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## Trauma Reaction in the Light of Kierkegaard's Concept of Self

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### Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to explore the theoretical and philosophical connection between trauma reaction and Søren Kierkegaard's concept of self. This philosophical exploration into Kierkegaard's ideas will include a case evaluation. Using a fictitious case study from the unfortunately real event of the Marchioness disaster, this paper examines how Kierkegaard's concept of self can help to conceptualize trauma reaction via immediate man and despair. This paper will also address further areas for development within Kierkegaard's theory as related to this specific case.*

### The story of Max

Someone in despair despairs over something. So, for a moment, it seems, but only for a moment. That same instant the true despair shows itself, or despair in its true guise. In despairing over something he was really despairing over himself, and he wants now to be rid of himself. (Kierkegaard, 1944, p. 49)

Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy provides depth and understanding to humanity's struggle to understand itself. To explore the adaptability of these ideas, this paper attempts to understand trauma reaction in light of Kierkegaard's concept of self. This will be achieved through the philosophical exploration of a fictional case based on unfortunate real life events.

The journey begins with Max: an ordinary man with a good job working in advertising, a happy family life and a large circle of friends. This ordinary life is dramatically changed when Max has the traumatic experience of a life-threatening event. Max is involved with a boat-sinking disaster when a large group of his friends went on a party cruise called the Marchioness. Unexpectedly, the back of the boat was hit by a large dredger and the boat capsized. There were about 130 people on board and 51 drowned. Max survived the accident but nearly drowned as well. This was incredibly traumatic but fortunately for Max, none of his family were on the boat when it sank. Unfortunately, Max witnessed the death of several of his friends on the Marchioness that day.

Following this trauma, Max began to experience classic symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Clinically Max was experiencing symptoms resulting from the trauma; he had intrusive thoughts and avoidance behaviour. In addition, Max also began to display significant anger which emerged both in the home and at work. Max himself saw this rage as a dramatic personality change. Max still sees himself as a "victim" of that famous boating accident and this forms part of his self identify, as a badge of honour. However the consequence of his unstable mood has been disastrous. Max and his wife divorced and he chooses not to spend time with his old friends because "they don't understand". When his friends ask him casually about his well-being, Max gets very irritated. Max will often say "I can't explain it to them." He lost his partner, lost his friends and eventually quit his job because he could not focus at work. Max eventually spends most of his time focusing on recovering from the disaster. He initiated a support group for the Marchioness disaster and become active in the supporting of others who suffered great loss from this trauma.

*1. How should we conceptualize this case in the light of philosophical literature regarding Kierkegaard's concept of self?*

## *2. Is there further development within Kierkegaard's theory regarding this case?*

### **Kierkegaard's concept of self**

Søren Kierkegaard's concept of self and corrupted human nature is a foundational theory within existential psychotherapy (Yalom, 1980; Chung & Hill, 1993). The foundational principle for the Kierkegaardian self is not to see it related to the totality of things, but as the individual implying subjectivity (Kierkegaard, 1941; Chung & Hill, 1993). Kierkegaard envisioned the despairing situation of a person being completely unconscious of having his own self (Kierkegaard, 1941; Chung & Hill, 1993). He called this situation a state of "weakness-despair"; such despair is passive whereby people cannot help but be influenced by the external environment (Kierkegaard, 1941). These people immediately latch onto others and imitate their wishes and desires. This in turn prevents them from developing any depth of understanding of the significance of life. Kierkegaard called these people "immediate men", signifying a life lived by immediacy and without any type of in-depth reflection. They cannot recognize their own self through introspection; instead they only recognize that they have a self dictated by the external circumstances of the outside world (Kierkegaard, 1941).

According to Kierkegaard the time comes when some people are conscious of their despair at not having their own self (Kierkegaard, 1941). There are those that can become conscious of this despair in conjunction with not having their own sense of self. This causes them to tumble further into their despair because the "despairers" are now feeling that this weakness is determined by external circumstances. This is quite problematic because they find themselves being immersed in it and cannot escape from it, trapped. The cycle continues when instead of escaping the situation, they find themselves in yet another despairing circumstance, all the while insisting on being themselves but actually unaware of having their own self. This form of despair over one's own weakness can be differentiated from the original weakness-despair. In this case they understand their weakness to be controlled by the external world and yet they find themselves being completely absorbed and imprisoned by it (Kierkegaard, 1941; Chung & Hill, 1993).

Despite this cycle of entrapment, there are those that recognize this and determine to be themselves. They stand against it in defiance by attempting to create the self they choose rather than one chosen by the external i.e. the immediate self. According to Kierkegaard, despite their best efforts, the immediate self is always lurking in the background and is a destined concrete self (Kierkegaard, 1941). Such consciousness ignites more despair and they suffer the pain from being unable to remove or separate from their concrete self, "defiance despair". This consciousness consequently makes people manifest anger and rage, emotions which arise from knowing they are in an impossible, inescapable situation. Unable to find freedom from the concrete self while desperately trying to create their own self.

Kierkegaard describes people who live aesthetically as having no control, living for any moment that provides entertainment and excitement. They have no commitments, and are fickle minded, changing according to their temporary mood. As a result their lives tend to lack continuity, focus and stability, allowing any and all happenings to govern their behaviour. Without unity or coherency, they never discover what they should be (Kierkegaard, 1941; Chung & Hill, 1993).

*How should we conceptualize this case in the light of philosophical literature? For*

*example can Kierkegaard's concept of self help us understand the processes going on in this story?*

Max is experiencing a sense of weakness-despair. It is passive whereby he can't stop being affected by the traumatic circumstance. He is helplessly determined by the trauma (which is the external outer world). He lives by the external and allows these factors to affect and indeed govern his own behaviour. He is not able to establish a coherent pattern and arrive at some unity in his life. That implies he is lacking self consciousness.

This happens unconsciously; Kierkegaard calls this type of person the immediate man, immediacy occurring without reflection (Kierkegaard, 1941). Max cannot recognize his own self but only recognizes his self in relation to the traumatic experience. In this immediacy situation he is experiencing what Kierkegaard called *weakness-despair* (Kierkegaard, 1941).

According to Kierkegaard, there will be a time that Max becomes aware of this weakness-despair. This traumatised self is not really himself. He falls into another despairing situation whereby he insists on remaining his traumatised self. He realises that he is stuck in this and this has been happening for a while. The traumatised self is persistent and has been with Max for a considerable amount of time. This second despair is over one's own weakness, which is different from the original weakness despair, because Max understands that it is a weakness to be determined by the outer world (i.e. the trauma) and yet finds himself being deeply absorbed in it and cannot escape from it.

Max realises this and determines to create his own self. He wants to come out of the traumatised self. He chooses to become himself. He does not want to be absorbed in this immediate man, the traumatised self. Kierkegaard sees this as defiance as Max wants to rule over and create the self he wants to be. He does not want to be this immediate man, the traumatised self. Kierkegaard says this immediate traumatised self is always present and is a "concrete self" in his own destiny. But knowing this makes him despair even more; Kierkegaard calls this his defiance despair. Max consequently suffers the pain of being unable to escape from his concrete self. This pain manifests as anger and rage. These emotions arise from knowing himself to be in the impossible situation in which he cannot escape from his own concrete self while he chooses to create his own self.

Kierkegaard's concept of self helps us understand Max and his struggle. Max says he has a personality change; it is his new traumatised self. He cannot relate to his partner and friends with his old self and cannot relate to them with his traumatised self. They cannot share in this experience with him. He is absorbed in his traumatised self and cannot fulfil even his job responsibilities. He relates to people even in his job with a different self, a traumatised self.

Max develops a support group for victims of the Marchioness disaster and in doing so attempts to create his own self. This does not really succeed and once again he becomes the immediate man. Max is influenced by others who share the identity of being traumatised, and stays absorbed. Therefore when he tries to create his own self, he is unable to break free of the immediate man. The implication is that the support group only perpetuates being stuck in the traumatised self/ immediate man. The support group can be a maladaptive coping strategy because it allows him to be absorbed in this even more. However, Max's involvement in the support group is supported by the literature on post-traumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). Although Kierkegaard would not see it as helpful, post-traumatic growth states that

people search for meaning and create a purpose in life from their trauma (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999).

*Attempting to address the limitations embedded within Kierkegaard's theory regarding this case*

One limitation of Kierkegaard's theory is the question: how does one become *suddenly* aware that one is stuck in the traumatised self i.e. the immediate self? How does someone choose to become, in Kierkegaard's words, reflective and not ignorant? Our hypothesis is that it takes time to develop a sense of traumatised self and the pains of being absorbed in the traumatised self makes Max become aware. It is the pain of the trauma itself that becomes the trigger. Post-traumatic growth emphasizes finding purpose in life as a result of lessons learned after a trauma (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). The reason that Max is aware of this absorbed traumatised self is that the trauma's pain triggers growth. It takes time to develop a sense of traumatised self and the pain of being absorbed in the traumatised self makes Max become aware. It is a developmental process after the trauma that creates a traumatised self. Then the resulting pain of the traumatised self creates this awareness.

Secondly, what gives people the determination to choose to create their own self? Perhaps there is a need to move away from the here and now and instead focus on the past. Can attachment style be the factor that gives people the energy to choose to become themselves? For example, research done by Hauck et al. (2007) has examined the significance of parental bonding as a resilience factor following trauma. In female rape victims the perception of having less affective parents was correlated with severity of acute stress disorder, and the latter was more prevalent in participants with less affectionate and controlling fathers (Hauck et al., 2007). This research shows perceived lack of parental support to be associated with clinical impairment. Bowlby (1951) found that when parents are not overprotective or overbearing, children are encouraged to exercise their own autonomy. This autonomy becomes internalized and is a useful resource for later life. One could argue that internalised autonomy helps victims find the motivation to face the trauma by trying to escape it by creating a nontraumatised self.

Therefore, one potential criticism is that Kierkegaard does not take into account past experience. His emphasis on the here and now does not acknowledge the history of the immediate man. Questions arise when we consider what gives people the energy to choose to become themselves. Is it plausible that parental bonding gives people the energy to choose to become themselves? Max's past or in this case his attachment style shapes his immediate man. If the literature on parental bonding is correct, certain attachment styles help people cope with trauma and be more autonomous.

### **Kierkegaard's possible response**

Kierkegaard might counter with the criticism that internalised autonomy gives you the urge to act and create a non-traumatised self, but you still are unable to escape defiance-despair. Attachment style is one way of explaining why some people can be more "existential". Some people are more likely to accept the urge to try. It's important to note that Kierkegaard might see a way out of this vicious cycle by placing the needs of Max elsewhere. He emphasised that the religious phase is crucial. Religion is a desire to embrace transcendence, abandoning human rationality and to

go beyond our understanding. This is the only way to escape defiance despair. Human rationality does not help escape defiance despair, but in Kierkegaard, seeking God is the ultimate trajectory (Kierkegaard, 1941; 1944). Is that however another delusion? Do you stop focusing on the self and instead on some delusion of God? When you find meaning higher than yourself, then that meaning becomes more important than dwelling and identifying yourself by reference to a trauma. Kierkegaard would counter that even if it is a delusion, it is a useful delusion.

If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe. (Kierkegaard, 1999, p. 129).

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