Loneliness and innocence: A Kierkegaardian reflection on the paradox of self-realization

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Abstract. In this paper, I explore loneliness as a primordial call to find accord with the self that, as Kierkegaard claims, is born of spirit. I put Kierkegaard’s Anti-Climacan formula, “the more consciousness, the more self,” to work by examining lamentation over loss of the innocent days of youth as symptomatic of primordial loneliness. In loneliness, I argue, we confound loss of naivete (a developmental change) with loss of innocence (a spiritual failing). While each person is fated to lose naivete, no person loses innocence by developmental necessity. Each person loses innocence by his or her own hand in freedom.

“And the sea, like a wise man, is sufficient unto itself.”

Søren Kierkegaard lived a solitary life. He lived a mere 42 years – alone. His immense authorship, most of which unfolded in an intense six year period (1842–1848), was dedicated to the solitary individual, in a word to his unknown reader, if indeed such a reader existed. This strange, uncanny man, though he had a friend or two, truly lived alone, not simply in inwardness, as we all must, but in the total character of his life. He wrote without a known audience, as if he had to call out, with the greatest faith, to one not yet come or one alive but unknown to him. He occupied no public forum of consequence, had no family of his own, and did not know the delights of evenings spent in intimacy with a loved one or in Socratic-style discussion with friends during the ripe years of his adulthood. It is not far-fetched to say that Kierkegaard, the man, was his authorship and his authorship sired who he became as a grown man, a rich embodiment of spirit that once graced the earthly realm and left its mark. The frail Kierkegaard, weak in physical vitality, undertook a strenuous life act. He left behind all the comforts of culture and family, approbation and acceptance in order to become one single thing: a solitary individual who bore witness to the demise of Christianity and testified to its ideal in a manner that pierced through the vast distance of inwardness to anyone
who might hear and for the sake of those who wish to rescue themselves for right living.

Everyone who reads Kierkegaard must sooner or later be startled by the pure, solitary nature of his voice. And yet loneliness is not one of the main themes to which we turn to his work for instruction. Nor is it a leading word in his corpus. We associate his authorship with its elaborated themes: despair, anxiety, poetic existence, the sins of lowliness and highness, pride and cowardliness, the pervasive reality of double-mindedness, and their counterpoise in works of love and purity of heart. And yet the implicit waters within which the explicit elaboration of his philosophy emerges remain those of solitude, the solitary nature of human existence and vocation.

Much in Kierkegaard’s authorship testifies to the difference between loneliness and solitude, and could, thus, instruct us. Two aspects stand out in particular: the theory of indirect communication and the authorship understood as a work of love.¹ And yet it is to the model of self-realization developed in The Sickness Unto Death that I wish to turn in taking up the ordeal we know as loneliness.² I focus thus on Anti-Climacus’s core premise, “the more consciousness, the more self.”³ There is a direct correlation between degree of consciousness and degree of spiritual possibility. The inverse aspect of this law of human existence is that degree of resistance to a gain in consciousness does not escape the life of spirit but rather enters into a willful and ultimately demonic refusal to grow in spirit. The more aware we become, the more intensive our responsibility to live well; but the more we refuse a potentially new order of awareness, the deeper we fall into a sickness of spirit. Loneliness is such a disease. One primary expression of loneliness voices the complaint that we are all doomed to lose the innocence of our youth as we come of age. Although it does not begin as an illness that has festered and become grave, loneliness can, like despair, grow aggravated to the point that one’s entire disposition toward life journey announces itself as one, long and bitter complaint of self-pity, a bottomless negativity that kills off all trust in self and life and others. It is, I think, a worthy aim to explore whether life dooms us to lose innocence and the radiant purity of youthfulness. Is it true, as worldly “wisdom” claims, that youthfulness must end and the gloomy shadow of loneliness ascend only to becloud the length of our days?

1. The Paradox of self-realization

In The Sickness Unto Death, Kierkegaard presents us with a radical and paradoxical view of the self.⁴ The whole force of Kierkegaard’s