<sup>39</sup> Narcissism is a particular psychological and (if Lasch and Kierkegaard are correct) sociological means of gaining value and meaning for one’s life, without which each individual would have to face his or her own helplessness and nothingness, along with its attending anxiety and terror. As Becker puts it,

In the prison of one’s character one can pretend and feel that he *is somebody*, that the world is manageable, that there is a reason for one’s life, a ready justification for one’s action. To live automatically and uncritically is to be assured of at least a minimum of the programmed cultural heroics – what we call ‘prison heroism’: the smugness of the insiders who ‘know.’

Kierkegaard’s torment was the direct result of seeing the world as it really is in relation to his situation as a creature. The prison of one’s character is painstakingly built to deny one thing and one thing alone: one’s creatureliness. The creatureliness is the terror. Once admit that you are a defecating creature and you invite the primeval ocean of creature anxiety to flood over you.<sup>40</sup>

*Pretending to be somebody* is at the core of narcissism. This pretense is an attempt to deny one’s helplessness and creatureliness through the creation of a stronger or even omnipotent sense of self (a grandiose self). The pathological narcissist becomes a false self by diving into the infinite, and creates this self out of the fantasy the infinite (imagination) can provide; the acceptable narcissist becomes a false self by diving into the finite, and creating this self out of the cultural heroism or established order.

Narcissism is the illusion of manageability in the face of the unmanageable through a sense of self-sufficiency. Pathological and acceptable narcissists are both evading their ultimate helplessness in the face of the unmanageability of non-being in all its varieties, and the anxiety this produces. While the pathological narcissist is alone in the fantasy, and so is a more obviously false self to others, acceptable narcissism has the affirmation and confirmation of its culture to evade the illusions and falseness of this ‘firm self.’

#### THE CHARACTER OF NARCISSISM

According to Kohut, a pathological narcissist is a person who has never completed the work of self-definition, because the narcissist has never moved from a sense of unlimited omnipotence to a healthy ambition, nor has the parent imago been internalized as goals and ideals.<sup>41</sup> This lack of self causes the narcissist to suffer from an inner emptiness and loneliness, which is hidden even from his or her own view. No matter how charming and full of life the narcissist may seem, there lies underneath, the suffering of a self that is alienated from itself, from the world, and

from others.<sup>42</sup> It is this impoverishment of the self, and the pain associated with it, that causes the narcissist to create false images or false selves, which come to be viewed as the true self.

This is not unlike Kierkegaard's view that the self is groundless or empty in itself (when not relating to the power that established the self-relating relation), and so it seeks to be self-grounding by creating a false self. This is also related to Becker's view that character is a vital lie that is created through the cultural heroism into which the individual is born. Whereas Kierkegaard and Becker view this cultural grounding of the self as an act of evading one's self, Kohut distinguishes between the groundlessness of the pathological narcissist, who is completely 'grounded' in his or her individual grandiose fantasies, and those who are grounded in the socialization of their cultures. Kohut views the latter as a healthy self, because the individual is able to function well within this milieu; Kierkegaard and Becker, however, find this to be just a deeper evasion of reality, and a more acceptable form of narcissism. The self's attempt to ground itself in either itself or in its culture is a false understanding of itself (the surrendering of the self to a fantasy); instead, the self is *initially* to ground itself in its own helplessness and insignificance, which Kierkegaard and Becker both see as rooted in the reality of the situation. This would be to become defenseless against reality. Becker writes in relation to this:

Kierkegaard has engaged in this extremely difficult and unbelievably subtle exercise for one reason and for one reason alone: to be able finally to conclude with authority what a person would be like *if he did not lie*. Kierkegaard wanted to show the many ways in which life bogs down and fails when man closes himself against the reality of his condition. Or at best, what an undignified and pathetic creature man can be when he imagines that by living unto himself alone he is fulfilling his nature.<sup>43</sup>

A pathological narcissist lives in a perpetual lie, maintaining the sense of a firm self through the creation of a false self: 'the narcissist does not occupy his own soul, nor does he inhabit his own body. His is the servant of an apparition, of a reflection, of an Ego function. To please and appease his Master, the narcissist sacrifices to it his very life. From that moment onwards, the narcissist lives vicariously through the good offices of the false self.'<sup>44</sup> The emptiness of the self is just too much to bear, and so the narcissist will eventually surrender to the false self's image. This is a self that craves a sense of worth, and the pathological narcissist gains this sense of worth through an image of grandiosity, superiority, omnipotence, and unmatched uniqueness. Although the spiritless individual does not create as grandiose a false self, according to Kierkegaard the self is still grounded in a vital lie in which the false self sees itself as more than it truly is; the spiritless self spends its life evading its true impoverished, vulnerable, and helpless self. Kierkegaard's writings are an attempt to face this self, whether one needs to break through the isolated false self of the pathological narcissist, or the culturally constructed false self of spiritlessness.

It is essential to see that this false self is connected to the desire for a sense of worth and meaning. Kohut says the pathologically narcissistic self does not receive sufficient empathic encouragement as a child, and so the child remains stuck within the narcissism of the infant and young child. There are no inner resources by which narcissists can generate a sense of self-approval, and so they create a false self, and then demand admiration through external resources – though ironically this 'external' admiration is often the creation of their own minds, achieved through false interpretations of how others perceive them. Kierkegaard thinks most people use external resources to ground their 'self-approval.' While the pathological narcissist lives in an invented world of his or her own design, the 'healthy' individual lives in an invented world of his or her culture's design. The illusion of the more firm grounding in the spiritless individual

is simply due to the social element, and the fact that he or she is able to function so well (that is, normally) within the established order.

The pathological narcissist's attempts at self-grounding are viewed as unhealthy because they so obviously end in despair. A brief look at how the narcissist seeks to maintain his or her sense of grandiosity will help us understand this despair, and will allow us to see how acceptable narcissism works.

The first method narcissists use is simply to take credit for positive outcomes around themselves, and view their accomplishments, and so themselves, as superior to others.<sup>45</sup> Studies have shown that narcissists significantly overestimate their own contribution relative to the judgment of other group-members – as well as independent judges. Narcissists also overestimate their intelligence and attractiveness, and exaggerate their positive personality characteristics.<sup>46</sup> Second, when confronted with failure, narcissists find ways of undoing it.<sup>47</sup> They respond to negative feedback by derogating the evaluator, or the evaluation technique. As Morf and Rhodewalt write,

Narcissists find endlessly inventive means of casting feedback and social information in ways to reinforce their grandiose self: They view their personal attributes and accomplishments as superior, they make self-aggrandizing attributes to augment positive feedback, they structure their past to be more favorable, and they derogate the source and validity of negative feedback. However, the fact that they keep looking for more self-validation suggests that they fail to convince themselves of their own adequacy.<sup>48</sup>

Kierkegaard views the crowd and established order as using these same basic techniques in order to maintain the sense of grandiosity for its members. The difference between the pathological narcissist and acceptable narcissism is that the pathological narcissist does not have the backing of the 'crowd.' It is this backing that allows the acceptable narcissism of spiritlessness both to work for its members, and to remain hidden from view from its members. The number of people who accept this ground are sufficient to maintain a sense that the self is firm and cohesive. In other words, the hypothetical nature, arbitrariness, and conditionality of the self are hidden by the fact that all the changes that take place in the self (changes that would show the lack of grounding of the self) take place in concert with those around one. As Kierkegaard would put it, there is no 'genuine criterion' for the self, and so it remains a mere hypothetical self at each moment. Kierkegaard presents an allegory to show how the established order creates a false sense of success and grandiosity. He writes,

Imagine a school, let it have . . . a class of one hundred pupils, all of the same age, who are supposed to learn the same thing and have the same criterion. To be number seventy and below is to be far down in the class. Now, what if the other thirty pupils from number seventy had the idea that they might be allowed to form a class by themselves. If so, then number seventy would become number one in the class. That would be an advancement, yes, well, it might be put that way, but according to my conception that would be sinking even lower, sinking into a contemptible false self-satisfaction, because it is still much higher to put up willingly with being number seventy according to a genuine criterion. So it is in the actuality of life. What is bourgeois-philistinism? What is spiritlessness? It is to have changed the criterion by leaving out the ideals, *to have changed the criterion in accord with how we human beings who now live here in this place happen to be.*<sup>49</sup>

Just as pathological narcissists change the criterion in order to allow themselves to feel superior to others, and to feel a sense of grandiosity within themselves, so too does a culture as a whole change its criterion in order to save the sense of self-worth of its members. The distinction

between healthy and unhealthy vital lies tends to depend more on whether one's culture 'backs up' one's lies or not, than whether one is truly being oneself. In his book *Narcissism: Denial of the True Self*, Alexander Lowen writes,

In general, insanity is seen as a mark of an individual who is out of touch with reality *or his or her culture*. By that criterion (which has its validity), the successful narcissist is far from insane. Unless . . . unless, of course, there is some insanity in the culture. Personally, I see the frenzied activity of people in our large cities – people who are trying to make more money, gain more power, get ahead – as a little crazy. Isn't frenzy a sign of madness?<sup>50</sup>

As we have seen, the distinction between a pathological narcissist, and a healthy adult with 'realistic' ambitions and ideals, is not so cut and dry for Kierkegaard. He wants to bring us to the 'firm ground' of our lostness, helplessness, and dependence on an absolute and unconditional power. Like Ortega, Kierkegaard would say that this brings us before the question of our own salvation, and brings an earnestness to our existence that does not otherwise exist. When faced with the non-being that encompasses us, we are brought before a conscious and free choice of what will ground the self. Kierkegaard is well aware that there are no definitive arguments available for why one should surrender to God in faith, and so his readers can certainly choose against the 'leap of faith.'<sup>51</sup> Regardless of the choice one makes, Kierkegaard views this conscious choice for one's ultimate ground as a necessary aspect of self-becoming, because it brings one before the absoluteness and unconditionality such a choice entails.

#### NEEDINESS AND GRACE

Kierkegaard's writings are an attempt to face the fragility and weakness of the self, whether it needs to break through the isolated false self of infinitude's despair, or the culturally constructed false self of finitude's despair. He views much of our self-sufficiency and sense of self-grounding as an illusion. These capacities seem firm to us, but this is only because we never question too deeply the vital lie by which our illusion is defended.<sup>52</sup> The true self (the lost, helpless, and creaturely self) is the firm beginning for philosophical reflection on self-becoming. For Kierkegaard, all self-becoming starts here, with the despair of self-sufficiency, because the answer begins with recognizing the need: 'The need brings the *nourishment* [Naering] along with it – oh, so near [*noer*] (the word indeed says it) it is, so near it is, if only the need is there. The need brings nourishment along with it, not *by itself*, as if the need produced the nourishment, but by virtue of a divine determination that joins the two, the need and the nourishment.'<sup>53</sup> This is a recognition of what Socrates says about *Eros* in relation to *Eros*' mother: 'it has been his fate to always be needy; nor is he delicate and lovely as most of us believe, but harsh and arid, barefoot and homeless, sleeping on the naked earth, in doorways, or in the very streets beneath the stars of heaven, and always partaking of his mother's poverty.'<sup>54</sup> Kierkegaard embraces this aspect of human desire, and its importance in our quest for the Good or God; unlike Socrates, however, Kierkegaard is not so certain the parentage of human desire includes, as its father, Resource. Instead of being the offspring of Need and Resource, Kierkegaard views humanity as the progeny of Need and Grace.

In closing, I would like to point to a problem for further thought and research. Kierkegaard often wrote to what he called the 'single individual,' who appears to be a person in isolation reading one of Kierkegaard's works. Kierkegaard was so intent on calling the individual out of the established order or cultural heroism, that he tended to neglect the role a community must play in aiding and helping the individual in terms of helplessness, defenselessness, and grace.

Isolation is often nothing more than another defense against one's neediness – a rejection of help and grace. Thus, the area for further reflection is around the possibility of something that might be termed an 'ekklesia of defenselessness.' This, it seems to me, would need to be a community of grace and openness, without succumbing to another 'heroism' out of which another vital lie would arise.<sup>55</sup>

## Notes

1 Ortega y Gasset, José (1960) *The Revolt of the Masses*, trans. Anonymous (Authorized Translation from the Spanish) (New York: Norton & Company), p. 157.

2 Kierkegaard, Soren (1980a) *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP), p. 13.

3 Kierkegaard (1980a, p. 13).

4 Becker, Ernest (1973) *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press), p. 69.

5 By 'acceptable' I mean acceptable to our culture, though the argument of this paper is that it should not be seen as acceptable.

6 Lasch, Christopher (1979) *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Warner Books), p. 171.

7 This issue is very dialectical for Kierkegaard, in that, while the more pathological characteristics of narcissism have an intensity that makes them more dangerous to the narcissist and those around him or her, the 'healthy' narcissism that one's culture values is more dangerous in the sense of its having become an acceptable approach to the world, others, and oneself.

8 The DSM-IV-TR provides nine characteristics used as diagnostic criteria for 'Narcissistic Personality Disorder.' These include a grandiose sense of self-importance; preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love; the belief that he or she is special and unique and can be understood by other special or high-status people; a need for excessive admiration; a sense of entitlement; interpersonally exploitative; lacking in empathy; envious of others and believes others envy him or her; and shows arrogant behaviors or attitudes. (American Psychiatric Association [2000] *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders [DSM-IV-TR]*, Fourth Edition, Text Revision [Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association], p. 365).

9 'The essential psycho-pathology in the narcissistic personality disorders is defined by the fact that the self has not been solidly established, that its cohesion and firmness depend on the presence of a self-object . . . and that it responds to the loss of the self-object with simple enfeeblement, various regressions, and fragmentations' (Kohut, Heinz [1977] *The Restoration of the Self* [New York: International Universities Press], p. 137).

10 Kohut, p. 5.

11 Kohut writes, 'the child's selection of certain functions out of the number of those at his disposal (and his developing them into efficacious talents and skills) and the direction of his major pursuits as ultimately laid down permanently in the psyche as the content of his ambitions and ideals – i.e., the child's acquisition of compensatory structures – are best explained in the context of his having been able to shift from a frustrating self-object to a non-frustrating or less frustrating one' (p. 83). See pages 85–88 for Kohut's explanation of a healthy development of the child, and the need for empathic caregivers in early childhood development.

12 Kohut writes, 'If we are dealing with a narcissistic personality or behavior disorder . . . the success of the analysis is to be measured primarily by evaluating the cohesion and firmness of his self and, above all, by deciding whether one sector of the self has become continuous from one of its poles to the other, or has become the reliable initiator and performer of joyfully undertaken activities. Stated in still different terms, in cases of narcissistic personality disorder, the analytic process brings about the cure by filling in the defects in the structure of the self via self-object transference and transmuted internalization' (p. 134). Kohut's view of the third element of the self is different from Kierkegaard's idea of 'spirit,' but the structure of the self is very much alike. The difference between the two, however, points them in very different directions as to what a 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' person would consist of. Kohut's picture of a healthy self consists of a well socialized individual, who is well-versed in the cultural heroism (which will be explained below), while for Kierkegaard this is often the epitome of spiritlessness. In this formulation, Kierkegaard would say that Kohut's analysis remains within 'aesthetic categories' of what is 'normal,' pleasant, healthy, comfortable, and a socially functional human being.

13 Vaknin, Sam (2003) *Malignant Self Love: Narcissism Revisted* (Prague: Narcissus Publications), pp. 320–321 (my emphasis). It is the argument of this paper that, while healthy adults accept some of their limitations, they hide and evade many more in an attempt to appear self-grounding, and as a means of suppressing anxiety.

14 Vaknin, p. 150.

15 Kohut writes, 'I have in mind the specific interactions of the child and his self-objects through which, in countless repetitions, the self-objects empathically respond to certain potentialities of the child (aspects of the grandiose self he exhibits, aspects of the idealized image he admires, different innate talents he employs to mediate creatively between ambitions and ideals), but not to others. This is the most important way by which the child's innate potentialities are selectively nourished or thwarted. The *nuclear* self, in particular, is not formed via conscious encouragement and praise and via conscious discouragement and rebuke, but by the deeply anchored responsiveness of the self-objects, which, in the last analysis, is a function of the self-objects' own anchored nuclear selves' (p. 100).

16 Pascal, Blaise (1984) *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin), p. 165.

17 Becker, pp. 53–54.

18 Becker, p. 54.

19 '[C]haracter is a face that one sets to the world, but it hides an inner defeat. The child emerges with a name, a family, a play-world in a neighborhood, all clearly cut out for him. But his insides are full of nightmarish memories of impossible battles, terrifying anxieties of blood, pain, aloneness, darkness; mixed with limitless desires, sensations of unspeakable beauty, majesty, awe, mystery; and fantasies and hallucinations of mixtures between the two, the impossible attempt to compromise between bodies and symbols. . . . To grow up at all is to conceal the mass of internal scar tissue that throbs in our dreams' (Becker, p. 29).

20 Becker, p. 55.

21 Becker, p. 23.

22 Ecclesiastes 1:14 (all quotes from the Bible are taken from the New American Standard Version). See also Becker, pp. 85–86. The purpose of Kierkegaard's authorship is to bring this whole illusion and evasion down upon the individual, so that he or she can face the anxiety of life in its truth. Ultimately, Kierkegaard wants to give hope, but in order to bring the individual before the choice of this hope, he must bring the reader to the realization of the illusions of the vital lie, and the false hopes it provides. Kierkegaard wants to bring the individual before a choice, but a choice that can only be authentically made when one has come face to face with one's helplessness; the choice concerns what, or whom, one will ultimately surrender one's hopelessness to. The point is to become self-conscious and free enough to authentically make a choice about who one is: is one a created being, dependent and in need of help for significance and meaning in life, or is one an accident in this world, grounded in an indifferent fatalism where one's ultimate end is to fall back into the nothingness out of which one arose?

23 Kohut writes, 'Within the framework of the psychology of self, we define mental health not only as freedom from the neurotic symptoms and inhibitions that interfere with the functions of a "mental apparatus" involved in loving and working, but also as the capacity of a firm self to avail itself of the talents and skills at an individual's disposal, enabling him to love and work successfully' (p. 284). To 'work successfully' means to function within what Becker calls the 'cultural heroics' of one's society. Success (which gives a sense of self-sufficiency and being self-grounding) is defined by one's culture.

24 Becker, p. 82.

25 Becker, pp. 4–5.

26 Kierkegaard, Soren (1997) *Christian Discourses/The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, trans. Howard V. and Edna. H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP), p. 58.

27 Kohut says that psychoanalysis is completed and successful when a functioning self has been established. This is when a 'psychological sector in which ambitions, skills, and ideals form an unbroken continuum that permits joyful creative activity' (p. 63).

28 Tolstoy, Leo (1960) *The Death of Ivan Illych and Other Stories*, trans. Aylmer Maude (New York: Signet), p. 148.

29 Plato (1961) *Apology*, in: Hamilton, Edith and Huntington, Cairns (Eds.) *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, pp. 3–26, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Princeton: Princeton UP), p. 16.

30 Matthew 16:26.

31 Kierkegaard, Soren (1980b) *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton UP), p. 95.

32 Camus, Albert (1955) *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Random), p. 10.

33 Kohut, p. 102.

34 Kierkegaard, Soren (1975) *Soren Kierkegaard's Journal and Papers: Volume III*. Eds. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana UP), #3558. In another journal entry Kierkegaard writes, 'Wanting to hide in the mass or the crowd, to be a little fraction of the crowd, instead of being an individual, is the most corrupt of all escapes. Even if this makes life easier by making it more thoughtless in the din – this is not the question. The question is that of the responsibility of the individual – that every individual being ought to be a single individual, ought to make up his mind about his conviction' (Kierkegaard, Soren [1970] *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers: Volume II*. Eds. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong [Bloomington: Indiana UP], #1996).

35 Becker, p. 73.

36 Kierkegaard (1990a, p. 166).

37 Kierkegaard (1980a, p. 69). Terry Eagleton writes, 'Agency, control, and autonomy are admirable virtues, but they are also attempts to master a world now felt to be threateningly alien. Sovereignty proves to be inseparable from solitude. At the peak of his assurance, Enlightenment Man finds himself frighteningly alone in the universe, with nothing to authenticate himself but himself. His dominion is accordingly shot through with a sickening sense of arbitrariness and contingency, which will grow more acute as the modern age unfolds. What is the point of extracting from the world with one hand values which the other hand has just put in? What is it for the human subject to stand on a foundation which is itself' (Eagleton, Terry [2009] *Reason, Faith, & Revolution* [New Haven: Yale UP], pp. 82–83).

38 Lasch, p. 101. Earlier Lasch writes, 'New social forms require new forms of personality, new modes of socialization, new ways of organizing experience. The concept of narcissism provides us not with a ready-made psychological determinism but with a way of understanding the psychological impact of recent social changes – assuming that we bear in mind not only its clinical origins but the continuum between pathology and normality' (p. 101). Lasch is not alone in his assessment of our culture as being narcissistic in nature. Erich Fromm has made the argument in (1964) *The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil* (New York: Harper Books), p. 64; Lowen implies it in (1983) *Narcissism: Denial of the True Self* (New York: MacMillan Publishing), pp. ix–xi; and Becker himself also points to the narcissistic tendencies of our cultural heroics (pp. 4–5).

39 Becker writes, 'It doesn't matter whether the cultural hero-system is frankly magical, religious, and primitive or secular, scientific, and civilized. It is still a mythical hero-system in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning. They earn this feeling by carving out a place in nature, by building an edifice that reflects human value: a temple, a cathedral, a totem pole, a sky-scraper, a family that spans three generations. The hope and belief is that the things that man creates in society are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive or outshine death and decay, that man and his products count' (p. 5).

40 Becker, p. 87.

41 Morf, Carolyn C. and Rhodewalt, Frederick (2001) 'Unraveling the Paradoxes of Narcissism: A Dynamic Self-Regulatory Processing Model,' *Psychological Inquiry*, 12:4, 177–196, p. 182.

42 Savitz, Carol (1986) 'Healing and Wounding: The Collision of the Sacred and the Profane in Narcissism,' *Journal of Analytic Psychology*, 31, 319–340, p. 323.

43 Becker, pp. 85–86.

44 Vaknin, 177.

45 Morf and Rhodewalt, p. 184.

46 Morf and Rhodewalt, p. 185.

47 Morf and Rhodewalt, p. 185.

48 Morf and Rhodewalt, p. 185.

49 Kierkegaard, Soren (1990b) *For Self-Examination/Judge for Yourself!*. Eds. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, 89–215 (Princeton: Princeton UP), p. 199 (my emphasis).

50 Lowen, p. xi (my emphasis).

51 Kierkegaard believes that people choose against this leap because of various ways of being 'offended' (as he calls it) by the idea of the existence of God. One may be offended at the requirement of faith (i.e., that it is not rationally verifiable); one may be offended by the whole 'set up,' which includes suffering and pain (the problem of evil); one may be offended by the very thought of one's helplessness and dependence, and the requirement of surrendering one's life into the hands of an 'alien' power.

52 Kierkegaard writes, 'One fears that one's knowing, turned inward toward oneself, will expose the state of intoxication there, will expose that one prefers to remain in this state, will wrench one out of this state and as a result of such a setup will make it impossible for one to slip back again into the adored state, into intoxication' (1990b, p. 118).

53 Kierkegaard (1997, pp. 244–245).

54 Plato (1961) *Symposium*, in: Hamilton, Edith and Huntington, Cairns (Eds.) *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, 526–574, trans. Michael Joyce (Princeton: Princeton UP), pp. 555–556.

55 As just one example of what such a community might look like I would direct the reader to the final few chapters of Karl Barth's *The Epistle to the Romans* (Barth, Karl [1968] *The Epistle to the Romans*, Sixth Edition, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns [Oxford: Oxford UP], pp. 502–537.). Although this has a specifically Christian context, the important issue, in my view, is Barth's emphasis on *krisis*, and the continual 'disturbance' such a community works toward (the disturbance of any new cultural heroism), all within the context of grace and love.