

Hermeneutics and Negativism

Edited by
CLAUDIA WELZ
and RENÉ ROSFORT

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Mohr Siebeck

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Hermeneutics and Negativism

Existential Ambiguities of Self-Understanding

Edited by

Claudia Welz and
René Rosfort

Mohr Siebeck

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With this book, we wish to celebrate Arne Grøn's 65th birthday on October 1, 2017. The book is both a gesture of appreciation of his work and a contribution to its cross-disciplinary continuation. As one of his colleagues and friends expressed it, our project is a kind of substitution and intercession¹ performed by the scientific community while one of its members is sorely missed due to serious illness. Together with this volume, we also send our best wishes for recovery to the jubilarian.

We are grateful to Faber Ltd for permission to quote from Edwin Muir, *Collected Poems* in George Pattison's contribution, and to the Prinzhorn Collection, Universitätsklinikum Heidelberg, for permission to print five paintings in Sonja Frohoff's contribution. At Mohr Siebeck we would like to thank all those who have been involved in the publication of this volume, in particular Henning Ziebritzki and Klaus Hermannstädter. Moreover, we would like to thank two people who were indispensable in finalizing the manuscript: Elin Simonson for her skillful, elegant, and thorough English language corrections in all parts of the book written by non-native speakers, and P. Johan Lose for his meticulous work as editorial assistant, formatting the manuscript according to the RPT series guidelines, and making the indexes.

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Copenhagen, August 2017

René Rosfort and Claudia Welz

¹ »Eine Art aktiven Platzhaltens für eine denkerische Persönlichkeit während der schmerzlichen Zeit ihrer Passivität! Eine Art nach außen tretender innerlichster Fürbitte!« (Günter Bader in an email to Claudia Welz, September 8, 2016).

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Introduction

A Negativistic Approach to Existential Hermeneutics

Claudia Welz and René Rosfort

1. Theme, aim, and background of this volume

This volume is a thematically focused exploration of existential questions that concern the ambiguities of self-understanding. It explores the following three thematic fields: first, experiences of anxiety and despair as related to the question of what these ambiguous phenomena show about freedom and its difficulties; second, hermeneutical theories as related to the question of how we can develop an existential hermeneutics that can account for the ambiguities of self-understanding between transparency and opacity; and, third, selfhood between self-understanding and self-alienation as a focal point of existential psycho(patho)logy.

This research agenda originates in the open endings of a conference that took place at the Faculty of Theology, University of Copenhagen, in September 2015. The conference was organized as part of an interdisciplinary research project on »Self-Understanding and Self-Alienation: Existential Hermeneutics and Psychopathology« (2014–2017).¹ The project's principal investigator, Arne Grøn, intended to organize a follow-up workshop in order to reinvestigate which notions of selfhood and alterity are at play when human beings experience themselves as others, and in order to examine whether it is possible to differentiate the concept of self-alienation into a structural, an existential, and a normative form, and experiences of self-alienation into non-pathological and pathological experiences. Furthermore, in his capacity as director of the *Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre* at the University of Copenhagen, Arne Grøn wanted to rearticulate the Kierkegaardian core of Michael Theunissen's negativistic approach to subjectivity via experiences of self-alienation.

¹ The project is funded by the Velux Foundation and co-financed by the Faculty of Theology, University of Copenhagen, and Psychiatric Center Hvidovre/Glostrup. The project offers an empirical and philosophical investigation into the role of self-understanding for personal identity and into the relation between self-understanding and self-alienation. With this double approach, the project not only seeks to clarify in what sense radical forms of self-alienation characterize schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder, anorexia nervosa, and traumatic conditions following torture, but it also seeks to contribute to an improved basis for psychotherapeutic practice. For more information, see <http://teol.ku.dk/skc/selfunderstanding/english/> (accessed August 10, 2017).

Both of these planned projects deal with the interplay between empirical and philosophical questions and draw upon resources from the distinct but interconnected fields of existential thinking, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and psychopathology (especially Jaspers, Heidegger, Levinas, Binswanger, Blankenburg, and Tellenbach).

However, due to serious illness, he could not implement these plans. The idea of this monograph is therefore to pick up on the aforementioned existential questions and to contribute to the discussion in written form. Our aim is not to provide general answers to inescapable existential questions, but to convert them dialogically and dialectically into new questions that can shed light on the complexity of human existence.

2. Methodology

As indicated by the title, the contributions to *Hermeneutics and Negativism* combine two methodological paths:

1. The papers aim to develop various forms of existential hermeneutics. In this sense, they explore the leading idea of Arne Grøn's work that, if we want to understand ourselves and, more generally, human existence we cannot draw sharp distinctions between contingent and transcendental aspects of the self, but must, rather, make sense of and deal with the continuously changing ambiguities of experiential life. This implies that the basic »structures« of selfhood and self-transformation are neither given as immediate conditions nor as historically contingent constructs, but are accessible only in mediated forms. Yet language as mediator is itself a double-edged sword: it functions both as a means to establish relevant distinctions and as a means to deconstruct them in case that they seem inappropriate in relation to the phenomena in question. It is here decisive to consider that the ways in which phenomena appear depend on the perspectives of those to whom they manifest themselves. The perspectival givenness of anything manifesting itself to someone in a certain way is central to existential ambiguities of self-understanding, in particular when we consider the relations between impression and expression; activity and passivity; being formed and forming oneself.
2. Furthermore, the papers adopt or examine a negative approach to selfhood by focusing on experiences of anxiety, despair, or other forms of more radical self-alienation in which self-understanding is lost or radically altered. Such experiences of negativity challenge our sense of self, making it difficult to understand oneself, regardless of whether one tries to understand oneself through emotions, thoughts, or interactions with others. The crucial question in this context is what disturbances to or breakdowns in self-understanding

can teach us about selfhood. As mentioned, this approach was pioneered by Michael Theunissen, whose negativism draws heavily upon Kierkegaard, both methodologically and anthropologically.² Grøn's study on subjectivity and negativity in Kierkegaard develops this approach.³

A prime example of self-alienation, which can be approached by combining negativism and existential hermeneutics, is how time can estrange persons from themselves to the point at which they can no longer recognize or identify with who they were at an earlier stage of life. Considering the conditions of human finitude, Theunissen, in his book *Negative Theologie der Zeit*, correlates philosophy and psychopathology. He discusses how human existence can fail when we experience the estranging effect of time, and, conversely, he asks how happiness is possible and how one's life as a self can turn out well (*gelingendes Selbstsein*) – in and despite our temporality and our more or less »healthy« ways of relating to time. Theunissen developed his philosophy in constant exchange with the immeasurable wealth of the lived world, the *Lebenswelt*. The lived world is conceived as temporally determined reality, which precedes the individual and his or her experience of time, and Theunissen examined it to uncover dimensions of experienced time that had often remained – and still often remain – untouched by contemporary psychological and psychiatric investigations.⁴

According to Theunissen, today philosophy can only be serious in the mode of its negation,⁵ that is, philosophy must be denied the possibility of pure thought. Philosophy can only be conducted in and through a reality that is »earlier« than all thinking and that informs thinking in virtue of being a historically »grown« reality. In this denial of pure thought, philosophy becomes re-search in searching that which precedes and instructs it. Thus, *Nachdenken*, or after-thought, is philosophy's true nature. In this context, Theunissen emphasizes how philosophical thinking is always late.⁶ Philosophy does not, on his view, ground anything in or through its activity of thinking, but comes after the fact – as a conscientious, critical reflection upon the historical reality that shapes and conditions human existence.

² See M. THEUNISSEN, *Negative Theologie der Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991), 8; IDEM, *Das Selbst auf dem Grund der Verzweiflung: Kierkegaards negativistische Methode* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991); IDEM, *Der Begriff Verzweiflung: Korrekturen an Kierkegaard* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1993).

³ See A. GRØN, *The Concept of Anxiety in Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. J. B. L. KNOX (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2008 [the original Danish edition is from 1994]); IDEM, *Subjektivitet og negativitet: Kierkegaard* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1997).

⁴ THEUNISSEN, *Negative Theologie der Zeit*, 14–15.

⁵ See *ibid.*, 22: »Seriøs ist Philosophie heute nur noch im Modus ihrer Negation« (our translation).

⁶ See *ibid.*, 24.

Arne Grøn shares this view of philosophy as related to life,⁷ and has in numerous articles examined different ways of relating to and dealing with time – be it in hopeful courage or despair, in faith and love that can wait for and anticipate the good, or in impatience and mistrust that clings to what seems to be a clear reason for relinquishing hope.⁸ Furthermore, the existential aspects of the relation between time and history, finitude and transcendence, and death and the preciousness of time and human (co-)existence are all topics at the heart of his philosophical reflections. He has in his own way explored how human beings suffer under the futility of time and how they can resist its overwhelming power and bring out positive aspects from the passing of time and from the constant threat of being »too late« to mend our shortcomings, omissions, and miscarriages.

In his essay on melancholy, which is based on vignettes and statements by patients, Theunissen discusses the methodological difficulty at the core of psychopathology: that one can speak of the »sick soul« (or self) only by negating certain determinations of the »healthy« self, for instance by describing the lack of self-continuity experienced by depressive patients as an »obstruction« or »disempowerment« of the future, as its being »non-given« or given only in an »improper« or »inauthentic« fashion.⁹ As co-founder of The Danish National Research Foundation's *Center for Subjectivity Research*,¹⁰ Arne Grøn has contributed to the center's interdisciplinary research agenda, not least with his negativistic approach to subjectivity and selfhood. His principal argument is that the interdisciplinary investigation of selfhood and self-disorders conducted between psychiatry and various philosophical and theological traditions needs to take into consideration the various forms of negations of what is regarded as »normal« or non-alienated states of mind.

In a time of rapidly advancing scientific knowledge, groundbreaking technological innovation, and instantaneous access to seemingly limitless information, a negativistic approach to the human condition is not immediately obvious. Why focus on what goes wrong when so much is going well? What is the point of reformulating old questions when the frontiers of knowledge are constantly expanding? Is the long detour through negativity necessary in a time abounding with shortcuts? These are more than rhetorical questions. When trying to making sense

⁷ See, for example, A. GRØN and TH. BRUDHOLM, »Nachdenken,« in *On Jean Améry: Philosophy of Catastrophe*, ed. M. ZOLKOS (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001), 193–215.

⁸ See A. GRØN, »Time, Courage, Selfhood,« in *Kierkegaard in Lisbon*, ed. J.M. JUSTO and E. M. DE SOUSA (Lisbon: Centro de Filosofia de Universidade de Lisboa, 2012), 85–96; IDEM, »Time and History,« in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. J. LIPPITT and G. PATTISON (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 273–291; IDEM, »Zeit und Transzendenz,« in *Der Sinn der Zeit*, ed. E. ANGEHRN et al. (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2002), 40–54; IDEM, »Unanschaulich: Tod, Zeit, Antlitz,« in *Bild und Tod: Grundfragen der Bildanthropologie*, ed. PH. STÖELLGER and J. WOLFF (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 727–744; IDEM, »The Concept of Existence,« in *Kierkegaard's Existential Approach*, ed. A. GRØN et al. (Berlin/New York, NY: de Gruyter, 2017), 71–90.

⁹ THEUNISSEN, *Negative Theologie der Zeit*, 228.

¹⁰ See www.cfs.ku.dk (accessed August 10, 2017).

of human existence it does undeniably seem more obvious to turn to the successful accomplishments of the human intellect rather than mistakes or shortcomings. In other words, a contemporary, updated version of existential hermeneutics might be better off taking advantage of the positive results of science and technology rather than delving into the manifestations and forms of negativity. The texts in this book argue, in various ways, that the strength of the negativistic approach basically consists in the development of a sense of the ambiguities – and at times outright paradoxes – more or less explicitly involved in our scientific answers, technologies, and access to information.

This is not to say that a negativistic approach to existential hermeneutics does not acknowledge technological innovation. As also evidenced by the contributions in this book, a negativistic approach is not adverse to empirical knowledge or interdisciplinary dialogue. The exploration of ambiguities and paradoxes is, on the contrary, meant to disclose or at least articulate the normative problems involved in the resources that we use in our existential hermeneutics. We never simply use scientific results, technological innovations, or readily accessible information. We incorporate these into our existence in terms of interpretations. A systematic focus on the normative problems of our interpretative engagement with reality can be understood as a critique of normativity, that is, a persistent critique of our ideal representations of how to live our lives – and often also of how others should live theirs. As Arne Grøn argues: »A human being can use its ideal representations to not acknowledge itself. The moral self-consciousness can make one blind to that which one does.«¹¹ Making visible one's own blindness by articulating the shadows of our knowledge and our abilities is at the core of the negativistic approach.

3. Structure and contents of the volume

The present volume is structured into three main parts. All of them discuss how selfhood is to be understood if taken together with various forms of self-alienation. While the first part is dedicated to existential ambiguities as they surface in anxiety, despair, and freedom,¹² the second part concentrates on existential hermeneutics,¹³ and the third on existential psycho(patho)logy.¹⁴

¹¹ GRØN, *Subjektivitet og negativitet*, 284.

¹² See A. GRØN, »Frihed i religionsfilosofisk perspektiv,« in *Frihed – idé og virkelighed*, ed. A. GRØN and H. C. WIND (Frederiksberg: Anis, 1989), 9–30; IDEM, »Zweideutigkeiten der Angst,« in *Angst: Philosophische, psychopathologische und psychoanalytische Zugänge*, ed. S. MICALI and TH. FUCHS (Freiburg: Verlag Karl Alber, 2016), 56–69; IDEM, »Phenomenology of Despair – Phenomenology of Spirit,« in *Kierkegaard im Kontext des deutschen Idealismus*, ed. A. HUTTER and A. M. RASMUSSEN (Berlin/New York, NY: de Gruyter, 2014), 241–257.

¹³ See A. GRØN, »Homo subiectus: Zur zweideutigen Subjektivität des Menschen,« in *Seinkönnen: Der Mensch zwischen Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit*, ed. I. U. DALFERTH and A. HUNZIKER (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 19–33; IDEM, »Subjectivity, Passion and Passivity,« in *Passion*

Part I (Existential Ambiguities: Anxiety, Despair, Freedom) opens with *Stefano Micali*, who presents three different notions of negativism – methodical, content-related, and normative – and analyzes Kierkegaard's notions of despair and anxiety through a critical discussion of Michael Theunissen's and Arne Grøn's contributions to the research on subjectivity. Micali reveals difficulties linked to the full re-appropriation of Kierkegaard's analysis of anxiety and despair in the context of a contemporary post-Husserlian phenomenology. Both anxiety and despair are essentially related to faith. Micali first investigates the relation between faith and despair by focusing on Theunissen's interpretation of *The Sickness Unto Death*, and then he investigates the complex connection between faith and anxiety in Grøn's reading of Kierkegaard's *Concept of Anxiety*.

René Rosfort sets out to show that the problem of ethics is a key issue in Kierkegaard's thought, where it is understood as the challenge to make sense of universal ethical demands in a time that has become sensitive to the voices of individuality. Against the background of Theunissen's and Grøn's seminal negativistic readings of Kierkegaard's authorship, Rosfort argues that ethics can function as a prism through which to read this multifarious authorship. Rosfort finds that the strength of Kierkegaard's ethical thought lies in his careful exploration of the ambivalence of irony and seriousness. He understands Kierkegaard's ethics as an »anxious ethics« that works with the existential destabilization of normativity experienced through the affective complexity of irony and seriousness, complicating our attempts to make sense of ethical demands.

Tying up ethics and history by taking his lead from Grøn's phrase that »the past ›has‹ us before we ›have‹ it,« *Mads Peter Karlsen* discusses the question of what it means to continue to inherit the doctrine of hereditary sin today. Grøn's phrase brings into focus diverse facets of inheritance combined with questions of temporality, identity, freedom, and responsibility. The first part of the essay outlines how Kierkegaard's revision of the traditional doctrine of hereditary sin brings into view inheritance as a problem, and thus enables us to ask anew what it means to inherit. Elaborating on this question, the second part of the essay examines Derrida's thoughts on inheritance, which confirm that inheriting is a profoundly ambiguous task.

and *Passivity*, ed. I. U. DALFERTH and M. RODGERS (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 143–155; IDEM, »Widerfahrnis und Verstehen,« in *Hermeneutik der Transzendenz*, ed. I. U. DALFERTH et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 47–59; IDEM, »Self and Identity,« in *Structure and Development of Self-Consciousness: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. D. ZAHAVI et al. (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004), 123–156; IDEM, »Subjectivity and Transcendence: Problems and Perspectives,« in *Subjectivity and Transcendence*, ed. A. GRØN et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 9–36.

¹⁴ See A. GRØN, »Eindruck – Ausdruck,« in *Fremde Spiegelungen: Interdisziplinäre Zugänge zur Sammlung Prinzhorn*, ed. S. FROHOFF et al. (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2017), 11–20.

Emil Angehrn explores self-understanding and self-deception between existential hermeneutics and negativism. Self-deception is not primarily seen as a cognitive fallacy, but rather as an existential failure. Self-deception does not only consist of holding false beliefs about oneself or about the world, but is also a fundamental deficiency in the way we *understand* and – ultimately – in the way we *are* ourselves. If we, as self-interpreting animals, fail to understand ourselves, we also fail to be ourselves. Self-deception can result both from the opacity of human existence and from *akrasia*: a weakness of the will to understand and to be oneself. In this way, self-deception points to the existential ambiguity of freedom.

The contributions in Part II (Existential Hermeneutics: Self-Understanding between Transparency and Opacity) develop the questions of self-understanding that have already been touched upon in Part I. *Carsten Pallesen* zooms in on Kierkegaard's category of *hiin Enkelte* – the single individual – and the concept of spirit as outlined in Grøn's habilitation thesis *Subjektivitet og negativitet: Kierkegaard*. Pallesen links the particle »as« in Paul Ricœur's expression »oneself as another« to Kierkegaard's redoubling of the single individual as *the single individual* and argues that the latter indicates a dialectic of recognition that dates back to Hegel and has its theological model in the *homoousios* of the Nicene Creed. Self-determination and dependence on the other are, in his view, constitutive yet conflicting moments that a theory of subjectivity should be able to account for.

In the same vein, *Hans-Christoph Askani* describes how the encounter with the stranger disturbs the »I« in its feigned stability and homogeneity. The reflex of meeting the stranger with resistance and fear might, indeed, stem from this shocking disturbance, yet the latter cannot be avoided. Giving up the idea of the self-contained »I« that is identical with itself, Askani instead probes the notion of a self that always remains in a quest for identity – a self that is a stranger to itself. According to Askani, the experience of inner and outer strangeness adheres to the constitution of personal identity exactly because the »I« is not yet what it is supposed to be, but exists only in becoming itself – in alignment with what it is *not*.

Shifting the focus from the finite to the infinite Other, *Ingolf U. Dalferth* maintains that we, as finite beings, are in constant danger of misconstruing the very point of our existence: that we live from a gift that we can never supersede by our own doing because it makes that doing possible in the first place. As long as we seek to understand ourselves merely in terms of activity or passivity, we miss the existential dialectics of passivity and activity at the very core of our existence. We are, but we have not made ourselves, and have no ultimate control over ourselves. In contrast to Ernst Bloch and Emmanuel Levinas, who take this lack of authority over ourselves to manifest our existential self-alienation, Dalferth holds that the contrary is true: striving for self-possession is not the overcoming of self-estrangement but its very enactment.

Theological aspects are central also to the next contribution. Responding to Theunissen's account of the transformation of time in Pindar, and to Grøn's argu-

ment that a similar structure is to be found also in Kierkegaard, *George Pattison* takes issue with Grøn's view that the »blessing«-aspect of time can only be discerned by a negative approach. Pattison takes up Grøn's own hint that Kierkegaard also offers an account of time as having »infinite worth.« Following the themes of suddenness and analogy with the help of Erich Przywara, Pattison endorses the role of poetic and religious discourse in articulating the meaning of time. The testimony of poetry draws on the work of the Orcadian poet Edwin Muir whilst Kierkegaard is taken as spokesperson for the religious perspective. Together they point to an experience in which »the grace of time« may be experienced in its fullness.

Ettore Rocca turns to the concept of »analogy« as one of the means by which human thought has sought to express the unknown and the divine. In a first step, he reconstructs this concept from Aristotle to Kant and Trendelenburg, and then examines Kierkegaard's contribution to analogical thinking, which can be summarized as follows: the very nature of analogy consists in finding likenesses of relations and revoking them at the same time. In other words, analogy defines our understanding of the incomprehensible by letting us understand in what sense we cannot understand. Finally, Rocca brings Grøn's negativism into dialogue with analogical thinking of transcendence. According to Grøn, it is in the negative experience of thought thrown back upon itself and its limits that we encounter ourselves and face the never-ending task of understanding ourselves.

The hermeneutical problems of understanding others and oneself; of receiving impressions »from outside« and expressing one's own »inner thoughts« in speech culminate in aphasia, a condition in which one or several of the four communication modalities – auditory comprehension, verbal expression, reading, and writing – are impaired due to brain injury. In a close reading of Sigmund Freud's early writing *On Aphasia*, *Günter Bader* interprets an erratic parenthesis that, strikingly, does not fit into the context of this text. Bader's interpretation of Freud's parenthesis results in the following thesis: if the brain relates to the periphery of the body as a poem relates to the alphabet, then a comparison of the incomparable becomes possible, which not merely leaves aphasia to nature and fate, but also prompts its re-description in the sign of freedom. This involves hope for patients who have lost their ability to speak, while their intelligence remains unaffected.

The contributions in Part III (Existential Psycho(patho)logy: Selfhood and Self-Alienation) concentrate on the transition from everyday experiences of failed understanding to clinically significant cases of self-alienation. *Sonja Frohoff's* essay deals with artworks of the famous Prinzhorn Collection in Heidelberg, which contains *art brut* from German psychiatric institutions around 1900. After commenting on different contexts of and approaches to these works, three case studies build the starting point for further questions about their meaning as expressions of self-alienation or self-recovery. Do such artworks mirror the self-alienation that their creators were probably experiencing? Or should they, by contrast, be under-

stood as expressions of self-recovery? Following an indirect path elucidating the relations between expression and impression, Frohoff makes self-alienation and self-recovery apparent as moments of one single process of self-communication.

Helene Stephensen and *Josef Parnas* clarify how subjectivity and radical experiences of self-alienation in schizophrenia implicate each other. The authors show that a Kierkegaardian account of subjectivity provides a fruitful framework for this investigation because it emphasizes subjectivity as a dynamic, ongoing process of differentiation and re-integration. Furthermore, Kierkegaard's account avoids the controversial dichotomy between simply being oneself and *not* being oneself. From this perspective, it becomes possible to understand self-alienation in schizophrenia as an exaggeration and radicalization of the constitutive structures of subjectivity. To illustrate the emergence of this self-alienation in schizophrenia, they present and discuss clinical and phenomenological features of self-disorders, and the full-blown articulation of schizophrenic psychosis.

Borut Škodlar follows Ronald D. Laing's insight that schizophrenia cannot be understood without understanding despair. He argues that schizophrenia patients live extreme forms of disturbed selfhood and analyzes statements by two patients in the light of Kierkegaard's differentiation between the despair of weakness (desperately unwilling to be oneself) and the despair of defiance (desperately willing to be oneself) in *The Sickness Unto Death*. Inspired by Grøn, Škodlar detects in the despair of potentially suicidal schizophrenia patients a dialectics at work between weakness and defiance, and passivity and activity. He concludes that if therapists enlarge their understanding of their patients' experiences, they are in a better position to (re)instate hope and love in their patients' lives.

With regard to existential hermeneutics and psychoanalysis, *Claudia Welz* explores the psycho(patho)logy of everyday life by focusing on self-alienating tours and detours of thought. In particular, she investigates the relation between self-knowledge and self-deception by bringing Kierkegaard into dialogue with Nietzsche, Freud, and Primo Levi. These thinkers have called special attention to the more or less willful self-obscurization and manipulation of memory in view of unwanted self-knowledge. Yet how can one's conscience become a false witness to oneself, and how is it possible to deceive oneself about oneself? If we approach the negativity with which we *nolens volens* are confronted *via negativa*, may this counter-move enable us to transform that negativity so that we can finally face our own fallibility and take upon ourselves not just guilt and despair, but also our own responsibility?

Existential Ambiguities

Anxiety, Despair, Freedom

Anxiety between Dialectics and Phenomenology

Stefano Micali

This paper intends to analyze Kierkegaard's notions of despair and anxiety through a critical discussion of Michael Theunissen's and Arne Grøn's contributions to the research on subjectivity. Its aim is to show how Theunissen's and Grøn's respective interpretations bring several tensions between phenomenological description and dialectical method to the fore. Both anxiety and despair are essentially related to faith, and this will be at the core of the present investigation. The first part investigates the relation between faith and despair with focus on Theunissen's interpretation of *The Sickness Unto Death*.¹ The second part analyzes the complex connection between faith and anxiety in Grøn's reading of *The Concept of Anxiety*.² The paper intends to highlight how a full re-appropriation of the insightful Kierkegaardian analysis of these fundamental moods faces difficulties in a contemporary post-Husserlian phenomenological context.

1. Negative anthropology

Michael Theunissen develops an approach he refers to as »negative anthropology,« growing out of in a critical confrontation with the concept of self that Kierkegaard elaborates on in *The Sickness Unto Death* (henceforth *Sickness*).³

In *Das Selbst auf dem Grund der Verzweiflung*, Theunissen investigates the productivity and relevance of Kierkegaard's concept of »self« to the fields of psychol-

¹ S. KIERKEGAARD, *The Sickness Unto Death* (Kierkegaard's Writings, vol. 19), ed. and trans. H. HONG and E. HONG (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980).

² S. KIERKEGAARD, *The Concept of Anxiety* (Kierkegaard's Writings, vol. 8), ed. and trans. R. THOMTE and B. A. ANDERSON (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980).

³ M. THEUNISSEN and WILFRIED GREVE, eds., *Materialien zur Philosophie Søren Kierkegaards* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1979); IDEM, *Das Selbst auf dem Grund der Verzweiflung. Kierkegaards negativistische Methode* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991); IDEM, *Negative Theologie der Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991); IDEM, *Der Begriff Verzweiflung. Korrekturen an Kierkegaard* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1993); IDEM, »Für einen rationaleren Kierkegaard. Zu Einwänden von Arne Grøn und Alastair Hannay,« *Kierkegaard Studies: Yearbook 1996* (Berlin/New York, NY: de Gruyter, 1996), 61–90; IDEM, »Anthropologie und Theologie bei Kierkegaard,« in *Kierkegaard Revisited: Proceedings from the Conference*, ed. N. J. CAPPELØRN and J. STEWART (Berlin/New York, NY: de Gruyter, 1997), 177–190.

ogy, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis. The relevance of the conceptualization of the self in Kierkegaard's work essentially depends on his definition of the relation between anomaly and normality. His anthropology refuses to establish »a certain notion of health as the norm in order to judge the disease as an anomaly.«⁴ Instead, Kierkegaard develops an idea of health from sickness, positing that health – not disease – is the exception: Self-relation is originally and directly a misrelation, and anomaly and pathology form the unavoidable starting point.

Kierkegaard's negativistic program is clearly shown in the following passage: Anti-Climacus, the pseudonymous author of *Sickness*, »merely describes the sickness by simultaneously defining on and on what faith is.«⁵ Theunissen notes how Anti-Climacus, »Instead of departing from faith and then moving towards its opposite – to the despair known as sin – he holds despair directly in front of him in such a way that he defines faith only in the analysis of its own negation.«⁶

Only by negation of the negative is it possible to gain the positive. Kierkegaard defines faith in terms of annihilation of despair. Faith has, then, no positive mode of appearance, independent from anomaly, but is defined »only in the analysis of its negation.«⁷ It is only the negation of despair as a sickness unto death.

Theunissen distinguishes content-related negativism – in the form of a deficiency of human life – from methodical negativism. The former concerns the concrete negative phenomena of affective life, such as anxiety and despair, while the latter describes a systematic procedure that takes its departure in negative phenomena in its strife towards a healthy form of life. Taking anomaly as a starting point has also an historical dimension: the negativist method presupposes the distortion of the successful form of life in »Christendom« as well as in modernity.⁸ To summarize, we distinguish between three aspects of negativism:

1. Methodical-formal negativism. Here, the essential characteristics of the self are not immediately accessible, but may only be evinced on the basis of human anomalies and deformations. Research on the self takes its departure in anomaly rather than normality.
2. Content-related negativism concerning the phenomena of anxiety and despair. When a negative anthropology identifies the particular properties of the self, it does not assume an already set or fixed definition but starts, rather, from concrete, specific experiences such as despair or anxiety in order to disclose and unravel the structure of the self, e. g.: »How must the self be constituted for despair to appear in the forms in which it actually shows itself?«⁹ The concept

⁴ THEUNISSEN, *Selbst*, 16. All translations of Theunissen's texts are mine.

⁵ S. KIERKEGAARD, *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer* X 5, ed. P.A. HEIBERG et al. (Copenhagen: Gyl-dendal, 1932), B 23.

⁶ THEUNISSEN, *Selbst*, 18 (note 2).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ THEUNISSEN, *Negative*, 353.

of self must be thought from the experience of despair. Theunissen recognizes a mutual dependence between self and despair.¹⁰

3. Normative negativism, regarding the historical modern situation in which authentic life has become impossible.

These three aspects are closely intertwined¹¹ and together they underlie Theunissen's interpretation of Kierkegaard's work, notably highlighted in his *Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair*, seen as the culmination of his lifelong confrontation with Kierkegaard's anthropology.¹² The text gives a twofold critique – both internal and external – of the structure of *Sickness*.

The immanent critique stresses the implicit guiding presupposition of Kierkegaard's inquiries into despair, namely that we do not want to be immediately what we are. The external critique, in Theunissen's terminology »the transcending critique,« argues for the introduction of a corrective element to the concept of despair, and to the way in which this concept is depicted in *Sickness*. According to Theunissen, Kierkegaard's analysis of despair includes elements that do not belong to despair, and excluding elements constitutive of it.¹³

In *Sickness*, the basic mistake consists in its one-sided tracing back of despair to a discrepancy in self-relation. Yet is it really necessary to comprehend despair on the basis of a »deficiency in relating oneself to oneself?«¹⁴ We find, in Kierkegaard's analysis of so-called »despair of weakness« an indication of a point of view that no longer relies on either the paradigm of self-relation, or on the willing (or not willing) to be oneself, that may also shed light on a deeper understanding of this phenomenon: »Here there is no infinite consciousness of the self, of what despair is, or of the conditions as one of despair. The despair is only suffering, a succumbing to the pressure of external factors; in no way does it come from within as an act.«¹⁵ At the stage of immediacy, despair is something that befalls me from the outside: »Now something happens to him, something occurs abruptly to the immediate self and makes it despair. [...] There must be an external motivation for the despair, and the despair is nothing more than a suffering.«¹⁶ According to Theunissen, in the despair of weakness, an alternative, promising paradigm of despair emerges, no longer understood on the basis of self-relation, but as an

¹⁰ However, it should not be overlooked that Theunissen ultimately tends to affirm the primacy of the self over despair, due to the prevalence of a Hegel-inspired dialectical paradigm. A phenomenological post-Husserlian approach would reverse this relation.

¹¹ The differences between the three forms of negativism are particularly apparent in THEUNISSEN and GREVE, *Materialien*, 71.

¹² In 1955, a twenty-three year old Theunissen wrote his PhD thesis on the concept of »earnestness« in Kierkegaard (M. THEUNISSEN, *Der Begriff Ernst bei Søren Kierkegaard* (Freiburg: Verlag Karl Alber, 1958)).

¹³ THEUNISSEN, *Begriff*, 63.

¹⁴ Ibid., 119.

¹⁵ KIERKEGAARD, *Sickness*, 50.

¹⁶ Ibid.

event. Kierkegaard failed to recognize the asymmetrical relation between despair of weakness – which has this event-like structure – and despair of defiance, which derives from a failure of self-realization. *Sickness* contains a vain attempt to reverse the despair of weakness into its opposite, that is, into the despair of defiance in the form of an absolute and unrestrained willingness to be oneself.

Theunissen views this transformation as bound to fail due to the seeming ambiguity in the key concept of weakness. The concept of weakness is here related to two heterogeneous phenomena: on the hand, it refers to the experience of suffering; of being affected by an external event. On the other hand, it relates to the lack of a positive will to be oneself. In his analysis, Kierkegaard overlooks the difference between these two completely different components: suffering and unwillingness to be oneself are treated as identical terms. A clear differentiation between these two forms of weakness, however, sheds light on the specific character of suffering: In the despair of weakness, the despairing one suffers from »both that which provokes his despair and his own being-in-despair.«¹⁷ Kierkegaard differentiates between »affective« despair concerning that which befalls the subject, and the »subjective« *conditio* of being-in-despair, which takes the form of one's relation to oneself: »It expresses the first suffering as an event that precipitates us into despair, and marks the second suffering by the turn after which despair itself overcomes us.«¹⁸ In the latter, we would have responsibility for our own being-in-despair, since this state would depend upon a deficiency or discrepancy in our self-relation. Theunissen argues that despair as being affected by an event (*Widerfahrnis*) is prior to this deficiency in self-relation, and finds that Kierkegaard himself confirms this primacy, at least indirectly: he begins with the former in order to argue for a missing form in one's relation to oneself.¹⁹

Theunissen's use of the term »phenomenology« bears a fundamental methodological ambiguity, particularly visible in his transcending critique. Aiming at describing the phenomenon of despair as such, he presupposes a Heideggerian phenomenological hermeneutics that tries to return to an original sense of experience set within a certain historical context. In this case, it is despair in the first sense set in the nihilist context that results from the history of Christianity. Thus, »we can understand Kierkegaard's interpretation provided that we also have nihilistic experiences, and we can criticize his interpretation in a way that is not just extrinsic, provided that we are, in principle, able to question its adequacy in our own experiences.«²⁰ Theunissen's confrontation with Kierkegaard is driven by the »thing itself« (despair), which must always be interpreted historically. Theunissen takes Kierkegaard seriously by examining his contribution to the phenom-

¹⁷ THEUNISSEN, *Begriff*, 71.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 70.

enon itself.²¹ This questioning of the adequacy of Kierkegaard's analysis to our experiences, as well as the reference to the »thing itself,« demonstrates a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach in a post-Husserlian sense. However, as mentioned above, Theunissen also remains committed to Hegel's dialectical phenomenology. Both critiques – immanent/internal and transcending/external – remain within a dialectical perspective that views the truth only in the whole. He writes about Kierkegaard that:

His version of phenomenological dialectics is open to criticism not because it endorses a Hegelianism that takes for its beginning the wrapped end, and the end as the unwrapped beginning. Both the immanent and the transcending critique were based on the completely Hegelian presupposition according to which the beginning represents the origin only insofar as the whole accomplishes itself in it.²²

If the whole is the only truth, the beginning necessarily admits to a certain one-sidedness. Theunissen remains faithful to the Hegelian idea according to which the beginning is the origin that accomplishes itself in the course of the process. Nevertheless, in order to grasp the phenomenon of despair he starts from a different origin, that is, from a being affected by an event (*Widerfahrnis*) – in order to be able to grasp the phenomenon of despair:

That someone distances himself from the idea that the original appearance is that of being affected by an event [*Widerfahrnis*] does not imply that he thereby negate the fundamental insight that, in general, there is a constraint [*Befangenheit*] in the appearance [*Schein*] which prevents what is original from showing itself in its truth at the beginning.²³

Theunissen thus denies Kierkegaard's fundamental claim that despair is to be understood as a failed self-relation. However, he shares Kierkegaard's dialectical assumption that the beginning cannot display the truth. Although Theunissen himself is right to stress some similarities between Heideggerian hermeneutical phenomenology and Hegelian dialectics,²⁴ a more precise analysis of the despair of weakness as suffering can show how the phenomenological method (as an original reference to the »thing itself«) and Hegelian dialectics stand – from a methodological point of view – in a difficult relation. From a post-Husserlian perspective, being affected by an event is defined by a radical facticity and contingency that is not *immediately in accord* with Hegelian dialectics. Theunissen does not consider these tensions to a sufficient degree.

Theunissen's sophisticated critique poses two elements of despair – that of being affected by an event and that of a discrepancy in one's relation to oneself – against each other, when really they belong together. His transcending critique misunderstands a decisive aspect of Kierkegaard's analysis of the phenomenon of

²¹ Ibid., 9.

²² Ibid., 154.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 27–30.

despair, since his considerations have an ethical-edifying character. Kierkegaard aims at expounding a »hidden« and implicit presupposition that constitutes the condition of possibility of every form of despair. In order to expose this presupposition, Kierkegaard carries out a still unrivaled phenomenological analysis (also in the post-Husserlian sense) of the experience of despair. *From a systematic point of view, Kierkegaard, however, does not aim at describing despair in its specific mode of manifestation* – in the »how« of its appearance. His intention is primarily »therapeutic.« Theunissen's transcending critique fails to recognize this decisive aspect of Kierkegaard's investigations. Kierkegaard's aim is to indicate, by referring back to faith, the *necessary conditions* for the *impossibility* of despair. Despair cannot exercise its power over the human being when the self, in its relation to itself, and in willing to be itself, »rests transparently in the power that established it.«²⁵

Faith can be characterized as that countervailing power that hinders our immediate consent to despair. In the very moment in which a negative event unexpectedly occurs to us, human beings tend to consent to the pathos of despair, as if everything were already lost. Despair stands on the verge of an outbreak. This tendency toward despair is closely connected to the internal logic of desire: one identifies oneself in one's own totality with that which is desired. In Kierkegaard's own language one could say that, thanks to the infinite passion of imagination, something earthly becomes the earthly in its totality.²⁶ From Kierkegaard's perspective, the indispensable task lies in opening up the possibility of a definitive immunization against despair, as the following passage from *Works of Love* attests:

I do not have the right to become insensitive to life's pain, because I shall sorrow; but neither do I have the right to despair, because I shall sorrow; and neither do I have the right to stop sorrowing, because I shall sorrow. So it is with love. You do not have the right to become insensitive to this feeling, because you shall love; but neither do you have the right to love despairingly, because you shall love; and just as little do you have the right to warp this feeling in you, because you shall love. You shall preserve love, and you shall preserve yourself and by and in preserving yourself preserve love.²⁷

My interpretation has much in common with the one developed by Arne Grøn in his critical confrontation with Theunissen:

Kierkegaard does not need to deny that there are situations of despair. His point of view is ethical, based on the idea that, precisely in such situations, one shall not allow oneself to despair. The hope one cannot give up is a hope despite the situation. When Kierkegaard stresses the fundamental self-relation in despair, so he is implicitly claiming that this self-relation opens up the possibility to resist despair.²⁸

²⁵ KIERKEGAARD, *Sickness*, 14.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁷ S. KIERKEGAARD, *Works of Love* (Kierkegaard's Writings, vol. 16), ed. and trans. H. V. HONG and E. H. HONG (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 43.

²⁸ A. GRØN, »Der Begriff Verzweiflung,« *Kierkegaard Studies: Yearbook 1996* (Berlin/New York, NY: de Gruyter, 1996), 33–60, 50 (my translation).

Kierkegaard's should be interpreted as an ethical-edifying point of view:²⁹ Despair is related to one's self-relation, since it presupposes an acceptance of despair:

Despairing is to give up hope and to lose courage – the courage to carry oneself in leading one's life. Only in this sense is Kierkegaard's claim to be defended: that despair comes ›from within‹ in that despairing is something the one despairing ›does‹. He does it to himself, by himself: he gives himself up.³⁰

The most important point relates to the question how not to consent to despair.

Such a perspective does not implicate a moralization of despair as Theunissen suggests in his reply to Grøn's critique: »Kierkegaard carries his moralism to extremes precisely at the moment when he forbids despair at all costs.«³¹ The point is neither to judge the one despairing nor to forbid despair for moral reasons. Rather, the point is to identify the moment of despair in order to find an escape from it. Only when one finds the extraordinary perspective of faith and is thereby able to truly relate to the power on which one depends, does it become possible to avoid approving of despair. Approval of despair presupposes that one forgets that one stands before God. The feeling according to which everything is possible in God is inherent to the experience of praying: »For prayer there must be a God, a self – and possibility – or a self and possibility in a pregnant sense, because the being of God means that everything is possible, or that everything is possible means the being of God.«³² Faith entails a transformation in the sense of a correction of the immediate discrepancy in one's relation to oneself.

Kierkegaard accepts that we are constantly responsible for our despair since despair always involves an instance of freedom in the form of approval, directly related to our relationship with ourselves. Despair evolves in the temporal form of a continuous »actualization.«³³ Kierkegaard's concept of despair is disturbing as it confounds heterogeneous phenomena: How can we judge the life of a happy father or a successful manager as one of despair? Inauthentic despair, where one is unaware of one's eternal self, poses serious difficulties, because the moment of being affected by an event (*Widerfahrnis*) is here absent or present only in the remote background. With what authority can Kierkegaard claim that such a life is desperate? It is crucial to keep in mind that Kierkegaard describes the whole phe-

²⁹ I think it is more appropriate to use the expression »ethical-edifying« point of view, rather than to speak, as Grøn does, of an ethical point of view, since faith is the anchor of Kierkegaard's whole investigation into despair.

³⁰ A. GRØN, »Phenomenology of despair – phenomenology of spirit,« in *Kierkegaard im Kontext des deutschen Idealismus*, ed. A. HUTTER and A. M. RASMUSSEN (Berlin/New York, NY: de Gruyter, 2014), 256.

³¹ M. THEUNISSEN, »Für einen rationaleren Kierkegaard. Zu Einwänden von Arne Grøn und Alastair Hannay,« *Kierkegaard Studies: Yearbook 1996* (Berlin/New York, NY: de Gruyter, 1998), 61–90, here 78.

³² KIERKEGAARD, *Sickness*, 40. Theunissen calls Kierkegaard's definition of God unorthodox. A critique of this idea would go beyond the limits of the present paper.

³³ *Ibid.*, 12.