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*International Kierkegaard Commentary:
The Sickness unto Death*

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Sigla

- CI *The Concept of Irony*. Trans. Lee Capel. New York: Harper & Row, 1966; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968. (*Om Begrebet Ironi*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1841.)
- EO *Either/Or*. Volume 1. Trans. David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson. Volume 2. Trans. Walter Lowrie. Second ed. rev. Howard A. Johnson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971. (*Enten-Eller*, 1-2, ed. Victor Eremita, 1843.)
- ED *Edifying Discourses*, 1-4. Trans. David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943-1946. (*Opbyggelige Taler*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1843, 1844.)
- FT *Fear and Trembling*. Trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983. (*Frygt og Bæven*, by Johannes De Silentio, 1843.)
- R *Repetition*. Trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983. (*Gjentagelsen*, by Constantinus Constantius, 1843.)
- PF *Philosophical Fragments* and *Johannes Climacus*. Trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985. (*Philosophiske Smuler*, by Johannes Climacus, ed. S. Kierkegaard, 1844; "Johannes Climacus eller *De omnibus dubitandum est*," written 1842-1843, unpubl., *Papirer* IV B 1.)
- CA *The Concept of Anxiety*. Trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980. (*Begrebet Angest*, by Vigilius Haufniensis, ed. S. Kierkegaard, 1844.)

- TCS *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions [Thoughts on Crucial Situations in Human Life]*. Trans. David F. Swenson, ed. Lillian Marvin Swenson. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1941. (*Tre Taler ventænkte Leiligheder*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1845.)
- SLW *Stages on Life's Way*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940. (*Stadier paa Livets Vej*, ed. Hilarius Bogbinder, 1845.)
- CUP *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press for American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1941. (*Afsluttende uvidenskabelig Efterskrift*, by Joahannes Climacus, ed. S. Kierkegaard, 1846.)
- TA *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age. A Literary Review*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978. (*En literair Anmeldelse. To Tidsaldre*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1846.)
- OAR *On Authority and Revelation, The Book on Adler*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955. (*Bogen om Adler*, written 1846-1847, unpubl., *Papirer VII² B 235; VIII² B 1-27.*)
- PH *Edifying Discourses in Various Spirits*. (*Opbyggelige Taler i forskjellige Aand*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1847.) Part One, *Purity of Heart ["En Leiligheds-Tale"]*. Second ed. Trans. Douglas Steere. New York: Harper, 1948.
- GS Part Three and Part Two: *The Gospel of Suffering and The Lilies of the Field ["Lidelsernes Evangelium" and "Liljerne paa Marken og Himlens Fugle"]*. Trans. David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1948.
- WL *Works of Love*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, New York: Harper & Row, 1962. (*Kjerlighedens Gjerninger*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1847.)
- C *The Crisis [and a Crisis] in the Life of an Actress*. Trans. Stephen Crites. New York: Harper & Row, 1967. (*Krisen og en Krise i en Skuespillerindes Liv*, by Inter et Inter. *Fædrelandet*, 188-91, 24-27 July 1848.)

- CD *Christian Discourses*, including *The Lilies of the Field and the Birds of the Air* and *Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1940. (*Christelige Taler*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1848; *Lilien paa Marken og Fuglen under Himlen*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1849; *Tre Taler ved Altergangen om Fredagen*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1849.)
- SUD *The Sickness unto Death*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980. (*Sygdommen til Doden*, by Anti-Climacus, ed. S. Kierkegaard, 1849.)
- TC *Training in Christianity*, including "The Woman Who Was a Sinner." Trans. Walter Lowrie. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1941; rpt.: Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944. (*Indovelse i Christendom*, by Anti-Climacus, ed. S. Kierkegaard, 1850; *En opbyggelig Tale*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1850.)
- AN *Armed Neutrality and An Open Letter*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1968. (*den bevæbnede Neutralitet*, written 1848-1849, publ. 1965; *Foranledigt ved en Yttring af Dr. Rudelbach mig betræffende, Fædrelandet*, no. 26, 31 January 1851.)
- PV *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, including the appendix "The Single Individual," Two 'Notes' Concerning My Work as an Author," and *On My Work as an Author*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1939. (*Synspunktet for min Forfatter-Virksomhed*, by S. Kierkegaard, posthumously published 1859. *Om min Forfatter-Virksomhed*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1851.)
- FSE *For Self-Examination*. Trans. Howard v. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1940. (*Til Selvprovelse*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1851.)
- JFY *Judge for Yourself!* including *For Self-Examination, Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* (trans. David Swenson) and *The Unchangeableness of God* (trans. Walter Lowrie). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944. (*Dommer Selv!* by S. Kierkegaard, 1852; *to Taler ved Altergangen om Fredagen*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1851; *Guds Uforanderlighed*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1855.)

- KAUC *Kierkegaard's Attack upon "Christendom," 1854-1855*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944. (*Bladartikler I-XXI*, by S. Kierkegaard, *Fædrelandet*, 1854-1855; *Dette skal siges; saa være det da sagt*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1855; *Øieblikket*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1-9, 1855; 10, 1905; *Hvad Kristus dommer om officiel Christendom*, by S. Kierkegaard, 1855.)
- JSK *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*. Trans. Alexander Dru. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1938. (From *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, I-XI³ in 18 volumes, 1909-1936.)
- LY *The Last Years*. Trans. Ronald C. Smith. New York: Harper & Row, 1965. (From *Papirer XI¹-XI²*, 1936-1948.)
- JP *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, assisted by Gregor Malantschuk. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press (1) 1967; (2) 1970; (3-4) 1975; (5-7) 1978. (From *Papirer I-XI³* and XII-XIII, 2d ed., and *Breve og Akstykker vedrørende Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. Niels Thulstrup, 1-2, 1953-1954.)
- LD *Letters and Documents*. Trans. Hendrik Rosenmeier. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.
- COR *The Corsair Affair*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.

Introduction

This volume of essays on Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death* addresses new questions about the significance of Kierkegaard's work and in so doing illustrates the breadth of his appeal to a younger generation of scholars who have fresh insights and interests. Yet to say that is not to say there is a complete break, a discontinuity, between the earlier and the more recent research. There is both continuity and discontinuity between this collection of essays and the older scholarship.

The greatest continuity between the older research and the work in this volume is the regard for facts, for accuracy of interpretation. The works of several (Hirsch and Geismar among others), but not nearly all, of the earlier scholars are paradigms of scholarly achievement. The contributors to this volume have, like the best of their predecessors, attended to the detail of the text and to the way that Kierkegaard develops his arguments.

The most profound difference between the older research and research in this volume is a new set of questions and concerns. This becomes most obvious when one notes the assumption shared by most, if not all, of the contributors to this volume that Kierkegaard's thought has great importance for social philosophy and even constitutes a major critique of modernity.

This difference calls into question the stereotype of Kierkegaard as having no social and political thought. His individualism has frequently been interpreted quite narrowly and apolitically. At best he has been interpreted as not having thought about the political and social issues of his time. At worst his thought has been interpreted as logically excluding the possibility of his thinking about these political and social issues. These two views, taken together, have been the major variations of the common interpreta-

tion till quite recently. So pervasive was this stereotype that it has even been claimed, for instance, that he had no theology of the church—in spite of the collection we conveniently call *The Attack on Christendom*. That this collection does not contain a theology of the church in any strict or systematic sense is obvious even to the casual reader. Still, implied in and underlying the polemic against Christendom is a well-considered understanding of the church and society. While most would agree, some perhaps grudgingly, with this assertion, the objection has been raised against some of Kierkegaard's other writings that he had no concern for the wider issues facing modern society.

Yet, in all fairness to those who have held to the better or the worse form of the usual interpretation, it must be emphasized that Kierkegaard never thought that the political and social issues of the time reflected the fundamental ills of humankind. He was, to be sure, neither a Hobbes, a Locke nor a Marx. On the other hand, the forms of life he criticized were those forms of life he knew. The criticism of aestheticism, speculation, Christendom, the ethical optimism of Judge William, and so forth, all testify to the concern he had for the social and political forms of his time.

Few of his books could be construed to support the usual interpretation better than *The Sickness unto Death*. One can imagine how someone presenting the usual interpretation would go on: The rhetoric of the title, *The Sickness unto Death*, suggests that Kierkegaard was concerned with the individual. The title, again, suggests the hortatory or the literary, not sober social or political analysis. The subtitle, *A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, indicates the unpolitical and unsocial nature of the book. It is for upbuilding and awakening, that is, the book is religious and probably "preachy." It is, furthermore, "psychological," again indicating a concern for the individual. Finally the book is authored by a pseudonym, a favorite literary device of the German romantics. The book is scarcely literature, but it is more emphatically neither politics nor sociology. The author is suggesting so much in the title and subtitle that his intentions are not clear. Yet one thing is clear: Kierkegaard is not presenting substantial reflections on, or interpretations of, modern society.

Several contributors to this volume have read the same texts and have found Kierkegaard to have a fundamental understanding of society in both a secular and a Christian sense. He rejects the secular, and the rejection is a considered one as those who comment on this issue in this volume show. More remarkably, his Christian critique of modernity is not a conservative critique. Kierkegaard's critique of modernity does not look backward to a lost golden age. Neither is his critique a Marxist or a socialist one that looks forward to a golden age yet to come if certain changes are made. What Kierkegaard says against modernity cannot be used by any class interest to batter another class. Rather, his critique, based as it is upon a developing understanding of the historical and social conditions of his age, is at the same time transcendental, theocentric, apocalyptic, and prophetic.

Another issue that emerges between the older and newer scholarship is the meticulous detail with which the crucial text (SUD, 13-14) regarding the constitution of the self is analyzed. There are certain texts that simply will not let go of a person, and this is one of them. Only since the mid-sixties has the text received the detailed analysis it deserves, or rather, provokes.

The relation of Kierkegaard's views to some other philosophic concepts of the self, the bearing of this concept on the wider issues of the book (edification and awakening), and the way this concept of the self ties his authorship together, are examined in detail in this volume. Further, the issue of the unity of the two parts of the work is clarified if proper attention is given to the definition of the self.

Kierkegaard's view of the self has been one of his most fruitful ideas in the areas of psychotherapy and counseling, *The Sickness unto Death* frequently being read. The wealth of comment on Kierkegaard by practitioners and scholars in these areas is pertinent and perceptive. But as could be expected, philosophers have not been entirely appreciative of these efforts, in spite of the fact that Kierkegaard cast the major analogy of the book as sickness and healing. Psychotherapists usually miss the philosophic import of the book, but, on the other hand, they do find a dimension that philosophers may not properly appreciate. The lack of mutual enlightenment between these two fields speaks more of the aridity of our artificial compartmentalization of the matters of the spirit

than it does to any inherent difficulty or any conceptual division in *The Sickness unto Death* itself.

With rare exception, theologians have not exploited the massive contributions Kierkegaard makes to the doctrine of sin and the issue of the relation of revelation and reason (among many other topics) in *The Sickness unto Death*. Remarkably, Kierkegaard is more thought about in academic philosophy than in academic theology. Yet in the philosophic community he is usually treated as if his credentials left something to be desired, and for this very reason he should be received with more enthusiasm by the theologians: Kierkegaard is confessedly a radical Christian thinker and the object of his authorship is upbuilding and awakening to the Christian sense of beings. (Of course, philosophers have other objections to his work: dislike of Kierkegaard's literary devices, objections to specific arguments, and so forth.)

Much of the earlier writing on Kierkegaard was concerned with his relation to the philosophy of existence. "Existentialism" is probably the most abused philosophic word in the twentieth century. The works of Kierkegaard were first popularized and then neglected during the rise and the gradual demise of that movement, whatever it was. The relation of Kierkegaard to existential philosophy is discussed in this book, but, whereas that was a major concern in many books written in the fifties, this concern is only one of several now. Still, there is a sense in which the relation of Kierkegaard to existentialism needs to be investigated. Previous scholarship did not, as a rule, penetrate to close reading of the texts in a comparative and analytical manner. Further, the historical studies were, to a large extent, superficial, and frequently broad generalizations were developed on the basis of a minimum of detail.

The concern of existentialism and phenomenology with the lived-world has carried over into the issues raised in contemporary philosophy such as sexual identity. New interests such as this one measure Kierkegaard, and Kierkegaard is measured by them.

Much remains to be done in all the areas indicated above, but this collection marks an advance in every area addressed. We can do better than our predecessors because of what we learned from them. Our successors will do likewise. They will honor us by surpassing us.

I

The Definition of the Self and the Structure of Kierkegaard's Work

John D. Glenn, Jr.

"A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self?" (SUD, 13) So begins the main body of *The Sickness unto Death*. Kierkegaard¹ proceeds to define three dimensions of human selfhood. The self is, he says: (a) a *synthesis* of polar opposites—"of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity;" (b) *self-relating*—"a relation that relates itself to itself;" and (c) ultimately *dependent* on God—"a derived, established relation, a relation that . . . in relating itself to itself relates itself to another" (SUD, 13-14).

This definition is fundamental for the concrete exploration of selfhood throughout the whole work. The "sickness unto death"—which Kierkegaard identifies as *despair*, and also later as *sin*—is a malady affecting all the dimensions of the self. It is a failure to *will* to be the self one truly is—in other words, a deficient self-relation—which involves also an imbalance among the components of the self as synthesis and a deficient God-relation. The *health* of the

¹As it is generally recognized that Kierkegaard "stands behind" the ideas expressed in *The Sickness unto Death* in a sense that is not true of all the pseudonymous writings, I will dispense with references to "Anti-Climacus."

self—which he eventually identifies as *faith*—is an affirmation by the self of itself (that is, a positive self-relation), in which the components of the self as synthesis are in right relation, and the self is properly related to its divine foundation. It is a state in which “in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it” (SUD, 14).

The definition of the self is, however, not only crucial for understanding the other main concepts of *The Sickness unto Death*; it is also the key to the work’s concrete structure. After some general observations about the nature and universality of despair, Kierkegaard proceeds to dissect various forms of despair (a) insofar as they involve misrelation among the components of the self as synthesis, and (b) insofar as they are characterized by varying degrees of self-consciousness and self-assertion; finally, he analyzes (c) despair as sin. These three sections of *The Sickness unto Death* correspond to the three dimensions of selfhood, so that the definition of the self provides the structure of the rest of the work, while the latter’s details make concrete the meaning of the definition. I also hope to show that a similar relation holds between these dimensions and the three “stages” of existence—the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious—depicted in Kierkegaard’s early pseudonymous works. This essay will explore these correspondences in order to clarify Kierkegaard’s conception of the self and to show how his definition provides a key for understanding both *The Sickness unto Death* and his broader work. I will focus in turn on the three dimensions of the definition and on the related forms of despair and “stages” of existence.

(A) *The Self as Synthesis:*

The Psychological-Aesthetic Dimension of Selfhood

“A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short a synthesis” (SUD, 13). Human existence is a kind of paradox. A human being is neither god nor beast—yet is somehow like both.

Is Kierkegaard simply reasserting the traditional dualistic conception of the human being as a composite of immortal soul and mortal body? He does sometimes refer (such as in SUD, 43) to the “psychical-physical synthesis.” But his meaning emerges more

clearly in the first major subdivision of his account of the forms of despair, which is entitled “Despair Considered without Regard to its Being Conscious or Not, Consequently Only with Regard to the Constituents of the Synthesis” (SUD, 29). That is, despair is here analyzed (so to speak) *psychologically*, as a mere *state* of the self, in abstraction from the self-relation which makes the self responsible for it as an *act* and qualifies it *ethically*; it is also in general treated without focus on the God-relation which qualifies it *theologically* and marks it as *sin*. This section thus corresponds precisely to the first dimension of the definition of the self, and its details clarify the meaning of the self as synthesis.

The specific forms of despair described in this section are characterized by an overstress on one aspect of the self as synthesis, with a corresponding understress on (or “lack of”) its polar opposite. “Infinitude’s despair” is a state in which the self becomes lost in vaporous sentimentality, in sheer proliferation of objective knowledge, or in fantastic projects—when by means of the “infiniteizing” capacity of imagination the self is “volatilized” (SUD, 31) in its feeling, knowledge, or will.² “Finitude’s despair,” in contrast, is characterized by worldliness, conformism, and a merely prudential attitude toward life:

Surrounded by hordes of men, absorbed in all sorts of secular matters, more and more shrewd about the ways of the world—such a person . . . finds it too hazardous to be himself and far easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man. (SUD, 33-34)

Kierkegaard describes what the *right* relation between the infinitude and finitude of the self would be in terms that are reminiscent of the “double-movement” of faith in *Fear and Trembling*, though less paradoxical:

To become oneself is to become concrete. But to become concrete is neither to become finite nor to become infinite, for that which is to become concrete is indeed a synthesis. Consequently, the progress of the becoming must be an infinite moving away from itself in the infiniteizing of the self, and an infinite coming back to itself in the finitizing process. (SUD, 30)

²See SUD, 30-33.

Where Kierkegaard's initial definition posed freedom and necessity as polar opposites, in his discussion of the forms of despair "possibility" replaces "freedom;" freedom seems not so much to be a single pole as to pertain to the synthesis of possibility and necessity. He describes "possibility's despair" primarily as a fascination with possibility purely *as* possibility; here the self is awash in a sea of possibilities, but does not proceed to actualize any of them. "What is missing is essentially the power to obey, to submit to the necessity in one's life, to what may be called one's limitations" (SUD, 36). "Necessity's despair," on the other hand, involves a lack of possibility, which means "either that everything has become necessary for a person or that everything has become trivial" (SUD, 40)—that is, either a kind of fatalism or a mentality which reckons life within the narrow compass of probability.

These analyses obviously reflect the definition of the self as synthesis—and help to clarify it. They suggest, first, that the "infinitude" of the self does not primarily mean the possession of an immortal soul, but the capacity to transcend one's own finite situation, *either* in such a way that this finite situation is somehow neglected *or* that an expanded, ideal form of the self is envisioned and movement toward its actualization is made possible. Moreover, they indicate that the "finitude" of the self does not mean its bodily character *per se*, but its involvement in actual situations, particularly as this entails a tendency to be absorbed in restrictive social roles—what Heidegger and Sartre identify as the "one." In its specific elaboration, then, Kierkegaard's definition of the self as synthesis of infinitude and finitude is not so close to traditional soul-body dualism as it is to Heidegger's account of Being-in-the-world as involving both "facticity" and "existentiality" or to Sartre's conception of Being-for-itself as involving "facticity" and "transcendence."³

The "necessity" of the self, similarly, does not here seem to mean its subjection to either logical or causal necessity, but refers rather to its unsurpassable limitations. To that extent it might be

³See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 235-36; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956) 56. Need it be said that both thinkers are greatly indebted to Kierkegaard?

compared to Heidegger's account of death as "not to be outstripped,"⁴ though Kierkegaard's later reference to the "thorn in the flesh" (SUD, 77-78) and other features of his discussion indicate that he primarily intends specific limitations of a self's actual situation. His references to hope, fear, and anxiety as characteristic attitudes toward possibility suggest that he conceives the self to be defined both by *active* possibility—what it can *do*—and *passive* possibility—what can happen *to* (or be done *for*) it. Later "existentialist" thinkers—including the early Heidegger and Sartre—have tended to overemphasize the former aspect of selfhood; Kierkegaard's conception of the self is in this respect more balanced.

Kierkegaard does not here deal with the self as synthesis of "the temporal and the eternal," but other works⁵ help to clarify his intent. As with his accounts of the other "syntheses," Kierkegaard is asserting that human selfhood involves certain inherent *tensions*—in this case, a tension between the self's capacity for *unity* through time and the tendency of its existence to be *dispersed* into different moments. In this respect, the self's task is to give its existence a unifying meaning, a meaning that is "eternal" in the sense of transcending temporal dispersion, without becoming merely abstract or stultifying.

The correspondence between aesthetic existence and the first dimension of selfhood is perhaps clearest in the "Diapsalmata" in Volume One of *Either/Or*. These lyrical and aphoristic paragraphs best epitomize the reflective aesthetic existence of "A," the pseudonymous author of that volume, and provide a prelude to all the major themes that are developed more fully later in the volume, while also suggesting points that are not elsewhere elaborated. Because reflective aestheticism contains within itself, as subordinate "moments," the characteristics of lower types of aesthetic existence, these paragraphs in a sense represent the whole aesthetic "stage."

What the "Diapsalmata" reveal is an individual lacking in any positive *self*-relation—he is committed above all to *non*-commitment, and so his self-relation does not take the form of explicit will, but rather

⁴Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 308.

⁵See below for brief discussions of this theme as it pertains to the two volumes of *Either/Or*.

only of (often ironic) self-observation—and in any clarified *God*-relation. His existence is thus dominated by the tensions between the components of the self as synthesis.

He is, for example, acutely aware of, and laughs bitterly at, the distance between the infinite and the finite, the ideal and the actual:

I saw that the meaning of life was to secure a livelihood, . . . that love's rich dream was marriage with an heiress; . . . that piety consisted in going to communion once a year. This I saw, and I laughed. (EO 1:33)

But he lacks a unifying will to resolve this tension in his own existence, and thus vacillates between the infinitude and the finitude of his nature:

[My] desires concern sometimes the most trivial things, sometimes the most exalted, but they are equally imbued with the soul's momentary passion. At this moment I wish a bowl of buckwheat porridge. . . . I would give more than my birthright for it! (EO 1:26)

Similarly, "A" fails to achieve an appropriate relation between the possibility and necessity of his existence. He expresses a strong preference for possibility over actuality: "Pleasure disappoints, possibility never. And what wine is so sparkling, what so fragrant, what so intoxicating, as possibility!" (EO 1:40) He attempts, in fact, to transform his life, through the skillful exercise of memory and imagination, from the status of actuality into that of art—that is, into the dimension of possibility. Yet his lack of commitment, his refusal to *will* to transform his existence in *actuality*, leaves him ultimately prey to necessity (envisioned as fate): "And so I am not the master of my life, I am only one thread among many. . . ." (EO 1:30) Thus he is subject, in turn, to "possibility's despair" and "necessity's despair."

Finally, "A" fails to unify the eternal and the temporal aspects of his self-synthesis. He tries to "live constantly *aeterno modo*" by keeping free of all temporal commitments ("the true eternity does not lie behind either/or, but before it" [EO 1:38]), and goes so far as to call the gods "most honorable contemporaries"! (EO 1:42) Yet he is aware of the failure of this attempt, and complains at its result, which is that his existence lacks temporal cohesion:

My life is absolutely meaningless. When I consider the different periods into which it falls, it seems like the word *Schnur* in the dictionary, which means in the first place a string, in the second, a daughter-in-law. The only thing lacking is that the word *Schnur* should mean in the third place a camel, in the fourth, a dust-brush. (EO 1:35)

The existence of the reflective aesthete is, then, lived in terms of the first dimension of the definition of the self.⁶ Failing to exercise a positive self-relation, to will to shape and unify his own actuality, and lacking a clarified *God*-relation, the self is here buffeted between the infinitude and finitude, the possibility and necessity, the eternity and temporality of its own nature.

(B) *The Self as Self-Relating:
The Ethical Dimension of Selfhood*

"In the relation between two, the relation is the third as a negative unity. . . . If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self" (SUD, 13). The self is not a simple sum of the factors that compose its synthesis; its direction is not to be determined by mere analysis of the "vectors" of its component aspects. Everything about the self is subject to an independent variable—namely, the stance which the self takes *toward* it.

To say that the self is self-relating is to attribute to it the capacity for such reflexive activities as self-love, self-hate, self-judgment, self-direction—and, above all, of faith or despair, of willing to be or not willing to be itself. It should be emphasized that while self-consciousness is certainly essential to selfhood as self-relation, Kierkegaard ultimately stresses here the *volitional* rather than the cognitive element of the self-relation. Again the issue is, Does the self will or not will to be itself?

This is also the chief issue in the second major subdivision of Kierkegaard's analysis of the forms of despair, which is entitled "Despair as Defined by Consciousness" (SUD, 42). Here he first discusses states that are really lower stages of aesthetic existence, where the reason that the self does not will itself to be itself is that

⁶This is also true of more "immediate" aesthetic individuals, except that their existence lacks A's self-awareness and dialectical complexity.

it is unaware of *being* a self in any but the most superficial sense. He notes, however, that "it is almost a dialectical issue whether it is justifiable to call such a state despair" (SUD, 42), and his chief focus is on despair's *higher* forms.

These fall into two main classes. The first is termed "despair in weakness" (SUD, 49). Here the self is not willing to be itself because of some factor in its existence—something present, or past, or even a mere possibility—which it finds unacceptable. The second is described as "in despair to will to be oneself: defiance" (SUD, 67). Here the self in a sense wills to be itself, but is yet in despair because it does not will to be the self that it *truly* is. It may in Promethean fashion will to be its own lord and creator, but refuse to accept *as* itself its concrete, finite being, or to acknowledge any authority over itself which can give *seriousness* to the task of being itself. (Every word of Kierkegaard's analysis here can be read as a prophetic critique of the atheistic existentialism of thinkers such as Nietzsche and Sartre). Or, finally, it may recognize that it cannot abstract itself from some "thorn in the flesh," some suffering or defect in its finite nature, but yet, refusing to accept any possibility of aid, will to be itself in its very imperfection as a spiteful protest against existence.⁷

Kierkegaard's purpose in these analyses is to show the insufficiency of an unaided self-relation, that the self alone is unable to put its existence aright, that this can be done only through a right relation to God. This is also a major concern in his depiction of ethical existence in the early pseudonymous works—most notably in Volume Two of *Either/Or*. It may seem arbitrary to link the forms of despair just discussed, culminating as they do in demonic defiance, with the moral earnestness of Judge William, the pseudonymous author of that volume, and Kierkegaard's paradigm of ethical existence. Yet I believe the link holds. For what this "ethicist" stresses above all, what he takes as absolute, is his own self as self-relation, as capacity of self-choice, as will, as freedom:

What is it I choose? Is it this thing or that? No. . . . I choose the absolute. And what is the absolute? It is I myself in my eternal va-

⁷See SUD, 67-74.

lidity. Anything else but myself I can never choose as the absolute.

But what, then, is this self of mine? . . . It is the most abstract of all things, and yet at the same time it is the most concrete—it is freedom. (EO 2:218)

Judge William's conception of the self as active self-relation, as freedom, in effect incorporates the first dimension of selfhood, the self as synthesis. Recognizing the presence of disparate elements within the self, he holds that these can be harmonized, that a right relationship between the different elements of selfhood can be achieved, through a self-choice in which the self as *freedom* takes responsibility for the development of the self as *synthesis*.

This is the meaning of the title of the second major portion of *Either/Or*, Volume Two: "Equilibrium Between the Aesthetical and the Ethical in the Composition of Personality" (EO 2:159). "The aesthetical" refers here to the *given* aspects of the self, to its multiplicity of needs, desires, conditions, relations, and capacities; "the ethical" refers to the freedom with which the self directs its own becoming.⁸ To postulate their "equilibrium" is to assert that ethical self-choice does not extirpate or impose a narrow discipline upon the aesthetic aspects of existence, but merely *relativizes* them, while at the same time directing them to a harmonious fulfillment. Thus Judge William argues that marriage—which he regards as a prime exemplar of ethical existence—does not destroy, but actually enhances the beauty of "first love" (a beauty which "A" prizes highly). Similarly, marriage ennobles the natural necessity that is expressed in erotic attraction by bringing it into the sphere of ethical commitment.

That ethical existence involves a unification of the diverse aspects of the self as synthesis is also indicated by Judge William in remarks such as this:

⁸See EO 2:182. The ethicist does not seem to make a clear distinction between the freedom of the self and the "higher" aspects of the self as synthesis. This may indicate that Kierkegaard had not, when *Either/Or* was written, formulated explicitly, even for himself, the definition of the self, but that he may have arrived at it *through* the early writings. At any rate, my claim is that it is a key for *interpreting* these works; I do not intend to advance any thesis about the *development* of his ideas.

Man's eternal dignity consists in the fact that he can have a history, the divine element in him consists in the fact that he himself, if he will, can impart to this history continuity, for this it acquires only when it is not the sum of all that has happened to me . . . but is my own work, in such a way that even what has befallen me is by me transformed and translated from necessity to freedom. (EO 2:254-255)

Again, he finds the highest expression of this in marriage:

The married man . . . has not killed time but has saved it and preserved it in eternity. . . . He solves the great riddle of living in eternity and yet hearing the hall clock strike, and hearing it in such a way that the stroke of the hour does not shorten but prolongs his eternity. (EO 2:141)

Marriage unites the eternal and the temporal by providing the different moments of life with continuity and a unitary meaning.

However, despite the attractiveness with which Judge William describes—and represents—the ethical life in general, and marriage in particular, Kierkegaard does not regard ethical existence as the highest “stage,” just as he does not regard free self-relation as the ultimate dimension of selfhood. His reservations about the sort of claims made by Judge William on behalf of the ethical are hinted at by a careful reading of *Either/Or*, and are suggested in the very paragraphs of *The Sickness unto Death* where the self is defined. The definition of the self as a “derived, established relation” expresses, he says, “the inability of the self to arrive at or to be in equilibrium . . . by itself.” (SUD, 13-14)

What is the root of the difficulty? It is that, despite the vague religiousness expressed by Judge William, the individual at the ethical stage of existence attempts to rely ultimately only on his own freedom, assuming for himself the power to make his own life right. He preaches, in effect, a doctrine of justification by works, the “works” in this case being expressions of an essentially Kantian ideal of universality and autonomy. It is this ultimate self-reliance that he has in common with the defiant types of despair described in *The Sickness unto Death*. He undertakes an *unconditional* self-affirmation, whereas Kierkegaard thought that affirmation of our true selves is ultimately dependent on a “condition” that can be given

only by God.⁹ Judge William's confidence that through ethical existence one can “succeed in saving his soul and gaining the whole world” (EO 2: 182) underestimates both the reality of sin in the self and the difficulty of shaping the world according to ethical purposes—and thus in effect ignores human dependence on God.

(C) *The Self as Dependent on God:
The Religious Dimension of Selfhood*

“The human self is . . . a derived established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another” (SUD, 13-14). The self-relation of *every* self involves also a relation to “the power that established it,” whether the self is aware of this relation or not. The self-relation and the God-relation are not—as Feuerbach would have it—identical, yet they go hand in hand. To will to be oneself in the fullest sense is also to take up an affirmative stance toward one's foundation; to despair, to refuse to will to be oneself, is also to turn against that foundation. In more explicitly theological terms, to say yes or no to one's own existence as *gift* and *task* is to say yes or no to one's Creator.

Two important issues immediately arise here. I have suggested that, according to Kierkegaard's definition of the third dimension of selfhood, every self-relation also involves a God-relation, whether or not the self is *aware* of its foundation in God. Such awareness is one aspect of the “transparency” to which his definition of faith refers: “that the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God” (SUD, 82). Just what does this “transparency” mean? He does not explicitly define it, though he clearly considers it a matter of degree, and he does analyze penetratingly the subtle interplay of will and knowledge involved in a self's *lack* of transparency (its “darkness and ignorance” [SUD, 48]) regarding its own spiritual state. In general, “transparency” seems to mean this: the self's awareness of its ontological and ethical status (in particular its creaturehood and sinfulness), both as part of the human race and as a specific individual, especially in its relation to God as Creator, Judge, and Redeemer.

⁹See, for example, the various references to “the condition” in PF.

The second issue concerns Kierkegaard's identification of the "power" on which the self is dependent (or in which it is "grounded," as in the older translation) with God, as God is conceived in Christianity. It is this that makes the third aspect of his definition theological, rather than simply ontological or metaphysical; for there are views of the self (such as Sartre's) that agree in general with Kierkegaard's up to this point, but conceive differently of the self's ultimate foundation. Has Kierkegaard anything to say to those who question this identification?

He would not, of course, cite the traditional theistic proofs; he regards these as theoretically inconclusive *and* as diverting attention from the "subjective" task of being oneself. Yet there is in his writings something analogous to Kant's "moral proof"—to the claim that the self's moral task is attainable only if God exists. Kierkegaard holds that only if the self's ultimate foundation is God, rather than some lesser reality or "power," can despair finally be overcome. He says:

The synthesis is not the misrelation; it is merely the possibility, or in the synthesis lies the possibility of the misrelation. If the synthesis were the misrelation, then despair would not exist at all, then despair would be something that lies in human nature as such. . . . No, no, despairing lies in man himself. If he were not a synthesis, he could not despair at all; *nor could he despair if the synthesis in its original state from the hand of God were not in the proper relationship.* (SUD, 15-16; my emphasis)

That is, only because the human being is God's creature is despair *as state* (as misrelation among the different components of the self as synthesis) not inherent in the human condition; only thus is despair *as act* possible, "inasmuch as God, who constituted man a relation, releases it from his hand, as it were—that is, inasmuch as the relation relates itself to itself" (SUD, 16); and only thus, through divine aid and forgiveness, can despair be overcome.

The title of the last major section of *The Sickness unto Death* is "Despair is Sin" (SUD, 77). The sickness that was first conceived psychologically, and then ethically, is now identified theologically. This identification is based in the third dimension of Kierkegaard's definition, and its implication that the self's refusal to be itself is also a rejection of its foundation—disobedience to its Creator.

Kierkegaard makes it clear that the self's dependence on God is as much axiological as ontological. God is not only the self's Creator, but is also its "criterion and goal" (SUD, 79).¹⁰ The self is not—as a purely ethical standpoint would have it—measured ultimately by a criterion immanent to itself, but by God; and it gains "infinite reality . . . by being conscious of existing before God" (SUD, 79).

This means, however, that the more "transparent" a self is in its God-relation—that is, the greater its conception or consciousness of God—the more sinful is that self's despair. The self's reality is even more "intensified" in relation to Christ, "by the inordinate accent that falls upon it because God allowed himself to be born, become man, suffer, and die" (SUD, 113) to offer it forgiveness and salvation; but, accordingly, this compounds the sin of a self that rejects this salvation. The God-relation thus accentuates the freedom and individuality of the self even more than did the purely ethical emphasis on its responsibility for and to itself.

These claims are not, of course, mere *consequences* of the definition of the self, but they flesh it out in such a way that there is a clear correspondence between the definition of the self as dependent on God and the account of despair as sin. Is the same true of the depiction of the religious "stage" of existence in Kierkegaard's early pseudonymous work? That this depiction must in some manner concern the self's God-relation is, of course, trivially true. But I would like to show that it bears an intimate relation to the *whole* definition of the self. I will focus on *Fear and Trembling*, the companion to the two volumes of *Either/Or*, because these three volumes taken together contain Kierkegaard's richest account of the "stages."

Johannes de Silentio, the pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling*, deals with religious existence by reflecting on a paradigm of faith—Abraham, in his response to God's command to sacrifice Isaac. Johannes depicts faith through two related, but nevertheless different, contrasts—first with the stance of "infinite resignation," and then with "the ethical." My specific thesis here is that this twofold con-

¹⁰Kierkegaard does not discuss here the relation between one's ontological and axiological dependence on God, nor the sense in which God is the self's "criterion and goal." His later statement that "only in Christ is it true that God is man's goal and criterion" (SUD, 114) suggests that what he has in mind in the latter instance is the "imitation of Christ."



trast shows how the self's God-relation affects, first, the self as synthesis, and then the self as self-relation—and thus both mirrors and illuminates the whole definition of the self.

Johannes first presents infinite resignation and faith as alternative possible responses of someone who, like Abraham (or like Kierkegaard himself in his relation to Regina), is called upon to sacrifice the object of all his worldly hopes. The "knight of infinite resignation" makes the sacrifice but thereafter has no joy or hope in the finite; instead, he seeks repose in a more-or-less stoical transcendence of all worldly concerns. The "knight of faith," too, prepares the sacrifice, and makes the spiritual movement of resignation—but also and at the same time makes another movement; "by virtue of the absurd" (FT, 35) he believes that this sacrifice will not be required of him, or that he will receive again what he has sacrificed.

The contrast between faith and "the ethical" centers on the question of a "teleological suspension of the ethical." Was Abraham justified in being willing to sacrifice his own child? Not according to "the ethical," Johannes says—and here "the ethical" connotes an ethics based on autonomy, rationality, and universality. All such standards—and, indeed, any standard that takes the *human* as its ultimate point of reference—are breached by Abraham's action. If Abraham is justified, it can only be because there is a higher source of obligation than "the ethical," one which at least on occasion warrants its "suspension." *Either* the latter is true, and Abraham stands in a direct relation to God, a relation not mediated through moral norms—or he is a murderer. Take your choice, Johannes says; there is no neutral standpoint from which the issue can be adjudicated.

To penetrate more deeply into the meaning of these contrasts, one question needs to be posed—namely, how does this whole treatment of faith apply to those who are *not* required, like Abraham, to give up the "Isaacs" of their lives? Johannes, who repeatedly claims *not* to understand faith, offers no explicit answer to this question. But a careful reading of *Fear and Trembling* suggests, I think, these reflections:

The existential dilemma to which both infinite resignation and faith are responses seems, fundamentally, to be this—that *every*

human self is by nature concerned with finite goods. Yet all finite goods are contingent and relative; none can be securely possessed; none can, without some measure of impoverishment or distortion of the spirit, be made its absolute end. Were the self a god, it would (or so our theological tradition implies) in its infinitude transcend contingency and relativity; were it merely a beast, it would be so immersed in finitude as to be unable to conceive of its situation as problematic. But the human being, neither god nor beast, yet in part like each, is both subject to and able to conceive of contingency and relativity, is both immanent in and somehow transcendent of the finite.

What stance, then, can the self take towards its situation? In "infinite resignation," the attitude of the ancient Stoic (with some Romantic feeling added), the self expresses its recognition of the contingency and relativity of the finite by giving it up spiritually, even before losing it or being called upon to give it up in actuality. Thus the "infinitude" of the self, its transcendence of the finite world, is manifested—though this attitude, however "deep," is a type of what *The Sickness unto Death* labels as "infinitude's despair."

In any event, faith, Johannes says, goes further. For illustration he sketches the famous imaginary example of a contemporary "knight of faith" who

one would swear . . . was the butcher across the way vegetating in the gloaming. . . . And yet, yet . . . this man has made and at every moment is making the movement of infinity. He drains the deep sadness of life in infinite resignation, he knows the blessedness of infinity, he has felt the pain of renouncing everything, the most precious thing in the world, and yet the finite tastes just as good to him as to one who never knew anything higher. . . . He resigned everything infinitely, and then he grasped everything again by virtue of the absurd. He is continually making the movement of infinity, but he does it with such precision and assurance that he continually gets finitude out of it. (FT, 40-41)

The knight of faith is, then, no merely immediate individual; he is aware of the contingency and relativity of everything finite, but he does not negate the significance of the finite by giving it up spiritually. He accomplishes a prodigy, a "double-movement" of faith, a simultaneous movement of withdrawal and return in his relation to the world.

All this Johannes tells us, though he continually professes not to comprehend how it is possible—not to understand this “knight of faith” who is nevertheless the product of his own imagination! And perhaps we *cannot* understand him, if to “understand” means to assimilate to our “natural” attitudes—for he is a challenge to these attitudes, to our tendency to alternate between immediacy and hopelessness. Yet if to understand is to grasp his existence as a challenge then perhaps we *can* understand him. His “secret,” it seems, is this: that recognizing the contingency and relativity of every finite good, he neither takes it as secure and absolute, nor expends all his energy in spiritually distancing himself from it; but he accepts all that he possesses as a gift from the hand of God, to be enjoyed and loved as such, yet to be released, if need be, with trust in God and His power to help us deal with every loss and adversity. Only thus, by virtue of relating to God in faith, can the self exist as both finite and infinite, both involved in and transcending the world.

Johannes’ explicit reflections on the relation between faith and the ethical *seem* to lead, I have indicated, to an either/or which cannot be adjudicated. But some of his statements—as Louis Mackey has argued¹¹—hint at a somewhat different conclusion. They suggest that Kierkegaard is not here concerned only with a few exceptional figures like Abraham, that rather the “suspension of the ethical” which ultimately concerns him is one that takes place in *each individual life*—namely, *sin*. For every individual self, as a sinner, is already “beyond” the ethical, has already “suspended” it.

How, then, can the self deal with the reality of its own sin? Where can forgiveness be found? It cannot be found, Kierkegaard (using Johannes as his “messenger”¹²) suggests, within the context of an ethics of rationality and autonomy. For in such a context, who can forgive? Can the self forgive itself? Such leniency would be highly suspect—an honest self would rather condemn itself. Can it be forgiven by the ethical law, or by the ideal self which is its ethical telos? No, for these can only stand over against the self as un-

¹¹Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc., 1971) 224-25.

¹²See FT, 3.

yielding measures of its deficiency. A self can only be forgiven by that which is also in some sense personal; only if the self’s obligation ultimately comes *from* God can a breach of that obligation be forgiven—*by* God. Thus, as a careful reading of Volume Two of *Either/Or* already suggests, an existential stance that acknowledges no authority or power higher than the self and its ethical choice of itself founders on the reality of sin. A defect in the self-relation, the self’s self-estrangement in sin, can be healed only through its relation to God—only by divine grace received in faith.

If these are sound interpretations of *Fear and Trembling*—which is by any account a many-dimensional work—then there is clearly a close relation between the pseudonymous presentation of the religious “stage” and the whole definition of the self. Just as the ethical self-relation supervenes upon and affects the self as synthesis, so the self’s God-relation supervenes upon and affects *both* the self as synthesis and the self’s relation to itself. The two contrasts drawn in *Fear and Trembling* illuminate aspects of this “double affection.” The contrast between infinite resignation and faith indicates *one* way, at least, in which faith makes possible a harmonious relation between different aspects of the self as synthesis. Only in faith, it suggests, can the self exist without despair both as finite—inevitably involved in and concerned about concrete actuality—and as infinite—capable of some sort of transcendence of that actuality. Similarly, the contrast between faith and “the ethical” suggests that faith *both relativizes and restores* the self’s ethical self-relation. Only if the self stands related to a power and authority beyond itself can the breach that sin inevitably brings into our existence be healed.

Kierkegaard’s definition of the self is a remarkable instance of his dialectical and literary skill. Yet it is more than that; it provides a key for understanding the structure and content of *The Sickness unto Death*, as well as the “stages” of existence depicted in his early pseudonymous writings. It forms a crucial part of works that were intended to help his readers on the road to self-understanding and self-fulfillment.

II

Spirit and the Idea of the Self as a Reflexive Relation

Alastair Hannay

*T*he *Sickness unto Death* opens forthrightly enough by declaring that a human being is "spirit," and amplifies this by saying that spirit is "the self." This latter notion is then elaborated as "a relation that relates itself to itself," an intriguing suggestion but hardly forthright and the reader awaits some clarification. But is clarification forthcoming? The notorious passage that follows has seemed to many an attempt on Kierkegaard's part, not to help the reader understand this idea of a self-relating self, but to parody the impenetrability of Hegelian prose. Anti-Climacus continues:

[T]he self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self. . . . In the relation between two, the relation is the third as a negative unity, and the two relate to the relation and in the relation to the relation; thus under the qualification of [soul] the relation between [soul] and [body] is a relation. If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self. (SUD, 13)¹

¹For purposes of exposition I prefer the more direct translations of 'Sjel' and 'Legeme' as 'soul' and 'body' to the Hongks' 'the psychical' and 'the physical.'

If this were no more than a dig at Hegelian obscurity, one might conclude that the idea of a self-relating self is not in need of clarification, but only obscure when clothed in pretentious philosophical jargon. Perhaps, whatever difficulties attend an analysis of the notion, the notion itself is nothing more exotic than that of the self-evident ability of human beings to reflect upon what they do and think, and to form their own self-images.

But Anti-Climacus's definition of the self as a relation that "relates itself to itself" is neither empty parody nor a pretentiously decked out truism. It states elegantly, and I believe accurately, a crucial principle of Kierkegaard's thought—only, however, to the appropriately programmed reader. By this I mean a reader familiar with the tradition from which Kierkegaard's terms derive their connotations: the Hegelian tradition. It is now of course something of a formality among Kierkegaard scholars to warn against letting Kierkegaard's unrelenting onslaught on Hegel blind one to the extent of the shared assumptions on which that onslaught is based. Yet often it is quite general, methodological assumptions that are referred to (the notions of 'negativity,' 'dialectic,' for example), or mere points of terminology where Kierkegaard uses Hegel's terms to deny what Hegel asserts (the identity of thought and being, and so forth). But there are several points of agreement in basic framework too, and an important one of these is the concept of self-consciousness.

Hegel makes two sets of distinctions. One, within the general category of "subjective spirit," distinguishes 'consciousness,' 'immediate self-consciousness,' and 'universal self-consciousness,' (see *Sämtliche Werke* 6, §§307-44).² These, in outline, are phases in a development from simple awareness of a distinction between inner and outer (see *Phenomenology*, 143), through a sense of the inner as the center of things but with these things themselves quite independent, to a grasp of the inner and outer as combined in the unity of consciousness and reality (*Sämtliche Werke* 6, §400; *Phenomenology*, §394).

²Quotations from Hegel are from *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. H. Glockner (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1927-1930); *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); *Logic* (pt. 1 of *The Encyclopædia of the Philosophical Sciences [1830]*), trans. W. Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) (abbreviated *Enc.*); *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

The latter phase—though each phase itself contains a development—provides the terms for defining 'spirit,' or reason as full awareness of itself as being all of reality (*Phenomenology*, §438). The second distinction is between "natural" consciousness, or soul, and spirit. In the *Phenomenology* Hegel talks of the "path of natural consciousness . . . the way of the soul which journeys through the series of its own configurations as though they were the stations appointed for it by its own nature, so that it may purify itself for the life of the Spirit." This path "presses forward to true knowledge" or "Science," and the goal of the journey is to give the soul a "completed experience of itself," in which it finally achieves "awareness of what it really is in itself" (*Phenomenology*, §77).

These passages contain all three of the terms used by Anti-Climacus in the opening passage of *The Sickness unto Death* to define the self as a self-relating relation. We have 'self,' 'soul,' and 'spirit.' My suggestion is that what Kierkegaard wants us to understand by his idea of a self as a self-relating relation is something that coincides to a considerable extent with what Hegel says about soul, consciousness, and spirit, yet departs from Hegel radically at a point to be determined; and my discussion here is an attempt to determine that point.

I.

Let us begin with Hegel's metaphor of a path that the soul goes along to purify itself for the life of the spirit. For Hegel 'soul' (*Seele*) denotes a set of possibilities ranging from those limited to (as with Aristotle) organic life as such (see *Phenomenology*, §265), through those inherent in animal life, to those specific to human life. The "paths" of these possibilities are of different length; that of human life (or consciousness) is one on which the soul progresses through its "appointed stations" to "purify itself for the life of the Spirit." One could read this as saying that the soul can itself acquire the characteristics of spirit, as if spirit was a qualification of the specifically human soul, something it can become and still remain soul. But Hegel would want us to read it the other way around. Spiritual life is already contained *in posse* in the initial soul, which in its most general characterization is the "animating principle of the body" (*Enc.*, §34). Spirit is what, in the human case, this animating prin-

ciple is destined to become. It is the human end-state, the human soul's "completed experience of itself" and "awareness of what it really is in itself." As noted, for Hegel this means not just a grasp of human consciousness as an actually existing subject-pole in relation to its "negative," the "other" (see *Phenomenology*, §§347-359), but awareness of a unity between thought and being themselves. A full philosophical account of self-consciousness is one that gives a total grasp of the relation of mind, or consciousness as reason, to its objective environment, and sees this goal of comprehension as a potentiality not just of "natural consciousness" but (having escaped the limitations of a merely *natural* consciousness) of the natural and social world itself.

This conveniently, but I think not altogether accidentally, picks out for us the target of Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegel's philosophy. If the term 'science,' as in Hegel, is taken to embrace knowledge not only of the environment but of a harmony between it and thought—a harmony so total as to give self-consciousness, among other things, the status of "the principle of right, morality, and all ethical life" (*Philosophy of Right*, §21)—then, says the criticism, science is not at all the end-state of natural consciousness. What end-state would Kierkegaard propose instead? And what would be the corresponding Kierkegaardian life of the spirit? One plausible suggestion regarding the end-state would be "awareness of the fact that there is no such completed experience of itself." As for Kierkegaard's life of the spirit, the apt answer would be to say that while for both Hegel and Kierkegaard the life of the spirit is the life of clear-sightedness, in Hegel's case the clarity is that of the "standpoint of Science" (*Phenomenology*, §78), taking this to include all ethical life, while in Kierkegaard's it is that of scepticism. This would allow us to see Kierkegaard's "journey" along the path of natural consciousness as merely an abrupted version of Hegel's. For, according to Hegel, natural consciousness proves only to have the *idea*, or notion, of itself as knowing not—as it itself believes—the reality of that; and for *it* the path to spirit proves to be one of loss of its status of real knower: "what is in fact the realization of the Notion [of knowledge], counts for it rather as a loss of its own self . . . [t]he road can therefore be regarded as the pathway of *doubt*, or more precisely as the way of despair . . . [f]or this path is

the conscious insight into the untruth of phenomenal knowledge" (*Phenomenology*, §78, original emphasis). Hegel is saying that *natural* consciousness has to give way to spirit, which is for him the standpoint of science, from which knowledge of appearance has given way to "true" knowledge (cf. *Phenomenology*, §76). The nature/spirit distinction used here is a traditional one, going back at least as far as Aristotle's *pneuma*, a kind of divine stuff (compared by Aristotle in one place to the *aithēr*) that preserves the unity of the organism which would otherwise dissolve into its constituent elements if these were allowed to obey their *natural* laws of motion.³ In Hegel's use of the distinction, nature is what appears to consciousness as external, which appearance is replaced in the standpoint of science—of spirit—by true knowledge. If the spiritual development is inhibited one receives only the "doubt," "despair," and "loss of self" of the awareness that phenomenal knowledge is not real. This sounds remarkably like Anti-Climacus's account of the individual's path to despair, in light of the failure of people even to "try this life" (SUD, 57). In the *Journals* (JP 6:6794) Kierkegaard draws the distinction in exactly Hegel's terms by talking of a "world of spirit" lying "[b]ehind this world of actuality, phenomena. . . ." Might we not simply say, then, that the life of the spirit for Kierkegaard is the life of one who realizes, on the one hand and like Hegel, that the natural world is only phenomenal, but on the other that there is no standpoint of science from which true knowledge (including knowledge of right, morality, and ethics) can be attained, and squarely faces the consequent uncertainty about human nature's standing and also the prospect of nihilism?

It is clear, however, that this is not what Anti-Climacus would have us call the life of the spirit. Such a life would, in Kierkegaard's as well as Hegel's terms, be purely negative; it would involve no more than the realization of loss—loss of presumptive knowledge and of self. Spirit, again for Kierkegaard as well as for Hegel, has a positive content; it involves the realization that human existence is grounded in an eternal *telos*.

³See M. C. Nussbaum, *De motu animalium: Interpretive Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) 159-60.

Every human existence that is not conscious of itself as spirit or conscious of itself before God as spirit, every human existence that does not rest transparently in God but vaguely rests in and merges in some abstract universality (state, nation, etc.) or, in the dark about his self, regards his capacities merely as powers to produce without becoming deeply aware of their source, regards his self, if it is to have intrinsic meaning, as an indefinable something—every such existence, whatever it achieves, be it most amazing, whatever it explains, be it the whole of existence, however intensively it enjoys life esthetically—every such existence is nevertheless despair. (SUD, 46)

The passage says that a life not grounded transparently in God is a life of despair; but it appears also to say that the life of spirit has to be one that is grounded transparently in God, and so not a life of despair. Since for Anti-Climacus the opposite of despair is faith, it looks as though the end-state he envisages, faith, and the life of spirit are the same. Of course the humanly existing subject cannot know that it has God as the source of its powers to produce; at most its “becoming aware” of where it has them from is a matter of faith. But then that, on this interpretation, would be the Kierkegaardian alternative to the Hegelian spirit’s self-knowledge. To reinforce the interpretation we can turn to Anti-Climacus’s remark that pagans “lacked the spirit’s definition of a self” because they “lacked the God-relationship and the self” (SUD, 46). They lacked the God-relationship because pagan belief finds God in nature, and what Anti-Climacus means by a God-relationship presupposes Climacus’s account of the “break with immanence” (CUP, 506); and they lacked the self because they had no sense of an identity other than in terms of what they shared with (and owed to) other humans (cf. SUD, 46).

Should we say then that what we have here is Anti-Climacus’s version of the life of the spirit in its properly positive guise? Much of *The Sickness unto Death* can be read in this light, for example passages like that in which Anti-Climacus says that the only one whose life is truly wasted is he who has been “so deceived by life’s joys or its sorrows that he never became decisively and eternally conscious as spirit, as self, or, *what amounts to the same thing*, never became aware and in the deepest sense never gained the impression that there is a God and that ‘he,’ he himself, his self, exists before

this God—an infinite benefaction that is never gained except through despair” (SUD, 26-27, emphasis added). Much also gainsays the proposal. For instance we have the starkly unambiguous assertion that “the devil is sheer spirit” (SUD, 42). Clearly the devil (in Greek *diabolos*, or defamer) stands in nothing that Anti-Climacus would call a God-relationship. So it looks as if Anti-Climacus here employs a more neutral concept of spirit. And since it is the devil’s “unqualified consciousness and transparency,” and the fact that in him there is therefore “no obscurity . . . that could serve as a mitigating excuse,” that earns him the description “sheer spirit,” it might look rather as though we were forced back upon our original “negative” notion. Yet that is not so. Although (like Hegel’s natural consciousness) the devil despairs, he does not *doubt*, nor does he suffer any loss of self—at least not as far as we are directly told. Indeed Anti-Climacus says “[t]he more consciousness, the *more self* [and will]” (SUD, 29, emphasis added), though also “the greater the conception of God, the more self . . .” (SUD, 80 and 113); but it is easy to imagine someone having a strong conception of God without yet having faith. In fact the devil does not *despair* analogously to Hegel’s natural consciousness, for his despair is not that of uncertainty, but of “the most absolute defiance” (SUD, 42), and that presupposes not only a conception of God but something like a standing assumption that God exists and has power to exert. The devil could not be a defamer if there were no one for him to defame. (According to early ecclesiastical writers the devil was created by God as an angel, Lucifer, who for his rebellion against God was punished by being thrown into the abyss where he became the prince of darkness.) And this seems generally true of what Anti-Climacus classifies as despair. The despairer of *The Sickness unto Death*, the one who lacks faith, is one who will not affirm what is recognizably the standing assumption that God exists and that one ought to stand before God. True, at the very end of *The Sickness unto Death* we are told of a form of despair, the culminating despair, that denies Christ, “declares Christianity to be untrue, a lie,” and makes of Christ “an invention of the devil” (SUD, 131). Yet calling Christianity an invention of the devil still acknowledges the God that created the devil. Moreover, that Anti-Climacus says this denial of “all that is essentially Christian: sin, the forgiveness of sins, etc.”

is itself a "sin against the Holy Ghost" (ibid.), indeed sin's "highest intensification," shows quite clearly that for him the framework of the standing assumption, and the assumption itself, remain sacrosanct. In other words if Anti-Climacus were to claim further, from within this framework, that *nihilism* too was an invention of the devil, he would not be taken seriously by the nihilist; for nihilism denies the framework and so cannot be grasped by one who must consider it to be defiance in Anti-Climacus's sense. Anyone who asserts that nihilism is the invention of the devil must assert it diagnostically from a point of view not shared by the one whose beliefs he diagnoses. I strongly suspect that Kierkegaard intends Anti-Climacus's diagnoses to be ones that those in the conditions he describes are predisposed, however unwillingly, to acknowledge.

It appears then that Anti-Climacus's 'spirit' embraces not only faith but despair. There is much to support this interpretation. "[T]he condition of man, regarded as spirit (and if there is to be any question of despair, man must be regarded as defined by spirit), is always critical" (SUD, 25). Unlike a normal illness where the issue of health or sickness is topical for so long as the illness lasts, within the category of spirit the issue is *always* topical, 'spirit' connotes a perpetual tension between faith and despair. Apart from *The Sickness unto Death* itself, the reading is supported by most of what Kierkegaard says elsewhere, in the pseudonymous works and the *Journals*, about spirit. Kierkegaard consistently links the idea of spirit with such partly "negative" attitudes as irony and indifference (to the worldly) as well as resignation—all preliminaries to fundamental choice (CUP, 450; FT, 46; JP 1: 843). In *Anxiety*, although spirit (like truth and freedom) is said to be "eternal," spiritual consciousness seems to require no more than the possession of the concept of time or temporality as such *sub specie aeternitatis*, that is, from a position as it were outside time, or perhaps in the intersection of time and eternity in the "moment" (CA, 83-84, 88-89). Finally, scattered throughout the *Journals* are numerous remarks on spirit as transcendence of nature. Spirit is also linked with individuality as such, and with the individual's task of fulfillment itself (see, for example, *Papirer* X,4 A 888, 307; JP 2: 2065; 3: 2986; 4: 4350).

II.

Let us then return to where we began, with the question of how to interpret the idea of a self as a reflexive relation. The passage (with the translation slightly modified) reads as follows:

The human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to itself, or that in the relation which is its relating itself to itself. The self is not the relation but the relation's relating itself to itself. The human being is a synthesis of infinity and finitude, of temporality and eternity, of freedom and necessity, in short a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Looked at in this way a human being is still not a self. . . . In the relation between two the relation itself is the third as a negative unity, and the two relate themselves to the relation, and in the relation to the relation; this is the way in which the relation between soul and body is a relation when soul is the determining category. If, on the other hand, the relation relates itself to itself, then this relation is the positive third, and this is the self. (SUD, 13)

The passage may be read in three ways: (1) as a description of "health" (faith), (2) as a description of "crisis," or (3) as a mixture of (1) and (2).

According to (1), we read the identity of spirit and the self as the identity of spirit and the true self (Anti-Climacus says that the "opposite" of despair, that is faith, is "to will to be the self that he is in truth" [SUD, 20]). The idea of a self as a relation relating itself to itself can then be identified as that of the (to use a neutral term) subject's conforming itself to what we have called the standing assumption—that there is a God and a need to stand before that God. In order to give point to the distinction between a synthesis in which soul is the determining category and one where the self (and thus spirit) is "positive," one must then say something like this: when the self fails to relate itself to itself and is in despair, then the fact that the true self is not related to is due to the soul's rather than spirit's being the determining category. This could suggest a gloss on Haufniensis's remarks on the "bondage of sin" (CA, 118). In sin a person is willing to be "determined" by temporal goals and is in "an unfree relation to the good" (CA, 119). The claim that, "regarded as spirit," man's condition is "always critical" could then be understood as asserting that, even when the subject does relate

himself to his true self, the situation still remains critical because the possibility of a reversion to despair is always present (cf. SUD, 114). Indeed Anti-Climacus actually says that when the human being is regarded spiritually it isn't just sickness that is critical, but health too (SUD, 25).

According to (2), spirit is not to be equated with the true self, but with the self aware of the options of health and sickness from the standpoint of either, though initially from that of sickness, that is the standpoint from which conforming to the true self is a task. Here the point of distinguishing spirit (and self) from soul, where the relation is a "negative unity," could be the following: human beings live initially "immediate" lives, in the sense that (in a way corresponding to Hegel's "natural consciousness") their goals are located outside them as external sources of satisfaction, and in such a way that they do not yet conceive of the finite world (their "environment") as a whole as something in relation to which they are not properly at home. Here they are not yet selves because they have so far no consciousness of something "eternal" in them (SUD, 62), and since despair proper (that is, as a "qualification of the spirit" [SUD, 24]) is always "despair of the eternal or over oneself" (SUD, 60) they have yet to reach the threshold of crisis. Such immediacy inevitably gives way to a sense of selfhood as transcending the world of temporal goals. The self makes an "act of separation whereby [it] becomes aware of itself as essentially different from the environment and external events and from their influence upon it" (SUD, 54). The scene is now set for the "positive" third factor's travails in the realm of spirit. The "critical condition" in which the subject finds itself is one that embraces both the health *and* the sickness of spirit. Moreover, even in sickness (that is, despair) it is not true that the bondage of sin is a condition in which the soul takes over from spirit, for "despair . . . is not merely a suffering but an act" (SUD, 62). However hedged around by "mitigating excuses," despair is itself an action of the spiritual subject unwilling to conform to its true self, the mark in varying degree of the open defiance of the devil's "sheer spirit."

According to (3), while 'spirit' denotes the realm of task and travail, the idea of the self as a reflexive relation is that of the goal, the true self, of the self conforming to its proper ideal. Here the

distinction between soul and spirit remains as in (2)—the task of spirit begins when the subject emerges from the psychophysical enclosure of immediacy to become a self that is "essentially different" from the enviroing world. And the critical condition is that in which this self seeks to become and, once it has become, to remain a "positive" third factor in the synthesis. Alternatively, though much less plausibly, the mixed interpretation might invert the mixture and make spirit the true self and the reflexive self the essentially differentiated self in its travails.

Of these three readings (or four if we count the inverted mixture) the second seems overwhelmingly to be preferred. It is more consistent than the first with respect to what Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms say elsewhere of spirit and the self; and it is clearly more internally consistent than the third in that, in conformity with the text, it preserves the identity of spirit and self throughout. As far as external consistency is concerned, we have Johannes de silentio's assertion that the world of spirit is the one in which one must work to "get bread" (FT, 27). Haufniensis, for whom 'spirit' and 'freedom' are interchangeable, says that the "secret of spirit" is that it "has a history" (CA, 66), and he talks of two "syntheses." One is the initial fusion or unity of soul and body in which spirit is not yet "posited," while positing spirit is the same as *spirit's* positing the "second" synthesis, that of time and eternity, as an "expression" of the first (CA, 88, cf. 85). The point seems to be this: prior to positing the second synthesis, the two terms, soul and body, are understood from the point of view of *immediacy* as forming a synthesis on their own, or rather (since "synthesis" in a Hegelian context implies the union of apparently incongruent terms under the auspices of a third) a unity with these two aspects, as though *naturally* unified as in the case of psychophysical organisms lacking a spiritual possibility. This is the case in natural *human* consciousness before spiritual consciousness emerges; but the emergence of spiritual consciousness is itself the idea that what appears initially to be a unity is really a juxtaposition of opposites. This realization is evidently what Kierkegaard *means* by the emergence of spiritual consciousness; for spiritual consciousness, or positing spirit, is recognizing an identity apart from and overordinate to the finite mentality of the first synthesis. Spirit here is the

emergence of a problem. Since both *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness unto Death* have as their topic the obstacles to its solution, it seems likely that, in having his author describe the human being as spirit in the first sentence of the main text of *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard is drawing the reader's attention to a feature of human consciousness which, once it emerges, presents a specifiable set of problems. The set itself is indeed specified in the triad of opposites, that is, (in their consistent order) infinity and finitude, eternity and temporality, freedom and necessity, mentioned in the opening passage. The latter element in each pair represents a limitation for a subject, now a self, that has emerged from "immediacy" to "eternal consciousness." Traditionally finitude is the limitation of distinctness, necessity that of rational constraint, and temporality that of exposure to change. In Anti-Climacus these become something like the limitations of mere particularity, genetic and environmental determination ("facticity" in Sartre's sense), and lack of a stable center in which to reside or "repose." (The most crucial departure from the tradition is the use of 'necessity' in connection with factual rather than logical constraint.) A human being subject to the limitations but not conscious of them as such, lives the life of immediacy, though such a life is also attempted (actively) by those who do feel them as limitations yet due to anxiety will not venture beyond the closure of immediacy. According to our preferred reading the category of spirit applies as soon as the limitations are felt as such, and therefore applies even to those who try to revert to immediacy.

If we are to read the opening passage of *The Sickness unto Death* consistently in this way, we will also have to understand the "synthesis" of the limitations with their opposites as the setting of a task rather than as, what might seem more plausible terminologically, its completion. This means that there is at least one *prima facie* Hegelian analogy to discard. In Hegelian philosophy we think of synthesis as a resolution of opposites.

My proposal here is that "synthesis" in both *Anxiety* and *The Sickness unto Death* be linked to what was earlier called the "standing assumption." The standing assumption is that the eternal is not a negative category but positive in the sense that it "posits" a *telos* outside nature and the task of holding the elements—for example,

freedom and necessity—together in a way that expresses this fact. It is useful here to call attention to Kierkegaard's notion of "finite spirit," of which he says it is the "unity of necessity and freedom . . . of consequence [*Resultat*] and striving . . ." (JP, 2: 2274). Elsewhere we are told that spirit posits the synthesis as a *contradiction*; spirit "sustains" the contradiction (CA, 88), it doesn't resolve it. Conceptually, however, a synthesis cannot consist merely of a contradictory pair (CA, 85); there must be some framework for conceiving the opposites as congruent. In *Anxiety* the "moment" is the intersection of time and eternity, and the idea of "finite spirit" combines necessity and freedom as "consequence," or product, and "striving," or effort, in human existence. We might say that the "unity" of the opposites is sustained, as in Spinoza, by a *conatus in suo esse perseverandi* which here beams in on the absolute *telos*. What "synthesis" actually means on this reading, then, is the conceiving of the opposites in the light of the presumption that it is right to side with infinity, eternity, freedom. This belief is essential to spirit's being more than a merely negative notion (of doubt, despair, and loss of self), but it is not yet the faith of the true self. The presumption can always be defied, even when it is not denied.

There is still a problem. Anti-Climacus describes despair as a "misrelation" (*Misforhold*) (SUD, 14). This can easily suggest that despair and the relation (*Forhold*) are mutually exclusive, and then we are back at the idea that it is only the true self that the expression "relates itself to itself" applies to, which would force us back either to the first or to the first mixed interpretation. Yet this problem, too, can be overcome. What Anti-Climacus actually says is that "the misrelation of despair is not a simple misrelation but a misrelation *in a relation that relates itself to itself*" (SUD, 14, emphasis added). In other words, what he says is that the reflexive relation already exists as a precondition of the possibility of a misrelation. From what we have said, this precondition can be identified as the self with its spiritual *conatus*. The self relates itself conatively to what it fundamentally recognizes, accepts, or perhaps has *chosen* as its ideal self. The misrelation is then an inability to sustain, or direct defiance of, spiritual inertia, prompted by the contrary inertial influence of the natural, instinctual "synthesis" which the despairing individual exploits as a protective device in the anxiety of

spiritual emergence. Anti-Climacus does not simply say that the relation in which the misrelation occurs relates itself to itself, but also that it is "established" by another (SUD, 14). The misrelation is the self-relating relation's unwillingness to orient itself to God.

III.

This interpretation has the important consequence that without the standing assumption there is no synthesis. The synthesis is "sustained" by spirit only so far as 'spirit' is understood positively, though only in task terms. This raises important questions of the interpretation of Kierkegaard's works as a whole. Why, for instance, do the pseudonymous works not envisage a nihilistic alternative, in which, according to the above, a "synthesis" would not be an initial part of the framework but itself an option? Does the standing assumption have some transcendental status, for example as a regulative idea? Or are the pseudonymous works deliberately confined to a framework in which the standing assumption has the status of an axiom? And if so, can that be seen as deliberate strategy on Kierkegaard's part, or is it rather an indication of his failure to take account of a more comprehensive kind of despair?

Answering these questions is beyond this essay's scope and its author's capacity; but I can usefully conclude by plotting the space of possibilities in which the answers might be sought. Let us take that space to be bounded by two extremes. On the one hand Kierkegaard's acceptance of the Christian framework can be read as culturally determined and passive. We know he broke with Christianity briefly in his early twenties, but this was also a crisis in his relationship with his father, so we are not forced to conclude that the resumption of the framework was other than simply a return to normal. On this view, Kierkegaard's own belief, or disposition to believe, in the truth of Christian doctrine is essential to the way we read him; and Kierkegaard himself is well placed in the context of a society which, for the most part unlike ours, professed Christian doctrine. At the other extreme Kierkegaard's own belief is not essential at all—the important thing is that his *readers* professed Christian faith. Positing the Christian framework as an axiom is simply a piece of strategy on Kierkegaard's part: his aim is to show

his readers what their professions of faith really commit them to. Why? Not, on this interpretation, because Kierkegaard himself accepts the content of that faith, though that is surely also true, but because he would insist that whatever a person believes (and in the case of his intended readers it happens to be Christian doctrine), his belief should be formed in full clarity about the options between which it adjudicates. This reading, contrary to the first, gives us a radically decontextualized Kierkegaard who might conceivably be transported into the present and put on the framework of *disbelief* in order to test modern man against the over-complacent acceptance of agnosticism and atheism.

Surely neither extreme captures the truth of Kierkegaard's authorship. Nor indeed is it even likely that the motivational complex behind his activity can be referred to any single point between them, not even if we confine ourselves to just one phase, say that of 'Anti-Climacus.' As a suggestion on how the space of possibilities might be exploited, I have proposed elsewhere that we pick out two different points corresponding to a "passive," or unreflective, "problem" aspect and an "active," deliberate "solution" aspect.⁴ The passive aspect corresponds to a need, the kind of need that leaves one wanting a religious framework, and the active element to the adoption of that framework as a solution to the need. Whatever else may be said of the proposal, it at least has the merit of providing a ready explanation of the exclusion of the nihilistic alternative in Anti-Climacus's works. Anti-Climacus speaks for the solution, from a point of view for which the nihilistic alternative does not exist; denying Christ is either backsliding within the framework and to be described as the framework specifies, as falling in with the devil's invention for example, or it is leaving the framework of the solution and stepping back into that of the need. Problem and solution thus stand in two different "stages." Put succinctly, the reason why the framework is a solution is because it does not contain the conceptual resources for describing the need that gave rise to it. The framework heals the breach by leaving no room for the problem; instead, by "engag[ing] man [in eternity]

⁴See my "Refuge and Religion," in *Faith, Knowledge, Action: Essays to Niels Thulstrup*, ed. G. L. Stengren (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 1984) 43-53.

absolutely" and making life "infinitely more strenuous than . . . when [one is not] involved in Christianity" (JP 1: 844), it redefines our needs. Once God is there the need is to stand transparently before him, which is quite different from the need for there to be a God to be able to stand transparently before.

Any account of the "problem" stage will be colored by the framework in which it is given. Much of Kierkegaard, particularly *Anti-Climacus*, reads as though all that goes before is to be grasped from the point of view of what comes last, namely religiousness. In the aesthetic works, however, religiousness is approached prospectively, from a dialectical distance, reminding us of Hegel. Just as natural consciousness breaks down on close scrutiny but in the same moment points beyond itself to a higher unity, so the psychophysical closure (where soul is the determining category) opens in a splitting of finite and infinite, leaving the self no *saving* option but to grant its constitution by "another" in eternity and to relate itself to that ideal. But—as *Anti-Climacus* does not make explicit—that there *is* this saving option is not given unless we adopt the religious framework, and before doing that we will have to grant that nihilism might equally be true. That is the problem to which the framework is the solution.

Whether coloring the account of what goes before in the dispassionately anthropological way of this proposal takes us nearer to the heart of Kierkegaard or further away is, I think, an open question. But to grant that it does take us nearer is to allow still deeper questions to be raised. Is the need for which the framework is a solution itself "passive" in the sense of our first extreme, and thus local in cultural time and place (as Marx claims), or has Kierkegaard unearthed a universal spiritual need? Secondly, is the fact that Christian doctrine commends itself as the only solution also passive in that sense, or is it really the only way out? The vindication of Kierkegaard's thought for our or any time would seem to call for the latter answer in each case.⁵

⁵I would like to express my gratitude to Robert Perkins for helpful advice on the final disposition of this essay, and to Grethe Kjær and Julia Watkin for some very practical assistance.

III

Kierkegaard's Psychology and Unconscious Despair

Merold Westphal

If Walter Kaufmann had written a book on Kierkegaard, it might have borne the title *Kierkegaard: Philosopher, Psychologist, Christian*.¹ And it might be argued that the three descriptions appear in an order of ascending importance. If it is obvious that Kierkegaard thinks of himself as a Christian thinker first and foremost, it is perhaps less evident but no less important that he thinks of himself as a philosopher. It could even be argued that he calls himself a psychologist to express his role as antiphilosopher. Perhaps Kaufmann's subtitle should read: *Christian, Psychologist, Antiphilosopher*.

Through their subtitles Kierkegaard identifies four of his writings as explicitly psychological. *Repetition* is "An Essay in Experimental Psychology." *The Concept of Anxiety* is "A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin." The essay, "Guilty?/Not Guilty?" in *Stages on Life's Way* is "A Psychological Experiment." And the work before us, *The Sickness unto Death*, is "A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening."

What Kierkegaard means by psychology is not easy to say. Sometimes it seems to connote nothing more than the acute perception of the human scene, which is, for example, the indispens-

¹The title of his book on Nietzsche is *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*.

able starting point for the novelist, but he also regularly treats psychology in tandem with dogmatics as a kind of prolegomena to theology (R, 324; CA, 9; SUD, 77). This does not mean that the two treat of different subjects. Whether the theme is repetition, anxiety, or despair, psychology and dogmatics are viewed as two ways of discussing the same human experiences. They differ in that only dogmatics allows the introduction of the distinctively Christian categories of, for example, sin and atonement.

This makes it tempting to suggest that if Kierkegaard were writing today he would use the term 'phenomenology' where he actually uses 'psychology.' This is perhaps correct, but it raises as many questions as it answers. Apart from there being many varieties of phenomenology in our own century, there is the fact that Kierkegaard includes the (to us) theological assumption of God as the self's creator on the psychological or phenomenological side of the ledger. The present examination of the (to us) paradoxical notion of unconscious despair will seek to use crucial parts of *The Sickness unto Death* to throw light on Kierkegaard's concept of psychology and vice versa.

* * * * *

It is clear, in the first place, that Kierkegaard's psychology is a clinical psychology. Its starting point is sickness, its goal diagnosis and healing. It is theory for the sake of therapy. The dialectical factor must never compromise the rhetorical factor, by which Kierkegaard means that the pursuit of scholarly and scientific rigor, which is by no means repudiated, must always be in the service of edification or upbuilding. Only the ideal of indifferent knowledge is repudiated, making the goal of health ultimate and that of knowledge only penultimate (SUD, xiv, 5-6).² Kierkegaard's analyses of anxiety and despair are meant for clinical psychologists.

In the second place, Kierkegaard's psychology can be said, with an important qualification, to have an Aristotelian concept of health. Just as Aristotle insists that the well being of a human person is to be found in activity (*energeia*), so Kierkegaard stresses that

²On the question of indifferent knowledge Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are in profound agreement. See Merold Westphal, "Nietzsche and the Phenomenological Ideal," *The Monist* 60 (1977): 277-88.

it is not something that happens to us but something that we do. Whether we speak of falling unto despair, the sickness unto death, or of continuing in it, we must speak of will and responsibility (SUD, xiv, 16-17, 20). If we speak of health instead of sickness, the category of action if again necessary, for in the realm of spirit there is no immediate health, but only that health that coincides with the fulfillment of the task of becoming oneself (SUD, 25, 29).

This emphasis on health and illness as modes of activity is intended to take the interpretation of human well-being beyond what Kierkegaard calls the "sensate-psychical" categories which treat persons as less than spirit. These "external," "temporal," and "secular" categories basically come down to two pairs: pleasant/unpleasant and good/bad luck (SUD, 43, 51-52). Since Aristotle also wishes to raise the question of the self's health above the levels of feeling and fortune, and does so by stressing activity, Kierkegaard's view of health can be called Aristotelian.

Yet Aristotle calls this health happiness, and this is where the similarity must be qualified. Kierkegaard insists that "happiness is not a qualification of spirit, and deep, deep within the most secret hiding place of happiness there dwells also anxiety, which is despair" (SUD, 25). Part of the reason for this is the ease with which the term 'happiness' slips back to become a category of feeling or mood and connotes not the robust Aristotelian notion of activity but merely a sense of security, tranquility, or contentment (SUD, 24, 26). In the larger context Kierkegaard's complaint is not merely that the term will not retain its Aristotelian meaning; it is rather that the Aristotelian meaning itself is inadequate to the self whose health concerns him, the self as spirit.

This leads us to a third description of Kierkegaard's psychology. It rests, again with important qualification, on a Cartesian sense of the inwardness of the self. This comes to expression in a crucial part of the justly famous definition of the self at the beginning of *The Sickness unto Death*. "The self is a relation that relates itself to itself" (SUD, 13). The self is a relation in the first place because it is a synthesis of such dipolar factors as the infinite and finite, the temporal and the eternal, and freedom and necessity. Yet this is not enough to constitute selfhood. Only as this relation relates itself to itself does the self as spirit emerge. The self is essen-

tially self related; its being is to be found in the inwardness of its relation to itself.

This self-relation is, in the first place, self-consciousness. The self as a synthesis of, for example, the temporal and the eternal, is a self not by virtue of being such a synthesis but by virtue of being aware of being such a synthesis. Since the foundational role of self-consciousness is generally associated with the Cartesian *cogito*, we can speak of a Cartesian inwardness in Kierkegaard's psychology.

However, there is more to this inwardness than mere self-consciousness. Kierkegaard is explicit about the fact that the self's relation to itself is its freedom (SUD, 29). As spirit the self relates itself to itself not only in its awareness of itself, but also in its presiding over itself.

It is the inwardness with which the self's self-conscious freedom is understood by Kierkegaard that qualifies the Aristotelian factor in his psychology. It could be argued that since the Aristotelian self deliberates about voluntary actions, it is in possession of self-conscious freedom. But the activity which is the health and happiness of the Aristotelian self is the public activity of the citizen self; whereas the faith which is the health of the Kierkegaardian self is not. We get an especially dramatic account in *Fear and Trembling* of the knight of faith as publicly indistinguishable from the tax-collector, the clerk, the shopkeeper, the postman, the capitalist, the grocer, and other such thoroughly "Philistine" personages (FT, 38-40). The movements of faith which are the activity in which the knight of faith's health resides are neither the public activities of the citizen self nor the private deliberations which lead to such public behavior. All this the Aristotelian self has. What the knight of faith has that the Aristotelian self does not is another domain altogether in which action takes place, a domain that is neither the public domain of social intercourse nor the private domain which belongs essentially to it. This is why the ethical and religious stages are so sharply distinguished by Kierkegaard.

For purposes of illustration we can distinguish between the public and private aspects of a game of cards. If I play the queen of hearts, that is a public act which all can understand and evaluate. If, on the other hand, I look my cards over, carefully letting no one else see, to determine whether I have enough trumps left to

use one to take this trick, that is a private act. No one else knows what I see or what question I am asking myself. But the private act and the public act (and whole sets of similar acts) belong essentially to the same game. If, to extend the analogy, while playing cards I am also sending secret signals to a fellow spy in the room by the cards that I play and by the way I look my own cards over, that would be a private act of an entirely different sort. Although occurring in the same physical space, my activity as a spy and my activity as a card player occur in two quite different personal spaces, the former being quite inaccessible to those who are only card players.

Something similar to this characterizes the inwardness of the self as spirit. The privacy of the activity of its self-conscious freedom is not the privacy that belongs essentially to public social life but the privacy that stems from essentially *not* primarily belonging to public social life.

It is clear that the Cartesian *cogito* begins a movement in the direction of inwardness, taking seriously the non-identity of inner and outer, the gap between the public and private self. But it is not richly developed enough to be the foundation for the distinction just drawn between two radically different kinds of privacy.

The first step to correct this is a Hegelian one. Thus, as our fourth description, Kierkegaard's psychology embodies, with an important qualification, a Hegelian view of spirit as relational. Martin Buber puts it more succinctly, when he writes, "Spirit is not in the I but between I and You."³ This is the view that Hegel develops in detail in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where he defines spirit as the I that is We and the We that is I.⁴ This crucial moment in Hegelian thought comes as an amplification of the Cartesian-Kantian thesis that the "I think" must be able to accompany all my representations, or, to put it more directly, that (human) consciousness is inseparable from self-consciousness. The Hegelian move is sim-

³Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner's, 1970) 89. Sartre's phenomenology of "the look" in *Being and Nothingness* is another important development of the same fundamental insight.

⁴For the details of Hegel's argument see Chapter Four of the *Phenomenology* and Chapter Five of my own *History and Truth in Hegel's Phenomenology*, each with reference to the immediately preceding chapter.

ply to go one step further to the thesis that self-consciousness is inseparable from other-consciousness, that my awareness of my own self is always mediated through my awareness of another self. The self is thus triply relational. It is first of all the relation of those factors of which it is the synthesis, such as the temporal and the eternal. It is second the relation to itself by which it is self-conscious freedom. And it is third the relation to that other self through whom that self-consciousness is mediated. So Kierkegaard can call the self "a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another" (SUD, 13-14).

However, even before Kierkegaard states this Hegelian principle he qualifies it and thereby gives it a quite unhegelian direction. To see why he does this let us recapitulate. The Aristotelian factor in Kierkegaard's psychology is the emphasis on health as activity, but activity is so construed as to accommodate the outwardness of the ethical self (and the inwardness essential thereto) but not the inwardness of the religious self. Since in *The Sickness unto Death* the health of the self is understood to be faith and its illness, despair (which is eventually understood to be sin) the latter mode of inwardness is utterly essential. The Cartesian principle of self-consciousness is a step in the right direction. It has traditionally and correctly been understood as qualifying the objectivity of views like Aristotle's with a subjectivity that seeks to locate selfhood in inwardness and to provide a coherent account of inward activity. Yet this is, from Kierkegaard's perspective, a false step. For it generates inwardness artificially, by taking the domain of privacy which belongs essentially to the public domain as its anteroom, so to speak, the domain of Aristotelian deliberation and of Kantian motives; and with the help of methodological doubt it fixes an epistemic gulf between public and private realms that belong essentially together. To call this gulf artificial is simply to note that ontology does not recapitulate epistemology, that in our being as selves we are never cut off from the world of nature and other selves in a manner corresponding to the self-induced epistemic estrangement brought on by the quest for certainty.⁵

⁵Studies of Kierkegaard that emphasize the ontological dimensions of his thought include Michael Wyschogrod, *Kierkegaard and Heidegger*, Calvin Schrag, *Existence and Freedom*, and John Elrod, *Being and Existence in Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Works*.

The Hegelian concept of spirit reaffirms the rights of being over knowing by reminding us of this ontological truth. The self is, not accidentally and contingently, but essentially and necessarily in the presence of the other. By itself, of course, this does not solve the problem that makes the Hegelian concept of spirit inadequate for Kierkegaard's purposes. The principle of subjectivity becomes a social principle in which spirit as we, the unity of a plurality of selves, attains to self-conscious freedom. In Hegelian language, the subjectivity of spirit is the self-awareness of *Sittlichkeit*, the ethical life of a people or a nation. Even if, as in the *Phenomenology*, this community becomes in principle a universal community, unrestricted by national boundaries, there seems no room for the subjectivity or inwardness of faith. From the perspective of the individual, the Hegelian principle is simply a return to the Aristotelian self, whose health is activity, but whose activity is only that of the ethical stage, where the inwardness of faith is not to be found.

What Kierkegaard needs is to preserve the essential other-relatedness of the self (so as to avoid the artificial inwardness of Cartesian solipsism) while unfolding for the self a domain for activity in addition to that of the public, universal, ethical life of the human community (so as to gain the possibility of the inwardness of faith). To revert to the previous analogy, he needs to make it possible for the self to act as a spy while playing cards.⁶ This is done quite simply by identifying the other to whom the self primarily relates as God. So, before introducing the Hegelian principle in its general form, namely, that the self is "a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another," Kierkegaard introduces the formula that gives his own distinctive specification to this principle.

Such a relation that relates itself to itself must either have established itself or have been established by another.

If the relation that relates itself to itself has been established by another, then the relation is indeed the third, but this relation, the third, is yet again a relation and relates itself to that which established the entire relation.

The human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another. (SUD, 13-14)

⁶Kierkegaard himself is quite fond of the spy metaphor for inwardness.

Kierkegaard leaves no doubt that by this other which has established the self he means God (SUD, 27, 30, 35, 40, 46). Correspondingly his definition of faith as the health of the self as spirit is as follows: "In relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it" (SUD, 14, 49, 131; cf. 82). The self relates to itself and to God in all conditions. It will be a healthy self if, in relating to itself it wills to be itself and in relating to God it rests transparently in him as its creator.

From the ethical point of view (understood by Kierkegaard in Hegelian terms) it is the social order that is the self's ground, the "power that established it." The explicit designation of God as the ground of the self's being gives to Kierkegaard's psychology a polemical relation to Hegelian theory (and its Aristotelian foundation). Such a view treats one's fellow humans as the primary other to whom one relates. Since a right relation to this power that has established the self constitutes the self's health, the result is that each seeks "to be like others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man." "Surrounded by hordes of men . . . such a person forgets himself. . . ." Though motivated by a fear "of men" and a desire for "earthly advantages," which deserve to be called "cowardly," the rules for playing this game will be presented as the "rules of prudence." In the process people are "lumped together and deceived instead of being split apart so that each individual may gain the highest," the awareness of existing individually before the God who transcends both individual and social order.⁷ The virtue that places one's relation to society before one's relation to God is what the ancient church had in mind when "they said that the virtues of the pagans were glittering vices: they meant that the heart of paganism was despair, that paganism was not conscious before God as spirit." (Aristotle might be forgiven this, but Hegel professes to be a Christian thinker.) The result is that people mortgage themselves to the social world as Faust mortgaged himself to the devil.

⁷In the companion volume to *The Sickness unto Death*, Anti-Climacus writes, "Every individual ought to live in fear and trembling, and so too there is no established order which can do without fear and trembling. Fear and trembling signifies that one is in process of becoming . . . And fear and trembling signifies that a God exists—a fact which no man and no established order dare for an instant forget" (TC, 89).

Such a posture, whether in its theoretical version presented by Hegel or in its practical version as found in the life-style of bourgeois respectability, is a "secular" posture that leaves no room for faith, condemning the self to despair, the sickness unto death (SUD, 27, 33-35, 46).

The immediate implication of this understanding of the self is that one can be in despair without realizing it. Before investigating this central theme of the present essay more fully, two important points must be noted. The first is that this critique of Hegelian theory and bourgeois practice as a fixation at the ethical stage is by no means unique to *The Sickness unto Death*. The critique spelled out here, briefly but ever so unambiguously, is not only to be found in the other work by Anti-Climacus, *Training in Christianity*, but with equal clarity and force in such earlier writings as *Fear and Trembling*, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and *Two Ages*.⁸

To give but one example—the much discussed question of a theological suspension of the ethical in *Fear and Trembling* becomes the question whether the individual has an absolute duty to God. The following understanding of faith, in answer to that question, is best understood when we remember that by the universal Kierkegaard means society, the social order (*Sittlichkeit*), and by the absolute he means the God who loves and judges his human children both as individuals and as families, tribes, nations, and so forth.

The paradox of faith, then, is this: that the single individual is higher than the universal, that the single individual—to recall a distinction in dogmatics rather rare these days—determines his relation to the universal by his relation to the absolute, not his relation to the absolute by his relation to the universal. The paradox may also be expressed in this way: that there is an absolute duty to God, for in this relationship of duty the individual relates himself as the single individual absolutely to the absolute. . . . if this duty [to God] is absolute, then the ethical is reduced to the relative. From this it does not follow that the ethical should be invalidated; rather the ethical receives a completely different expression, a paradoxical expression, such as, for example, that love to God may bring the knight of faith to give his love to the neighbor—an expression opposite to that which, ethically speaking, is duty. (FT, 70)

⁸I have developed this critique in chs. 3–5 of *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1987).

One does not cease playing cards just because one is a spy. But playing cards takes a distinctly subordinate role to the task of spying; and one can continue playing cards only in so far as it is compatible with the requirements of spying, a "game" played by quite different rules. To give a more realistic example, those who are pacifists out of religious conviction are precisely those who are persuaded that obedience to God leads them, not to hate their neighbors, but to love them in a way that goes against the socially defined duty to kill in defense of the governmentally defined, national interest. Because their willingness to obey society, like that of Socrates in the *Apology* and the apostles in Acts 4 and 5, is relative to a higher commitment, they are bound to seem like traitors to those who view society as an absolute. These latter, in turn, are bound to seem like idolators to the former because they confuse an all too human social order with God. Kierkegaard's point, of course, is not to defend pacifism, but simply to keep open the space in which this kind of conflict between religious and social conscience can occur. The desire to eliminate this very possibility is what bothered him so deeply about both Hegel and his own Danish corner of of Christendom.⁹

The second item to be noted concerns Kierkegaard's individualism. It is clearly not a Cartesian individualism, in either of the two possible senses of that phrase. For, on the one hand, there is utterly nothing solipsistic about it. The self is essentially and absolutely related to one other person, God, and at the same time essentially but relatively related to the many other persons, soci-

⁹Ironically, it is Hegel's understanding of Protestantism that leads him into this disagreement with the intensely Lutheran Kierkegaard. "Thus ultimately, in the Protestant conscience the principles of the religious and of the ethical conscience come to be one and the same. . . . The moral life of the state and the religious spirituality of the state are thus reciprocal guarantees of strength." *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind*, trans. William Wallace and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) 291. And at the conclusion of his *Philosophy of History*, Hegel writes that "through the Protestant church the reconciliation of religion and law has taken place. There is no holy, religious conscience separated from or even opposed to secular law." *Werke* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970) 12: 539. For the larger context of these passages see Merold Westphal, "Hegel and the Reformation," in the proceedings of the 1982 meeting of the Hegel Society of America, *History and System*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984) 73-99.

ety, whose interaction constitutes the ethical stage, which the religious life seeks to eliminate or exclude (rather than merely relativise) only when it misunderstands itself. On the other hand there is nothing of that autonomy, that freedom from all authority which is also associated with the Cartesian project and its Enlightenment offspring, that makes the individual's human reason the ultimate operative standard of the true. The self does not deny society's ultimacy in order to affirm its own. It denies it in order to place both itself and its society under the care and critique of the God who alone is truly absolute. Individuals need to be "split apart" rather than "lumped together" (SUD, 27), not because they are either logically prior, or morally superior, to society, but because God is prior, and superior, to both individual and society, a fact that somehow seems easier to remember "apart" than "together." The inwardness of faith, which includes elements of both privacy and loneliness, comes from playing two games at once. The knight of faith is both playing cards and spying, while those around him may well be, for all he knows, only playing cards.

Kierkegaard's psychology has been seen to be in important respects Aristotelian, Cartesian, and Hegelian, though each of these aspects is sufficiently qualified to make it equally appropriate to speak of an anti-Aristotelian, anti-Cartesian, and anti-Hegelian psychology. The end result is a concept of the self as an essentially religious task, the task of becoming a self-conscious freedom that affirms both God as its establishing ground and itself as the actual self it is, by virtue of that primal creative act of God and the subsequent creative acts of its own freedom. Faith and despair are the respective names for fulfilling and failing to fulfill this task.

As already noted, it is an immediate implication of this normative concept of the self that one can be in despair without realizing it. Given a different understanding of the self and a correspondingly different understanding of despair, one could easily be in despair in the Kierkegaardian sense without a conscious sense of living one's life in hopelessness. Even with Kierkegaardian definitions in place one could easily affirm only an abstract God or an abstract self, that is, only a select portion of the

God who establishes the self or a select portion of the actual self established by divine and human freedom. In this case as well one would be in despair without actually realizing it. In giving examples of despair, Kierkegaard regularly suggests that the individual in question is a Christian in Christendom.

Yet it is misleading to speak of unconscious despair as an "immediate implication" of Kierkegaard's view. This can easily suggest that we have discovered something about his view that he had not noticed, or that he only leaves the implication for us to draw without making the point explicitly. In fact it is a major, overt theme of *The Sickness unto Death* that the individual is not a reliable index of whether he or she is in despair or not. Already by treating despair as a sickness rather than as a symptom, such as a pain or an itch, Kierkegaard sets the stage for the claim that his essay is written for those who would be physicians of the spirit—whose expert knowledge is the standard by which health is judged. Just as we take it for granted in the physical realm that a person with a serious problem of high blood pressure or cancer may at a given time feel perfectly comfortable and well, so Kierkegaard wants to claim that in the realm of spirit the patient's report that all is well stands open to correction by the physician whose knowledge makes for a more reliable judgment (SUD, 5, 22-23; cf. 29-30, 43-45).

The "customary" or "common" view assumes an asymmetry between the realms of physical and spiritual medicine. While it accepts the doctor's expertise in the former realm, it assumes that I am the criterion of my own spiritual health. Despair is a psychic state just like the raw feelings that have become so prominent in recent philosophy of mind. For such states the difference between appearance and reality is inoperative. I cannot feel that I have a pain or an itch and then discover that I didn't have one after all. If it felt like it hurt, it hurt (even if I can find no adequate physical cause of the pain). My own reports about these matters are either incorrigible, or, if not, the closest approximation to incorrigibility about empirical fact one could hope for.

Kierkegaard finds this view to be "a very poor understanding of despair," so "superficial" as to be "totally false" (SUD, 22-23, 26). In rejecting it he makes a total break with the Cartesian assumption that that mind, being transparent to itself, is more easily

known than the body. Or, to put it differently, he rejects the identification of mind or spirit with that surface of consciousness that is the domain of raw feelings. If the move to inwardness removes Kierkegaard's psychology from empirical psychology in the experimental sense, it is not because he seeks to lay the foundations for an introspective psychology. Like psychoanalysis, his psychology will be a depth psychology. And, in so far as it is a phenomenology, it will not be a Husserlian phenomenology, built upon Cartesian foundations, but a Heideggerian, hermeneutic phenomenology, which refuses to take what is self-evident to everyday consciousness as the last word on anything.

To readers in an era overflowing with theories of false consciousness, Marxian, psychoanalytic, hermeneutical, and structuralist, Kierkegaard seems like a true contemporary—at least at this point. To those who have learned from Freud, for example, that there can be unconscious fears and desires, the idea of unconscious despair (and anxiety, about which Kierkegaard wants to say the same thing, SUD, 44; CA, 95-96)¹⁰ should not be an insuperable stumbling block. This means that Kierkegaard will be of interest to us, not by virtue of presenting a theory of false consciousness in general, but by virtue of the specifics of that theory. His view of the self as self-conscious freedom before God—already noted—is the first and most central of these specifics. Further specification comes in his attempts to classify the forms of despair.

Kierkegaard's classification of the forms of despair takes up the greatest portion of Part One of *The Sickness unto Death*.¹¹ It falls into two major subdivisions. In the first despair is considered "without regard to its being conscious nor not." In the second despair is considered "as defined by consciousness." It appears that Kierkegaard means that the forms treated in the first can occur at any

¹⁰Jean-Paul Sartre echoes Kierkegaard in speaking of unconscious anxiety in his celebrated essay "Existentialism Is a Humanism," in *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, expanded ed., ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: New American Library, 1975) 351-52.

¹¹Although the whole of *The Sickness unto Death* bears the subtitle identifying the work as a "psychological exposition," Part Two, entitled "Despair Is Sin," employs distinctly Christian categories in such a way as to suggest that it belongs to theology, which Kierkegaard calls dogmatics, leaving Part One as the purely psychological part.

point on the spectrum of consciousness/unconsciousness. Since that spectrum, as he understands it, is developed in the second subdivision, the full understanding of the first presupposes the analysis of the second, and accordingly we proceed from the later to the earlier portions of the text.

Despair as defined by consciousness comes in two major divisions, the second of which is in turn divided in two, giving us three major points of reference on the consciousness/unconsciousness spectrum. At one extreme there is "The Despair That Is Ignorant of Being Despair, or the Despairing Ignorance of Having a Self and an Eternal Self." Then there is "The Despair That Is Conscious of Being Despair and Therefore Is Conscious of Having a Self in Which There Is Something Eternal and Then Either in Despair Does Not Will to Be Itself or in Despair Wills to Be Itself" (SUD, vi). We could call the first mode of despair either the despair of ignorance or the despair of spiritlessness with good textual justification, but in the present context it will be best to call it simply unconscious despair. Kierkegaard himself gives specific designations to the two modes of conscious despair. The despair that does not will to be itself he calls the despair of weakness; and the despair that in despair wills to be itself he calls the despair of defiance.

By the despair of weakness Kierkegaard intends a special case of something like the Aristotelian *akrasia*, moral weakness as the lack of will power. Because of something that happens to me or because of something I do, I am tempted to give up on myself. I know better and cannot plead ignorance; but I don't have the strength to resist this temptation, so I fall into the despair of not willing to be myself. I either wish to be someone else, or, in a more sophisticated form, I disown myself without seeking to be someone else by withdrawing into a private reserve from which I become the observer of the self I do not wish to be (SUD, 49-67).¹²

By the despair of defiance Kierkegaard intends the most intensely conscious mode of despair, whose formula is: in despair to will to be oneself. Neither the suffering that has come to me nor the shameful things I may have done cause me to give up on my-

¹²What Kierkegaard seems to have in mind here is what R. D. Laing calls the schizoid self in *The Divided Self*. Dostoyevski's Underground Man would be a dramatic example.

self. I will be myself no matter what, but in the mode of demonic defiance. This means that I am willing to be self-conscious freedom, but not before God. I will neither be comforted nor corrected by anyone other than myself. Kierkegaard calls this absolute self-assertion Promethean, though Lucifer would be at least as good a model, for the despair of defiance is the desire of the finite self to be God (SUD, 67-74).¹³

Kierkegaard devotes considerable care to defining the boundaries between weakness and defiance and between both these modes of conscious despair and unconscious despair. While the issues raised by this schema are very significant, the most important point for present purposes is that Kierkegaard deliberately blurs these boundaries in the very process of drawing them. For example, "No despair is entirely free of defiance; indeed, the very phrase 'not to will to be' implies defiance. On the other hand, even despair's most extreme defiance is never really free of some weakness. So the distinction is only relative" (SUD, 49; cf. 20).

Even more important, the boundary between conscious and unconscious despair is equally relative. The formula of all despair is "to will to be rid of oneself" (SUD, 20). So there is will in all despair; but will and consciousness are proportionate, which seems to suggest that just as every despair involves some degree of will, it also involves some degree of consciousness (SUD, 29). Kierkegaard hints more directly at this conclusion when he writes, "Despair at its minimum is a state that—yes, one could humanly be tempted almost to say that in a kind of innocence it does not even know that it is despair. There is the least despair when this kind of unconsciousness is greatest" (SUD, 42). Apart from indicating that the unconsciousness of which he speaks is a matter of degree, Kierkegaard triply qualifies the idea that in innocence I might not know I am in despair. That is something he will "almost" say; it is something he might be "tempted" to say. And that temptation comes from seeing things "humanly."¹⁴ But eventually Kierkegaard becomes completely explicit.

¹³See Isaiah 14:12-14 in the King James Version. In *Being and Nothingness* it is a central thesis of Sartre that each of us is the desire to be God.

¹⁴In *The Sickness unto Death* as elsewhere in Kierkegaard's writings, "humanly

Actual life is too complex merely to point out abstract contrasts such as that between a despair that is completely unaware of being so and a despair that is completely aware of being so. Very often the person in despair probably has a dim idea of his own state, although here again the nuances are myriad. To some degree, he is aware of being in despair, feels it in the way a person does who walks around with a physical malady but does not want to acknowledge forthrightly the real nature of the illness. . . . he may try to keep himself in the dark about his state through diversions and in other ways, for example, through work and busyness as diversionary means, yet in such a way that he does not entirely realize why he is doing it, that is to keep himself in the dark. . . . There is indeed in all darkness and ignorance a dialectical interplay between knowing and willing. (SUD, 48)¹⁵

So it turns out that the three reference points of Kierkegaard's spectrum of despair are abstract idealizations. No real, concrete despair is a pure instance of any of these. Weakness and defiance are always intermingled in varying degrees, and the same is true of consciousness and unconsciousness. What started out as unconscious despair or the despair of ignorance is more accurately called the despair of bad faith. There is, to be sure, a certain oblivion, but it is achieved only as I manage not to notice that of which I am at the same time aware.¹⁶ So as we turn back to consider the forms of despair without reference to whether they are conscious or not, we need to remember not only that they can exemplify varying combinations of weakness and defiance, but also that we are likely to encounter the ignorance or unconsciousness of bad faith. In fact, Kierkegaard considers this latter mode of despair to

speaking" is contrasted with "Christianly understood" to designate the religiously inadequate perspective of those without faith (SUD, 7-8, 38-40). For the critical role this distinction plays in Kierkegaard's treatment of faith and reason, see ch. 6 of *Kierkegaard's Critique*.

¹⁵This is why Kierkegaard is so vehement in rejecting the "Socratic definition of sin" as ignorance (SUD, 87-96).

¹⁶Sartre's account of bad faith in *Being and Nothingness* can be read as a generalization of Kierkegaard's account of unconscious despair. In both cases the bipolarity of the self provides the occasion for flight from one pole to the other. In Sartre's case the poles are facticity and transcendence, which correspond very closely to the two pairs Kierkegaard discusses in detail, finite/infinite and possibility/necessity.

be not only the most dangerous but also the most common form (SUD, 44-45). It is dangerous for the obvious reason that despair is an illness that will almost surely go untreated as long as it is not felt. The sick soul that succeeds in hiding its illness from itself cannot get well and is likely to get worse. But in spite of being dangerous, unconscious despair, now understood as the despair of bad faith, is anything but rare because of its dual advantage over more conscious forms of despair. It is less painful and it provides less impetus to do something about it, thereby leaving the inertia of everyday life unchallenged.

A typical pattern in which Kierkegaard gives examples of various forms of despair revolves around the distinction between external and internal. On the one hand despair is externally motivated by some misfortune that befalls me; on the other hand I am led to despair from within because of something disreputable I have done. Overcome by either sorrow or shame I give up on myself, willing in some manner to be rid of the self I actually am. In these cases the point of reference for despair, the dust particle around which it forms, so to speak, is a contingent, empirical fact.

When Kierkegaard turns to discuss despair without reference to the balance between consciousness and unconsciousness within it, the point of reference is changed. Now it is the essential structures of the self that provide the occasion or opportunity for despair. These structures Kierkegaard typically sees dialectically as pairs of opposites as inseparable from each other as vowels and consonants or inhaling and exhaling (SUD, 37, 40). Examples of such categorial structures would include immediacy/reflection, inner/outer, real/ideal, temporal/eternal, finite/infinite, and possibility/necessity or freedom/necessity. The last three of these pairs are part of the definition of the self with which *The Sickness unto Death* begins. As the synthesis of each pair, the self is already a relation that can then be related to itself (SUD, 13). But it is only the last two of these pairs that are examined in the section now under discussion. Perhaps Kierkegaard's refusal to be systematically complete is a silent barb directed at the System, but it is at least as likely that he seeks only to give sufficient illustration of the kind of thing he

has in mind to make it possible for the attentive reader to work out the other cases as exercises.¹⁷

The first dipolar category to be discussed is finitude/infinity. The self is the tension of being both finite and infinite. Its task is to will to be itself (not something else). If it affirms its infinity at the expense of its finitude or vice versa, it is willing to be something other than itself, willing to be rid of itself. It is in despair, an illness we can now imagine as the attempt to speak using either vowels or consonants exclusively or to breathe by inhaling without exhaling or vice versa.

As infinite the self must move away from itself, never becoming the one-dimensional self that allows the given to define the horizon of reality. But as finite the self must always come back to itself, recognizing that our dreams not only should, but also do, exceed our grasp. Despair as the infinity which lacks finitude is the self's movement away from itself without that return (SUD, 30-31). Far from being bound to the given, unrestrained imagination gives rise first to fantasy and then to the fantastic self, to variations on the theme of Walter Mitty.

The fantastic self feels, knows, and wills in the realm of fantasy. Fantastic feeling is the sentimentality that expands itself so as to encompass all and in the process ends up with no one. It is perfectly expressed in the saying, I love humanity—it's my neighbors I can't stand. Fantastic knowing is inhuman in a different way. It is simply the increase in knowledge without any increase in self-knowledge, the objectivity that keeps the knower outside of every frame of reference under discussion and thereby immune to the questioning that constitutes inquiry.¹⁸ Since the given is not recognized as a self-evident norm, knowledge may well have the form of critique, but it will never be self-criticism. Fantastic willing is the making of big plans without the willingness to take personal responsibility for the small

¹⁷There is also the fact of his related discussions elsewhere. The extensive treatment of temporal/eternal in *The Concept of Anxiety*, to which *The Sickness unto Death* is a kind of sequel, may account for his mentioning this category as constitutive but developing only the other two pairs.

¹⁸Fantastic knowing is satirized in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* as objectivity. That satire is renewed in *The Sickness unto Death* 43 and 90.

part of the task that can be undertaken immediately. Planning and dreaming never give rise to work (SUD, 31-32).

The opposite form of despair is the finitude that lacks infinity. The fantastic volatilizing of the self is replaced by a reductionist narrowing. While the former view may have a religious form, the apotheosis of the finite is essentially secular (SUD, 33). Of the many modes of finitude that make up the facticity of the self, Kierkegaard focuses here exclusively on that of the social order. The despair that takes this as the given which defines its horizon is expressed in the old motto of Sam Rayburn, To get along, go along. A significant portion of that critique of the self's fixation at the ethical stage which was summarized earlier in this essay occurs at this point. Surrounded by "hordes" of others, the self forgets itself and out of "fear of men" seeks to reduce its difference from others to mere numerical difference. While the previous form of despair, with its implicit critique of the *status quo*, may be unwelcome in society at large, this form gives the individual "an increasing capacity for going along superbly in business and social life, indeed, for making a great success in the world," for it consists in practicing the "prudence" that "makes life cozy" (SUD, 34). Thus whereas actuality does a favor to the former kind of despair by punishing it, it shows this form of illness the dubious friendship of reinforcing it.

Since it is clear that at least one example of the despair of finitude would be the self that gets to the ethical stage but not beyond it, treating as ultimate the determinateness of a given social order, it makes sense to ask whether the despair of infinity corresponds to the aesthetic stage on life's way. One only needs to ask the question to see how appropriate an affirmative answer is. For the aesthetic stage, especially in those forms most closely associated with romantic irony, can well be interpreted as reflection and imagination that have broken completely free from all givens, assuming that ideality is only to be found by leaving reality behind.¹⁹ Thus Kier-

¹⁹This obviously makes the analysis of despair a commentary on *The Concept of Irony* and vol. 1 of *Either/Or*. For the similarities and differences between Kierkegaard and Hegel as critics of romantic irony, see Robert L. Perkins, "Hegel and Kierkegaard: Two Critics of Romantic Irony," *Review of National Literatures*, 1 (1970): 232-54.

kegaard's treatment of this kind of despair and of faith as its cure is at one level simply another statement of his theory of the stages.

In view of the central importance of the categories of finite and infinite in Hegel's thought, the question unavoidably arises whether we are also dealing here with another chapter in Kierkegaard's dialogue with Hegel. The answer is yes, but perhaps not as expected. Kierkegaard, rather than criticizing the dialectical relationship between finitude and infinity as set forth in Hegelian logic, employs it for his own purposes. It might be thought that for Kierkegaard (as with Descartes, for example), finite and infinite designate two fundamentally different kinds of self, human and divine. Yet we have just seen that he applies the two categories simultaneously to the human self (without any intention of lessening the ontological gap between the human and divine). Since this dialectical understanding of the categories as dipolar lies at the basis of both a major agreement with Hegel and the repetition of a familiar criticism, it will be helpful to take a brief look at Hegel's development of it.

Hegel calls the true or genuine (*wahrhafte*) infinite—which “must be defined and enunciated as the unity of the finite and infinite”—the “fundamental concept of philosophy” and the basis for the fact that “every genuine philosophy is idealism” (LL, 95).²⁰ This concept must be sharply distinguished from that of the “bad” or spurious (*schlechte*) infinite. The latter is the infinity of “endless iteration” or “endless progression” as in the movement through space or time *ad infinitum*. It is dualistic in its implications and involves a “rigid” and “insuperable opposition between finite and infinite” (LL, 94, 94Z, 95).

Things are finite simply by being determinate, in accordance with Spinoza's maxim, *Omnis determinatio est negatio* (LL, 91Z). The negation that determination implies is that of being this and not that and thus it essentially involves being limited in the sense of being related to that which is other. If infinity were to be found

²⁰LL is introduced here as a new siglum. It represents Hegel's “Lesser Logic,” the version found in the *Encyclopedia*. The numbers are paragraph rather than page, numbers, since these are standard to all translations. ‘Z’ following a paragraph number signifies the *Zusatz* to that paragraph. With a few changes I have followed the Wallace translation.

through the abstract negation of this negation, it would mean the surpassing of all limits through a flight to indeterminacy, the famous night in which all cows are black about which Hegel complained in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*. In existential terms it is escapism. For “to suppose that by stepping out and away into that infinity we release ourselves from the finite, is in truth but to seek the release which comes by flight. But the man who flees is not yet free: in fleeing he is still conditioned by that from which he flees.” Philosophy does not concern itself with “such empty and other-worldly stuff” as this infinity of indeterminacy, for “what philosophy has to do with is always something concrete and utterly present” (LL, 94Z).

The true movement to infinity is not that of flight from the finite and the other-relatedness which is basic thereto. The real infinite “consists in being at home with itself in its other, or, if enunciated as a process, in coming to itself in its other” (LL, 94Z). To remain self-related in the midst of, rather than as an alternative to, other-relation is the true infinity that can be called being-for-self (*Fürsichsein*).

It is already clear not only that such concepts as self-subsistence, self-relation, and self-determination are closer to the Hegelian concept of infinity than to any notion of abstract limitlessness, but also that the nature of freedom is at issue here.²¹ When Hegel comments that “the man who flees is not yet free,” it is clear that there is edification to be found, of all places, in Hegel's logic. As this dimension becomes more overt, the harmony between Kierkegaard's critique of the despair of infinitude and Hegel's view of essentially the same phenomenon is dramatic.

Man, if he wishes to be actual, must be-there-and-then [*muss da-sein*], and to this end he must set a limit to himself. People who are too fastidious toward the finite never reach actuality, but linger lost in abstraction, and their light dies away. (LL, 92Z)

The man who will do something great must learn, as Goethe says, to limit himself. The man who, on the contrary, would do

²¹In connection with the concept of freedom the same dialectic of determinacy, indeterminacy, and self-determination occurs in Paragraphs 5 to 7 of the *Philosophy of Right*. For an interpretation see Merold Westphal, “Hegel's Theory of the Concept,” in *Art and Logic in Hegel's Philosophy*, ed. Warren E. Steinkraus and Kenneth L. Schmitz (New Jersey: Humanities, 1980) 103-19.

everything, really would do nothing, and fails. There is a host of interesting things in the world: Spanish poetry, chemistry, politics, and music are all very interesting, and if any one takes an interest in them we need not find fault. But for a person in a given situation to accomplish anything, he must stick to one definite point, and not dissipate his forces in many directions. (LL, 80Z)

On the basis of the same understanding of the self as both finite and infinite, agreement turns to sharp criticism when Kierkegaard turns to the despair of finitude which lacks infinity. We have already seen that in this section he restates his fundamental critique of Hegelian theory and bourgeois life-style for remaining fixed at the ethical stage. We need only see how this can be expressed in terms of finite and infinite. Like Hegel and against the extremes of romantic irony, Kierkegaard finds the infinity of the self not in pure self-relation, but in being "at home with itself in its other" (LL, 94Z). In fact, his formula for faith as the self's health is an echo of this Hegelian formula. The self-relating self is "at home with itself," just to the degree that it wills to be itself, and it has this relation "in its other" just to the degree that it rests transparently in the power that established it. What has happened here is that Kierkegaard has specified God as the other in relation to which the self experiences its true infinity. This does not occur in the self's relation to other human selves, individual or collective, for these, unlike God, are not infinite in themselves, and finitude's relation to finitude does not generate infinity. A good deal would need to be spelled out to indicate just in what sense God is infinite in himself. If Kierkegaard were a systematic theologian he would need to undertake this task himself, but for his purpose the negative point is the crucial one, the reminder that society is not the other in relation to which we experience our true freedom. All those who, in theory or in practice, make society infinite in itself, either by making it the sole other to which the self relates, or by making it the basis and norm for the self's God relation (taking over the role of mediator between God and men as suggested in the passage cited earlier from *Fear and Trembling*), have lapsed into the despair that consists of accepting the self's finitude but not its true infinity. Though there is no direct reference to Hegel here (since Kierkegaard is more immediately concerned with the practice of this despair than with its

theoretical rationalization), it is clear from his other writings that he sees Hegel as the chief theoretician of this despair. Like Judge William, Hegel has a penetrating insight into the extreme and one-sided self-understanding of those individuals who define themselves counter-culturally, but little or none into those whose selfhood is simply given to them by their culture.

When Kierkegaard turns to the category possibility/necessity the question of freedom is even more explicitly in the foreground (SUD, 29). Once again the two factors are equally necessary to the self's health, and the acceptance of one at the expense of the other will be a sickness unto death (SUD, 35, 37, 40). As living the tension of being finite/infinite involves the self moving away from itself yet always coming back to itself, so here the movement of possibility is the self's movement from its place. But the metaphor changes in describing the other half of the truth. ("The mirror of possibility . . . does not tell the truth. . . . [but] only a half-truth" (SUD, 37).) Necessity can be described as the constraint upon the self, but we grasp it more deeply when we see that "necessity is literally the place where it is. To become is a movement away from that place, but to become oneself is a movement in that place" (SUD, 35-36). The task of living this tension is to move away from one's place while moving in it, to transform rather than to escape one's situation.²²

If possibility "outruns" necessity and the self seeks to move away from its place without remaining in it, then "the self runs away from itself in possibility," a form of escapism similar to the despair of infinitude—and with the same results. Such running away "neither moves from the place where it is nor arrives anywhere." It is so swallowed up by possibility that it loses all actuality in the sense of actualizing possibilities. Lacking action, the essence of selfhood, the self becomes a "phantasmagoria" of possibilities, a human (or better, inhuman) "mirage" (SUD, 35-36).

Although for Kierkegaard the self's place is synonymous with constraint, he does not view the inactivity of this despair as the self's being overpowered by necessity. "When a self becomes lost

²²The concept of "place" in this context clearly has the same generality as the concept of "situation" in the writings of Jaspers, Marcel, and Sartre.

in possibility in this way, it is not merely because of a lack of energy. . . . What is missing is essentially the power to obey, to submit to the necessity in one's life, to what may be called one's limitations" (SUD, 36). In short, Kierkegaard picks this particular point to remind us of his general claim that despair is never purely a matter of weakness but always has at least an element of defiance in it.

The opposite despair, where necessity eliminates possibility, is, like the despair in which finitude eliminates infinity, viewed as an essentially secular project. Kierkegaard views God as the ground of the self's true possibility just as he is of the self's true infinitude. There are two ways of denying this possibility. Fatalism or determinism is the total denial of possibility. Just because of its unambiguous posture, it is less subtle than the "philistine-bourgeois" version of this despair. It does not deny possibility altogether, but it is "completely wrapped up in probability, within which possibility finds its small corner; therefore it lacks the possibility of becoming aware of God." This last aspect stems from the fact that probability is based on a "trivial compendium of experiences as to how things go, what is possible, what usually happens," that is, when God is left out of the picture (SUD, 41).

Here as in *Fear and Trembling*, where Abraham by faith is able to hope for the return of Isaac contrary to all human understanding of what is possible, Kierkegaard draws the sharpest possible contrast between "humanly speaking, there is no possibility" and "with God everything is possible" (SUD, 38). Prayer becomes the touchstone for this kind of faith, the prayer that believes that with God everything is possible and therefore refuses to be bound by what is, humanly speaking, possible. Neither the determinist-fatalist nor the philistine-bourgeois modes in which necessity triumphs over possibility know the meaning of prayer in this sense. In Kierkegaard's view they are smothered by necessity, unable to breathe. In an equally dramatic figure, Kierkegaard says that without prayer "man is essentially as inarticulate as the animals" (SUD, 40-41).

Once again we are dealing with categories important to Hegel's logic, and in treating them dialectically as co-present within the self, Kierkegaard invites us again to ask about the relation of his analysis to Hegel's. His discussion of the despair of possibility (lacking

necessity) looks at first glance to be a direct criticism of Hegel's treatment of the modal categories. In the middle of his analysis of the loss of action and actuality that this despair involves he writes, "The philosophers are mistaken when they explain necessity as a unity of possibility and actuality—no, actuality is the unity of possibility and necessity" (SUD, 36). This seems directed at Hegel, who writes, "Necessity has been defined, and rightly so, as the union of possibility and actuality" (LL, 147).²³ But Hegel goes on to add that this account "gives a superficial and therefore unintelligible description of the very difficult notion of necessity." There is something useful about the formula, but it is by no means a summary of what Hegel wants to say. Although in his lengthy attempt to specify just what he does want us to understand by these modal categories he does not propose Kierkegaard's counter-formula, that actuality is the union of possibility and necessity, his paragraph 143 with its *Zustatz* reads like an extended commentary on that formula. In any case it constitutes a critique of free-floating possibility very much in the same spirit as Kierkegaard's. We can summarize by saying that whenever the imagination seeks to soar away from all givens, all limits, all constraints into a realm of absolute freedom, whether under the rubric of infinity or possibility or whatever, Hegel and Kierkegaard will be united in calling it back to earth and insisting that it submit to the discipline of determinacy.

As with the corresponding discussion of the despair of finitude, the account of the despair of necessity (lacking possibility) can be read as an anti-Hegelian polemic. However, this time the spotlight of criticism is not at all sharply focused on Hegel. The kind of prayer that corresponds to Abraham's faith is the mark of a healthy preservation of possibility in the "place" of necessity. It can be safely said that this kind of prayer is nowhere to be found in Hegel's writings, not even in his *Philosophy of Religion*, and certainly not in his discussion of the modal categories in his logic. Yet there

²³Hegel's own comment, which has the mark of condemnation by faint praise, is most likely directed at Leibniz, who interprets the ontological proof of God's existence in terms of this formula. As a necessary being, God cannot exist contingently. Only self-contradiction could hinder the existence of such a being. So, if God's existence is possible, it is actual. Since that is what it means to be a necessary being, necessity is the actuality that is given by its own possibility.

is nothing distinctively Hegelian about this absence; and this theme is as absent from Kierkegaard's other overt Hegel critiques as the charge that Hegel allows society to usurp God's place is present. The primary target here is that "philistine-bourgeois" mentality whose spiritlessness seems to have prevailed throughout Christendom. At this point Kierkegaard is less concerned that Hegel doesn't teach his readers to pray than that no one else, including the reverend clergy, seems to have done it either. We are on the verge of the attack upon Christendom.

Although in this section attention has been focused on forms of despair with reference to the dialectical structure of the self but without reference to whether it is conscious or not, we have tried to keep in mind Kierkegaard's dual claim that a) unconscious despair is the most common form of despair and that b) no despair is fully ignorant or unconscious of itself but can seem to be so only through self-deception, distracting its own attention from that of which it is all the time aware. It would seem to be Kierkegaard's assumption, then, that the four forms of despair just discussed most frequently occur as forms of bad faith, in which the person in despair seems, even to himself or herself, not to realize what is happening (though this appearance is misleading).

If we make this assumption with Kierkegaard, at least for purposes of discussion, we can ask two further questions about unconscious despair. The first concerns the deepest motivations of this despair. If we ask why finitude would seek to free itself from infinity or possibility from necessity or, in each case, vice versa, a first answer that suggests itself from Kierkegaard's analysis is laziness. The task of living the tension of the dialectical simultaneity of dipolar categories is an extraordinarily demanding and strenuous task. In fact, this way of describing it is misleading, for this task is difficult in a totally different way from that of ordinary tasks. Instead of an extraordinarily strenuous task we should speak of a uniquely strenuous task. The inertia of everyday life resists the call to such engagement. Spiritually speaking, the self falls into despair because it is lazy.

There is a second and deeper motivation—pride.²⁴ In each case the despair under discussion is the refusal to submit. Where infin-

²⁴Overt references to pride and despair are found at *The Sickness unto Death* 65

ity and possibility run amuck, it is the refusal to submit to the constraints of creaturehood; and where finitude and necessity gain the upper hand, it is the refusal to submit to the creator, to the commands and the consolation of the one who is higher than everything human, individual or corporate.

This leads to a second discovery about motivation and to a new question about unconscious despair, this time one that Kierkegaard himself does not seem to ask. If I am led to despair out of laziness and pride, that fact by itself will give me all the impetus I need to obscure it from my view, because I do not like to think of myself as acting in that way and will gladly avail myself of whatever opportunities for bad faith may be at hand. If, then, the very motivation for despair itself provides the motivation for being in bad faith about it, what possibilities for that bad faith are inherent in the situation? No doubt the capacity for bad faith is sufficient that, when the need is strong enough, no special assistance is necessary. Even if it is not strictly needed, the situation before us does offer such special assistance in diverting attention from that of which I am nevertheless aware. It comes in the form of "the other guy."

The dialectical structure of the categories involved here means that the forms of despair come in pairs of opposites. Each mode of despair is, with respect to its dipolar partner, the equal but opposite one-sidedness. Yet each can easily see the one-sidedness of the other more easily than its own, and in fact, it can easily persuade itself that, simply by virtue of being different from and opposed to that obvious error, it must have struck upon the way of truth. Thus, to use a contemporary example, it is easy to see instances where communism has been a violation of basic human rights and dignity, but not so easy to see that in the name of anti-communism human rights and dignity can just as easily be trampled under foot. A genuinely neutral observer might well see equal but opposite ways of being inhuman to those not strong enough to defend themselves; but to those involved on either side, the obvious sins of the other side serve to make their own, somehow, into virtue.

and 112, but the linkage is structurally much stronger than these two passages by themselves would suggest.

Something like that is surely at work in the forms of despair we have been considering. They occur in a social context where their opposites can be easily observed. The aesthete, the romantic, the bohemian, in short, the impersonation of counter-cultural imagination has no difficulty in seeing and skillfully satirizing the blandness and hypocrisy of main line society. At the same time the Judge Williamses of the world, along with all their fellow defenders of decency and order, have no trouble detecting the arrogance and irresponsibility of their opposites; and while they may not be as witty in denouncing them, they make up for it with the fervor of their moral indignation. The problem is simply that the conspicuousness of the shortcomings of "the enemy" becomes an all too effective instrument that enables me to blind myself to my own despair.

Here we find one of the deepest roots of Kierkegaard's individualism. It is not that he has no use for society or the church. It is rather that he knows that health requires self-knowledge, that bad faith is a major obstacle to that self-knowledge, and that bad faith is sustained by those situations in which I can always compare myself to those whose sins are more obvious (to me) than my own. There is a therapeutic as well as an ontological foundation to Kierkegaard's concern to get the individual alone before God. This is by no means where health ends up, but this is the only place it can begin.

IV

Kierkegaard's Double Dialectic of Despair and Sin

James L. Marsh

In fact, I state the title of this essay only to take it back immediately, for I think finally that there is one dialectic in *The Sickness unto Death*, with two different aspects, a philosophical and a religious. Reflecting on a "double dialectic," however, has advantages. One is that I can do justice to Kierkegaard's movement from a basically philosophical and ontological conception of the despairing self to a religious and Christian conception.

Second, I can stress the play between the philosophical and religious conceptions. Not only is there a dialectic within each sphere, but there is also a dialectic between the two spheres, out of which the one dialectic emerges. There is, then, a movement from multiplicity to unity, difference to identity, but the identity is an identity in difference in which the philosophical and religious remain as distinct but related aspects of one whole.

Third, my paper will traverse a path moving from the relative externality of the dialectics to one another to relative internality, where we see that one is really part of another. Such a path moves through the stages of parallelism between the two dialectics, inversion, complementarity, *Aufhebung*, and paradox. In such movement, "sin" becomes more inclusive, incorporating "despair" as an aspect of itself. Despair correlates with philosophy and sin to faith. As the content of despair gives way to sin in the essay, so the form of philosophy gives way to faith, and mediation to paradox.