

A

Game

Called

Life

Brad Musil

Act One

Characters: Brad

Setting: Brad is standing in front of a mirror

Brad: ...In the beginning, there was actually *something*, and, given the overwhelming confusion and incessant anxiety this simple observation has caused me, I hope you can understand why I am in the habit of not saying much myself. Please excuse me for having nothing to say of my own! You see, for as long as I've existed, or at least been aware of existing, there has actually been something instead of *nothing*. Consequently, I have never been able to get myself out of "Why?" "Why?" is my own personal state of despair in which everything becomes a question-mark—a "Why?" *Why* is there something instead of nothing? After asking this question truthfully, it seems to me that one has little left to say unless, of course, he or she knows, or, more often than not, thinks he or she knows, the answer(s) (in which case, I doubt one is being very truthful). It doesn't take a god to realize just how much human beings know, or think they know, the answer(s)—one need only open his or her ears and all kinds of answers are heard screaming and fighting to the death just to be acknowledged first.

And so I hope you will forgive me for my rather weak voice; after all, I do have an excuse—a nagging earache overwhelms me. With this said—that I have nothing much to say—I naturally turn to what others have said. I am a leech; my life requires that I suck blood from someone.

I cannot remember the first time I stumbled upon Soren Kierkegaard, nor should it matter. History is history. However, qualitatively, I will never forget him, for he has

scarred my soul. I was admittedly already sick before I swallowed the Kierkegaardian pill. I knew despair all too well. Yes, I was a conscious observer of my own existence. Perhaps much too conscious. Consequently, I was already aware of the many secrets my eternal friend revealed in his books, and *Sickness Unto Death* provided no exception. Yet, this genius has a knack for unearthing novel treatments of existential issues that are otherwise ignored or tritely dealt with by the monotonous throng of happy (insofar as they are less “conscious”) slaves. In other words, he made me think about existential dilemmas all over again, in a new light. Damn him!

And there I was at some historical point in time, reading him at four in the afternoon. And there I was, reading him at four in the morning. Twelve hours of existence, and perhaps fifty pages of completed reading. Still hours—days—left to go. An understanding of Kierkegaard requires a demanding exchange rate, and a lifetime of exchanging. Needless to say, this happened to be my second time through *Sickness Unto Death*! Ironically, the exchange rate becomes more taxing each time a book of his is revisited (the exchange rate is typically inversely related to the number of times a work is read). One recalls how differently one had conceived the text during one’s previous readings—how confident one was then (and, suspiciously, just as one is now) of how well one thought one had it all figured out—and, quite naturally, one grows confused, doubts sprout like Spring showers, and he finds himself rereading a page again...then again...then again.

Finally, the book is finished, and one flings it to the floor, breathing a long sigh of relief...but only for a moment. Another moment’s reflection reveals a sense of uncertainty—has one truly understood anything? Likewise, I stood sinking in the depths

of despair, staring down at my copy of *Sickness Unto Death*, wondering whether I had in fact understood anything. Had all that time—my existence—been worth anything? Wait, how should I qualify that? What is “worth”? Then, I realized the truth—I must exist nevertheless. I might be a sage, I might be a sadistic killer—but *I* must exist nevertheless. Words, thoughts, feelings, spinach, and even “freedom” will never change this necessity.

With necessity weighing down on me, I decided (this is just a word) to consider the even more overwhelming possibilities regarding what to do next. Then, like a revelation from God, I became conscious of yet another necessity—life (specifically, a brilliant woman employed at a prestigious business (specifically, a university) in a state in a country on a planet in a galaxy in a universe in/on/at...) demanded that I reflect upon the book a little. How wonderful, it was all decided (this is just a word) after all.

So, here I am, about to reflect. Before I do so, I’d just like to forewarn anyone attempting to understand, by reading what follows, what I understand Kierkegaard to be understanding by concepts like existence, consciousness, and freedom that such an attempt might only destroy one’s understanding if I have understood anything about Kierkegaard’s understanding of understanding $((Z^*)+x10=-Lr^2)$. Words have a tendency to self-destruct, much like this last sentence, in any attempt to understand existence. The closest one can come to understanding existence is to understand that one will never understand existence, because one, like words, is only a particular, yet necessary, component of existence, and understanding, by definition, attempts to grasp something in its entirety. Has one understood math if one merely understands addition and subtraction? At best, one merely understands a particular aspect of math. Hence,

existence, in sum, can never be understood by a particular act of existence, by one human being. Thus, I have necessarily understood an infinitely small bit about existence, but I can do no more. Offering that as my disclaimer, I shall now proceed to an understanding (but by no means an “understanding”) of Kierkegaard’s understanding (but by no means “understanding”) of consciousness, self, truth, and freedom.

Let us commence with what makes us human, all *too* human. Kierkegaard begins his fascinating formulation of human consciousness with an ambitious endeavor (especially if one considers the fact that he is a *particular* human being)—to define human beings. To begin with, he says: “A human being is spirit....spirit is self....self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation’s relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation’s relating itself to itself.”¹ Thus, a human being can be conceived of in one of two similar, and just as confusing, ways: 1) as a synthesis of the finite and infinite that relates its own (presumably past) synthesis of the finite and infinite to its own (presumably future) synthesis of the finite and infinite, or 2) as the synthesis’ relating its own (presumably past) synthesis to its own (presumably future) synthesis in the synthesis. Regardless, the process of relating indicates that a human being is never a static something, but continually evolving, continually synthesizing. It is insofar as the human being is more than just a synthesis of the infinite/possible and finite/necessary, insofar as it is a relation of its own syntheses, that the human being is defined (technically, as will be shown shortly, I think it is more than just this), otherwise he is no *human* being at all. The synthesis that demarcates human being emerges when syntheses are related.

¹ Soren Kierkegaard. Concept of Anxiety (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 13.

Indeed, *all* being is a synthesis of the finite and infinite, of necessity and possibility; all of existence is simultaneously something already and in the process of becoming something else, and is, therefore, a synthesis. *Human* being is distinguished from other being in its synthesis of syntheses; this phenomenon of relating syntheses is referred to as “consciousness.”

“Halt,” a dog named Hank barks! “What am I,” Hank woofs?

Well, what shall we say of man’s best friend? Does he merely act, or does he too “relate” acts? And, if he does relate, should we consider him conscious? What are the distinctions between human and animate existence, and animate and inanimate existence? If all existence is a synthesis, how are other living beings (Hank) to be distinguished from non-living beings (my pet rock), and other living beings (Hank) from us (humans)?

Kierkegaard says very little regarding these distinctions. The only hints he gives are that “the possibility of this sickness [despair] is man’s superiority over the animal,”² and “to be unaware of being defined as spirit is precisely what despair is.”³ It seems that these statements can be interpreted in one of two ways. They can indicate: 1) that despair is not possible for animals because they are not defined as spirit (a relation of syntheses), or 2) that despair is not possible for animals because they do not possess the *possibility* (whereas humans do) of being aware that they are defined as spirit, though they are, in fact, spirit. The first alternative implies that animals do not relate syntheses, while the second alternative implies that they relate syntheses, but are completely unaware of doing so (they are *incapable* of this awareness). Accordingly, in the first instance, animals are not spirits, while in the second they are. Well, which is it?

² Kierkegaard, p. 15.

³ Kierkegaard, p. 25.

Anyone asserting that animals are not capable of relating syntheses, at least to some extent, as Kierkegaard might be implying, is suggesting that animals merely exist like rocks, as neither are capable of anything more than simply existing (I say this all under the assumption—and this is a big assumption (I don't know what else it could be)—that I have understood what Kierkegaard means by this *relating* of syntheses). However, it seems to me that animals possess some ability to relate syntheses, if, by relate, we mean to indicate a component of being that exists differently than does dirt, something more than a mere physical existence (like dirt)—hence, some kind of *psychical* existence. Unfortunately, we now drown in the debate regarding what exactly that means—some assert that nothing of the sort exists while others purport that every living thing possesses more than mere physical qualities.⁴ For the time being, let us presume that what appear to be purposeful acts (whether these acts are themselves necessary or free has not been decided (this is just a word) yet) are an indication of psychical existence, an indication of something more than merely physical existence, and, consequently, an indication of relation. For instance, when Hank barks at us for suggesting he is nothing more than dirt, something other than merely physical phenomena (his voice and movement) instigated his bark. When he runs over to us so that we will pet him, something more is needed than merely physical activity (running over to us), whether it is merely *memory* of previous affection or something more. A dog relates to Kierkegaard, but does Kierkegaard relate to dogs?

Kierkegaard could be read as snuffing the life out of all living beings, save human beings. If *human* being and only *human* being is spirit, then dogs are no more than dirt

⁴ Despite his lack of objective credentials, a subjectively meaningful Brendan Mahoney once asserted that every living thing is, to some degree, “conscious.”

because only human beings are said to possess any sort of psychical or non-physical existence. While I doubt that Hank is aware that he is a being consisting of a relation of syntheses, I do believe he in some way relates syntheses nonetheless (poor Hank, he has to be worth more than dirt). In fact, it seems to me that the presence or absence of the relation of syntheses marks the essential difference between animate and inanimate beings, not man and animal. Furthermore, I think Kierkegaard can be read in similar fashion, so long as he is interpreted along the lines of the second interpretation just mentioned.

It seems blatantly obvious that, by whatever term we use to describe it, a qualitative distinction does exist between human beings and animals—human beings are not merely animals (a dog can never be a human being, and this is why the distinction is qualitative and not merely a matter of more or less). Either a being is human, or it is not. Equally clear is the fact that living being in general is qualitatively distinct from non-living being (remember poor Hank). Obviously, animals bring out the distinction much better than do plants, but the distinction seems to be present in each case. Having already delineated this presumed distinction between other living beings and non-living beings, we must uncover a qualitative distinction between other living beings and human beings while remaining true to Kierkegaard.

While all living beings relate syntheses (some more so than others), only human beings can become conscious of this very fact, only human beings can be “self-conscious.” Accordingly, the qualitative difference between Hank and human beings is that Hank will never become aware of his own spirit, of his own relating. While both can be said to be conscious, the consciousness of each is qualitatively distinct because the

one possesses the possibility for self-consciousness (and the sickness, despair, that accompanies it) and the other does not. Kierkegaard never says anything about spirit, or even consciousness, being the exclusive domain of human being. Instead, what is particular to human being is “the possibility of this sickness [of despair],” itself an offspring of the *possibility* of self-consciousness. The possibility of self-consciousness defines a human being, as no other being can possibly be self-conscious.

Now that Hank has quit barking, I would like to summarize what has been said thus far. Existence is *actuality*, a synthesis of the possible and the necessary; every being that exists (and, insofar as it is being, it must exist) is such a synthesis. Particular existing beings, namely all non-human, living beings, relate these syntheses, at least to some extent, but are not, and do not even possess the possibility of becoming, aware of this. Particular existing, living beings, namely human beings, relate these syntheses, and also possess the possibility of becoming aware of doing so.

And now for the awful truth about human beings. As they become more conscious, they become increasingly aware of the truth about existence, that they are a combination of possibility and necessity. For Kierkegaard, knowledge corresponds to existence (the act of existing), and is directly related to the intensity of one’s consciousness. The more one is conscious, the more one knows about existence—the *actual* synthesis of the possible and the necessary. Though Kierkegaard may, up until one’s twenty-third reading, seem to read otherwise, it seems that “intensity” should be read as mirroring an on/off switch, not a thermometer, when it first comes to the subject of consciousness. Initially, the pivotal point in his conception of despair reflects the moment one’s self-conscious is turned “on.” Whether or not consciousness is a matter of

degrees up until that point when one “turn’s on the light” is meaningless in comparison to the real despair one now must face—a budding, blissful despair has now turned into a withered old wise tale. Unfortunately, knowledge suffocates Mr. Despair, whom few know because he doesn’t tend to get out much most of the time, with the pillow of necessity.

Meet Mr. Despair. Mr. Despair’s life went something like what follows: He was born in small town with two older brothers (or sisters, you decide (this is just a word)). He enjoyed life to a certain extent for a while, though even as a child life was unusually confusing at times. As a young adult, he probably busied himself by obsessing over hobbies, working, going to church, and applying (hopelessly) to graduate programs in philosophy. Suddenly, a gun went off in some urban ghetto, a fly landed on a lion in Zimbabwe, and the light turned on in Mr. Despair’s head—he “woke up.”⁵ Mr. Despair is now self-conscious, well aware that his existence is in a state of despair, and that it always has been; “whenever that which triggers his despair occurs, it is immediately apparent that he has been in despair his whole life.”⁶ All his life he had been so wrapped up in what he now considers completely useless affairs. Fine dining, cars, drugs, books, even people. What does all this matter at a time like this? Time? ? To think, he had been existing this whole time, and yet he had never seemed to even realize it. He was/is/will be *existing*! He was/is/will be existing? *Why?* And to think, he had actually worried about things like brushing his teeth and combing his hair. If he missed his mother’s birthday, if anything went wrong (as if this actually occurs), he had despaired—

⁵ For a perfectly subjective fictional depiction of this process of waking up, the reader is referred to the semi-autobiographical novel *Is There Anybody Out There*, by Peter Past, though the reader should prepare him or herself for a novel in need of a few major revisions.

⁶ Kierkegaard, p. 24.

he was unhappy. Similarly, if one of his professors actually liked his work, he was happy. Oh, but that was not despair (it was but not in the way he understood it then⁷) and, likewise, that was certainly not happiness. He had been living a life full of illusion. “The person in [real] despair himself understands that it is a weakness to make the earthly so important, that it is weakness to despair.”⁸ After all, what can “happiness” mean when one can’t figure out why anything exists, let alone why one should have to exist at all—regardless if one is happy or not. Happiness is just a word and words mean less and less at this point in one’s existential development.

Typically, when one hears individuals talking about despair they are referring to something that has *caused* them despair. Kierkegaard argues that in their despairing over something (earthly), they fail to realize what they are despairing *of*—the eternal. When they despair, they despair over the circumstances they wish were different. In doing so, they typically do two things. They fail to realize: 1) that those circumstances are necessary for their particular existence, and 2) that implicit in their despair is a misrelation to the eternal/possible. In other words, in their despair over their particularities and their imagining of “better” possibilities and circumstances, they fail to properly relate their syntheses of the necessary/finite and the possible/infinite.

For Kierkegaard, there are two steps to a “proper” relation and they can only occur after the switch has been turned on—the occurrence of self-consciousness. The first step is recognition of the [real] despair itself, and this coincides with the light being turned on. At this point, one understands what real despair is for the first time—a misrelation of syntheses. The second step is more problematic.

⁷ Kierkegaard, p. 52.

⁸ Kierkegaard, p. 61.

According to Kierkegaard, there are three doors available (though really only two, ultimately only one, and perhaps none) to whoever stands upon this first step.

Recognizing one's despair, one can: 1) despair over despair and not will to be oneself, 2) despair over despair and will to be oneself, or 3) in being oneself and willing to be oneself rest transparently in God (faith)⁹. The third option (or, perhaps, lack thereof) is the culminating step to a proper relation of one's syntheses of the possible and the necessary. As will be shown, it appears that after one's light bulb is initially turned on (self-consciousness occurs), it may then grow brighter with intensity in the same manner that a thermometer rises in *degrees*.

Opening door number one, one may, having already lit up, despair over one's despair nevertheless, essentially because one wants to be rid of oneself. Instead of despairing over something earthly as one did before one became self-conscious, one despairs over oneself, over one's very own act of existing as a synthesis of syntheses between the finite and the infinite. Though one has an inkling of the eternal (or else one wouldn't really be self-conscious), one simply cannot overcome the fact that one necessarily is what one is; one is chained to one's own chains and dwells on the fact all day long.

Or, swinging open door number two, one may, after appropriately being turned on, despair over one's despair by willing to be oneself. In this instance, one is "very close to the truth," and "there is a rise in the consciousness of the self."¹⁰ Here, one's "despair is conscious of itself as an act."¹¹ In other words, while one entering door number one had a vague notion of the eternal, one who enters door number two is

⁹ Kierkegaard, pp. 14, 49, 82.

¹⁰ Kierkegaard, p. 67.

¹¹ Kierkegaard, p. 67.

completely aware of the fact that one is just as possible as one is necessary. Here, as opposed to one entering door number one, one's problem is an overestimation of the possible; one gets lost in possibility and loses sight of the fact that one is limited by necessity. One wants "to determine what he will have or not have in his concrete self," but, in doing so, one "recognizes no power over itself," thereby "severing the self from any relation to a power that has established it."¹² In what Kierkegaard calls an act of "defiance," one, having recognized the helplessness of existence (despair), refuses a plea for help. In disregarding one aspect of the truth—the necessity of one's being—one frolics around with impossible possibilities, and is "always building only castles in the air, is only shadowboxing."¹³ In a sense, then, one is willing not to be oneself, but, instead, an impossibility.

Finally, door number three reveals the "right road to faith," a trek that will insist "the self must be broken in order to become itself."¹⁴ Faith is continually juxtaposed with despair throughout *Sickness Unto Death*.¹⁵ Despair is the self's misrelation between syntheses of the possible and the necessary, and a state that reflects the self's implicit imperfection—"the self's necessity"¹⁶. If despair is the self's misrelation, and faith is the opposite of despair, then faith must employ the *correct* relation. Well, what is the magic formula, what is this correct relation? Again, "the formula for faith: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it."¹⁷

¹² Kierkegaard, p. 68.

¹³ Kierkegaard, p. 69.

¹⁴ Kierkegaard, p. 65.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, pp. 14, 38-39, 49, 82.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, p. 54.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, p. 49.

This formula for faith is in effect a submission. One “gives up.” One realizes that it is not possible for one to overcome despair; “one understands his downfall, humanly speaking.”¹⁸ Insofar as one exists, one despairs, as one is implicitly limited and, thus, always imperfect. God, on the other hand, is unlimited (unnecessary?), and “with God everything is possible.”¹⁹ Once one realizes that “there is no possibility” (I believe Kierkegaard is merely referring to the possibility of overcoming despair in saying this), then the question becomes whether one “will believe that for God everything is possible, that is, whether he will *believe*.”²⁰ In other words, we arrive at a paradox and a temptation to submit.

Thus far, existence has been described as an *actual* synthesis of the finite/limited/necessary and the infinite/free/possible. Yet, the only “antidote” for despair—the recognition of the imperfection of existence insofar as it is limited—is the belief in an existence that is not limited and that, consequently, cannot even be understood to exist in the first place? Quite right—“this is the very formula for losing the understanding; to believe is indeed to lose the understanding in order to gain God.”²¹

Up to this point, we have established an understanding of Kierkegaard’s understanding of consciousness, and its relation to other important concepts like self-consciousness, existence, despair, and faith. As consciousness, specifically self-consciousness, intensifies, so too does despair. One can ultimately either despair over this despair, and, by not willing to be oneself, continue to despair, or one can give up—

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, p. 39.

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, p. 38.

²⁰ Kierkegaard, p. 38.

²¹ Kierkegaard, p. 38.

one can relinquish one's understanding and "*believe* his downfall is impossible."²² In doing so (giving up), the self is finally said to "relate itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it."²³

The best way I can capture the intensification of self-consciousness that is supposed to sprout in all human beings, a phenomenon we pessimists can only insist, as does Kierkegaard, occurs relatively never, is as a painful disclosing of existence for what it is—a tragic play, in which a human being plays a role—a character—but as a puppet, who, under a previous illusion of freedom, thought that he or she was an actor (that he or she in *any way had control over his or her acting*), and who now, thanks to that whisper from something outside him or herself, *self-consciousness*, really knows the sole truth—that, given Kierkegaard's arguments, *reasonably* he or she is unfree, nothing but a puppet. In fact, truthfully, he or she is not even free when it comes to "the truth" or the occurrence, and intensification, of self-consciousness; their thoughts are whispers for which they have no control (more on this later).

And yet, we are told to have faith that none of it is as it appears to be. We understand existence as best we can by means of this self-consciousness, revealing all our previous illusory concepts (despair, existence, etc.) for what they really are—concepts—and now we are informed that our understanding of "understanding" is itself inadequate—we must lose our "understanding." But, what happens when we do this?

²² Kierkegaard, p. 39.

²³ Kierkegaard, p. 14.

An Intermission

*A Refreshment: "He wants to begin a little earlier than do other men, not at and with the beginning, but 'in the beginning'."*²⁴

“Despair is a qualification of the spirit, is related to the eternal, and thus has something of the eternal in its dialectic.”²⁵ There are essentially two acts in a play we can either call “Despair” or “A Game Called ‘Life’”—it really makes no difference—and the second act is always shorter. During the intermission, one lights up, and becomes “self-conscious.” During the first act, one sits uncomfortably in one’s seat (it really was a rather late night last night...I’m starving...why did I agree to come to this stupid play—I hate plays...is Ramirez batting .366 or .367?...I can’t believe I was rejected to all 338 schools...) and occasionally passes gas, but does little else. Intermission rolls around and presents one with the opportunity to walk, talk, and mock. Suddenly, BOOM...the whisper is heard. Inside one’s mind, a thought occurs: a thought occurs. Huh? Outwardly, nothing appears to be happening, but internally all hell is breaking loose. With a tug on the shirt, one is informed that act two is about to begin, and one somehow manages to make it back into the theater. Taking one’s seat, one reacts to one’s newfound existential tension for the entire second act. One’s eyes remain closed for the vast majority, and more than a few individuals sitting nearby, having recognized this fact, heave sighs of disgust. Inside one’s head, on the stage of his own private theater, absurd possibilities perform their roles, and the play unfolds...

²⁴ Kierkegaard, p. 68.

²⁵ Kierkegaard, p. 24.

Act Two (Don't worry, "the second act is always shorter")

Characters: Brad, Eternal Soren, and Peter Past

Setting: Brad is standing in front of a mirror

Brad: According to Kierkegaard's admirable conception of consciousness and existence, I can only conclude that human consciousness is a state of despair, a poisonous pill, and self-consciousness a flirt with suicide.

Eternal Soren: I've had enough of your incessant attempts to create long, elaborate analogies.

Brad: You're one to talk.

Eternal Soren: What's all this talk about consciousness and suicide? Don't you realize that a human being can only exist insofar as he or she is conscious—

Brad: You mean *self-conscious*?

Eternal Soren: Either/or.

Brad: But doesn't this imply that human beings who are not self-conscious don't exist? I mean, what is all this murky talk regarding authentic existence and acquiring more self all about?

Peter Past: Why don't we get historical about it? Frederick Ferre, in his article entitled *Existentialism And Persuasion*, expresses the exact same problem, arguing that, "the phrase itself, 'authentic existence', is a peculiar one: existence is existence and neither 'authentic' nor unauthentic."²⁶

Brad: Yeah, *either/or!*

²⁶ Frederick Ferre. Existentialism And Persuasion. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 12 (47), p. 158.

Peter Past: However, Ferre goes on to argue that it is important not “to overlook the important persuasive function of such existential utterances.”²⁷ Hence, Kierkegaard’s definitions are “designed to direct our favourable attention to that feature of our experiences which is most relevant to questions of our ‘infinite concern’.”²⁸

Brad: Well, that leads me back to my original problem: why are consciousness and self-consciousness, along with the subjective truth about existence, good things? One lives comfortably, perhaps with occasional ups and downs, but comfortably nonetheless, until one hears the whisper itself—self-consciousness—or someone else spoils one’s fun by revealing the essential nature of all kinds of subjective truths, and, ultimately, “the subjective truth.” Well, what then? Nothing but sheer torment, existential tension if you will. I want a *good* reason. I suppose that what counts as good depends on one’s personal preference (truth or happiness). Truthfully, I prefer happiness, but, unfortunately, the truth has already suffocated any possibility of that.

Peter Past: Similarly I must admit, I have thought twice, and more than once, about distributing my novel—*Is There Anybody Out There?*—to friends. In hindsight, after a good friend went through a period of depression and binge drinking *because* of the things he became conscious of while reading the novel, I also wonder whether consciousness might be a hard pill to swallow after all (at least for those in pursuit of a happy life).

Eternal Soren: But don’t you get it? No one is ever happy to begin with. Sticking with Brad’s dichotomy, happiness is an illusion and, hence, not the truth. Even when Brad considered himself happy, he was really in a state of despair.

²⁷ Ferre, p. 158.

²⁸ Ferre, p. 156.

Brad: Who said anything about *ever* being happy? At any rate, if people *feel* happy, why deflate them? Who cares if they have understood anything as long as they can smile? What is the point of existential tension revealing “the subjective truth” that culminates in a big, fat paradox?

Peter Past: Because, “to be human is to think existentially.”²⁹ Insofar as one is a human being at all, one must experience existential tension. Remember, “existence and thinking about existence are as different as day and night.”³⁰

Brad: None of that answers my question. What is the incentive to “be human?” Why should I care if my being resembles that of a more “inferior” being? Really, what I’m asking is why any type of being is more superior or inferior to any other type. And again, if we do insist on making a qualitative judgment of this sort, why is human being, insofar as it is conscious of the truth and consequently in a state of despair, considered superior rather than inferior to other beings?

Eternal Soren: Enough, enough. Your finitude is creeping me out. I have your answer: “self-consciousness is decisive with regard to the self. The more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self.”³¹

Peter Past: And, “the self is freedom.”³²

Brad: Finally, we’re getting somewhere. Before we go any further, I want to remind both of you that, “the human self is a derived, established relation,”³³ lest you both commit an act of defiance, which “recognizes no power over itself.”³⁴ Moreover, “we are

²⁹ Harry S. Broudy. *Kierkegaard On Indirect Communication*. *The Journal Of Philosophy*, 58 (9), p. 232.

³⁰ Bernard Bykhovski. *A Philosophy Of Despair*. *Philosophy And Phenomenological Research* 34 (2), p. 188.

³¹ Kierkegaard, p. 29.

³² Kierkegaard, p. 29.

³³ Kierkegaard, p. 13.

³⁴ Kierkegaard, p. 68

merely images and artistic projections for the true author...we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art....our consciousness of our own significance hardly differs from that which the soldiers painted on canvas have of the battle represented on it.”³⁵

Eternal Soren: Anything else?

Brad: “But don’t you get it?”³⁶ We’re derived! We can’t be free. Again, despair occurs to varying extremes, but is ultimately characterized by an awareness of the act of existence and its implicit restriction (by limitations couched in necessity) of possibility. Hence, insofar as one exists, one is not Free. To be truly free requires unlimited possibility. But, existence necessarily entails necessity, otherwise it is not *actually* anything, but merely possible. What is merely possible is nothing. Enter either/or. Either we can exist, but as necessarily limited and not free, or we can be (?) free and not exist (necessarily nothing). Unfortunately, either way, one cannot *be* free. Existence is limited because of the very fact that it *is* something. Freedom is free because it *is not*—not even freedom *is* free. Freedom is nothing. The truth: either exist without freedom, or do not exist freely. Hmm... The truth: there is no choice when one exists because one has no choice, and there is no choice when one does not exist because one does not exist to make a choice (which does not exist). The truth: choice does not exist; *freedom* does not exist.

Eternal Soren: But doesn’t freedom exist as a possibility? Mustn’t we *believe* that it does?

³⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche. The Birth Of Tragedy (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 52.

³⁶ Brad Musil. A Game Called Life, p. 18.

Brad: If you're asking if things would look bleak in a world with no freedom—yes, necessarily. That's why I cannot understand the urgency to unveil freedom for what it is—an illusion that pacifies despair. In addition, the further one's defense of freedom is pushed back into possibility, the more one should become aware of the very fact that one is actually not free, necessarily. The land of the possible is quite possibly the most crowded land of all. Some of its infinite inhabitants might possibly be, though not necessarily, and certainly not actually, three-headed, flying purple elephants, urgledorkles, Brad Musil running a marathon with his legs tied behind his eyes, Freedom, and...God...wordsumph...?...??...????

Real despair occurs the instant a human being is actually aware of this truth—that he or she lacks the eternal/freedom. As consciousness increases, despair increases (you falsely advertise an increase in “will,” “self,” and “freedom,” while I merely advertise the truth—despair). Freedom is an illusion. Our error in regarding it as something more is three-fold: 1) the majority of us never even think about it seriously enough to question it to begin with, or 2) the minority who do reflect on it either: a) overestimate the relationship between psychological activity/consciousness and will, or b) are impious toward the god of reason/understanding. You, Eternal Soren, seem to be guilty of both the either and the or in the second case.

Eternal Soren: I'll give you 2b, but why are you accusing me of 2a?

Brad: To repeat, “the more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self.”³⁷ A pleasant sounding trinity, but what does it all mean? In what sense does consciousness indicate will? When we traditionally speak of will, don't we infer some intention or purposefulness, insofar as it is said to be

³⁷ Kierkegaard, p. 29.

present? Assuming that we do, how does consciousness imply intention at all, let alone indicate a direct ratio to it? I do not possess will merely because I am self-conscious and am *aware* of my own relating of syntheses. Furthermore, while I may be aware of the possible because I am self-conscious, this does not necessarily indicate, as many argue, that I can determine, or decide (this is just a word), the possibilities I will *actualize*—

Peter Past: That is precisely what Richard M. Griffith argues in one of his historical articles. After hypothetically deciding that he would “choose to choose no more,” he discovers that he “was incessantly redeciding not to decide.”³⁸ For instance, after ending a phone call, he walked “back to the chair and froze in mid-step. Should I sit or should I stand?”³⁹

Brad: Peter, what a wonderful example. Regardless of which possibility he actualized—sitting down or standing up—can he be said to have determined the act? I have pondered this many times. Half the time it sounds convincing. But then, a thought occurs to me: a thought occurs to me. Possibilities occur to me, but from where? Then, I realize that thought may be just as determined as “finite” motion, though thought is given notoriously preferential treatment by human beings seeking a meaning by means of their exaggerated (maybe, maybe not) superiority over all other beings.

Truthfully, I’m afraid that our entire being might be determined, and that we are each just character slaves for some demented author. Just the other day it dawned on me—I don’t like spinach. *Why?* What is that all about? Furthermore, *why* do I have brown hair and, most importantly, why do I incessantly think about incessantly thinking about thinking?

³⁸ Richard M. Griffith. *The Reality Of An “Illusion”—A Psychology Of “As-If” Free Will*. *Philosophy And Phenomenological Research*, 23(2), pp. 232-233.

³⁹ Griffith, p. 232.

But, back to the example. A possibility presents itself: one can sit down on the chair. Now, let us suppose one has actually sat down. To begin with, we must raise the before-mentioned problem regarding the emergence of possibility from what may as well be called an abyss. Sure, some are inspired by immediate physical surroundings (one sees the chair and the possibility emerges), but this actually suggests the presence of external influences and *determining* factors. Regardless, there are some possibilities that, for all intents and purposes, spontaneously occur in the minds of human beings, and often against their will (if I may be permitted to speak loosely)—in fact the possibility of failure haunts me right now. A passage from Peter’s novel captures the point rather well:

And then I couldn’t help but wonder *why* I think the way *I* do. Pretend for a moment that I had a sudden thought occur to me that might explain something never before adequately accounted for. Why did I just happen to have this great thought that will now certainly gain me immortal fame? Why do “brilliant” thoughts emerge when they do? Why did the theory of relativity occur to Einstein? Is personal thought merely the manifestation of something else, some other indescribable?⁴⁰

Thus, I would argue that the possibilities presented to human beings are undetermined by them.

Eternal Soren: Fine, fine. But, isn’t will a matter of actualizing the possibilities presented to an individual, regardless of who or what determined or presented the possibilities? Isn’t will a reflection of *acttualization*, and not a spokesperson for one’s creative imagination?

⁴⁰ Past, p. 101.

Brad: Well put. However, how can one be sure that everything is not decisively determined from the outset? Not only are all possibilities predetermined, but all actualizations of possibility are as well. For example, perhaps my decision (this is just a word) to say what I just said was a necessary possibility, and, thus, a necessary act, equally necessary at the time of the big bang as it was just now.

Eternal Soren: Well, what if?

Brad: You tell me, you're the eternal one—let me in on the secret.

Eternal Soren: I'm not eternal; I'm just a figment of your imagination! You created me.

Brad: Yeah, I suppose your right. If only it were possible for me to actualize you!

Eternal Soren, tell me once more, how is one *willing to be oneself* if one rests transparently in the power that established it?

Eternal Soren: Essentially, one chooses to accept what one must be.

Brad: With all due respect, can that make sense? Can one *choose* what is *necessary*?

Eternal Soren: No. One believes “by virtue of the absurd.”⁴¹ In fact, it is “extraordinarily stupid...to defend Christianity,”⁴² and we should not “admire and praise him who pretends to be able to comprehend Christianity.”⁴³

Brad: Interesting...I feel like, and I don't think I'm alone here, that your entire book was an attempt to comprehend Christianity—an attempt to comprehend the incomprehensible. I'm awfully confused now. Were you trying to make the incomprehensible comprehensible and understandable? Can we even say anything about the incomprehensible? By simply calling it, “incomprehensible” haven't we implicitly attempted to make it comprehensible (insofar as it is understood precisely as

⁴¹ Kierkegaard, p. 71.

⁴² Kierkegaard, p. 87.

⁴³ Kierkegaard, p. 99.

incomprehensible)? Actually, it seems like your entire philosophy, insofar as it reflects subjective truth, is better off unsaid. Any attempt to understand it will never do it justice.

Eternal Soren: Well said. So, you want the truth regarding my impetus to write? Well, some truths are better off unsaid.

Peter Past: “As to why the subjective thinker has to communicate at all, Kierkegaard is neither clear nor convincing,”⁴⁴ and he probably intended “to bring about certain states in the recipient by means of communication.”⁴⁵

Brad: So that’s the objective opinion these days?

Peter Past: “Yes.”⁴⁶

Brad: Well, I’ve had enough of existence for now, and the seemingly futile attempts to understand it. I’m tired of playing the game for the time being. I’m conscious enough to realize I’d rather not be conscious. At this point, what else can life be but a dance with Freud’s death instinct?

Everyday, billions of human beings go about existing on a tiny speck of reality called “Earth,” a speck that is barely detectable in the grand scheme of space—a space that is, itself, expanding infinitely into...? Everyday, only an infinitely small fraction, perhaps .00103% of these people, will contemplate the seriousness of this very fact, and most of these unfortunate few bear the weight of an unbearable sense of helplessness thereafter. These same people are plagued with other similar thoughts and, though their friends and family might urge them to do otherwise, they simply cannot stop thinking about existential crises, those existential question marks that emerge in every aspect of their human life—questions about life itself, so to speak. While this questioning may,

⁴⁴ Broudy, p. 228.

⁴⁵ Broudy, p. 229.

⁴⁶ Musil, pp. 3, 21, 25, 26.

itself, be detrimental to life itself (it's hard to put food on the table when you can't get outside of your head), this fraction is so overwhelmed by questions regarding the very process of life that very little time—whatever that is—passes by in which these questions are not swarming around inside their minds—whatever those are—wrestling amongst one another and fighting for the undivided attention of the mind. Yet, in the end, *I* always reach the same conclusion about life, despite countless attempts to understand it differently: one cannot understand it. Does anyone else have this all figured out? Do Christians, Taoists, and eighty-year old Buddhist monks have all the answers, *really*? And, if not, at what point do we just stop kidding ourselves?

Life is a game. Some play it competitively; some could care less if they play at all. Thousands of rules, but why? Who made the game board, and why do I have to be blue when I would like to be fluorescent yellow? Yes, life is a game, and a game called life. It makes no sense, but we play it anyway, everyday, over and over again. In the beginning, there was actually *something*, and, given the overwhelming confusion and incessant anxiety this simple observation has caused me, I hope you can understand why I am in the habit of not saying much myself...