



Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair

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Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death* is one of the great philosophical works of the 19th century, as well as a seminal work in existential literature. Unfortunately, many readers are frequently put off by Kierkegaard's often unnecessarily obscure jargon in the work. In fact, I would hazard to say that most people who start reading *Sickness Unto Death* do not get beyond the first sentence in the text, in which Kierkegaard gives his famous definition of the self:

Man is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation which accounts for it that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but consists in the fact that the relation relates itself to its own self...If this relation which relates itself to its own self is constituted by another, the relationship doubtless is the third term, but this relationship (the third term) is in turn a relation relating itself to that which constitutes the whole relation.

With writing like this, it's no wonder that *The Sickness Unto Death* never attained the kind of broader appeal that other existential works have. And yet despite the often convoluted language of the text, many of Kierkegaard's ideas in *The Sickness Unto Death* are, of interest, not just for philosophers, but for anyone who is deeply concerned with understanding his or her own human condition. To understand what it means to be human, you have to understand the nature of despair. And to do that properly, there is no better place to turn than *The Sickness Unto Death*.

The aim of this text is to provide the newcomer to the thought of Kierkegaard with the background necessary to understand the concepts that he presents in Book One of *The Sickness Unto Death*. The specific focus will be on providing an overview of Kierkegaard's analysis of the different forms of despair, since this discussion has tremendous existential, psychological, and spiritual relevance for most readers. I'll be using generous portions of Kierkegaard's text (taken from the Lowrie translation of the 1940s), so you have a real sense of the text. The ultimate goal, however, is to inspire you to tackle the work in its entirety, since no summarized version can do full justice to the complexity and richness of Kierkegaard's thought.

I. WHAT IS DESPAIR?

For Kierkegaard, despair is a kind of sickness of spirit, stemming from a misunderstanding of who we actually are as human beings (or to use the more technical term, as selves). The self for Kierkegaard is a composite of various elements—finitude and infinitude, possibility and necessity. When any of these elements that constitute the self are out of balance, despair is the result. But, because we are not the source of our own creation, despair also results when the self fails to relate itself properly to “the power that posited” the self in the first place—namely God.

Despair, Kierkegaard tells us, is a “sickness unto death,” but, unlike a physical sickness,

does not necessarily lead to death:

The concept of the sickness unto death must be understood... in a peculiar sense... [O]ne speaks of a mortal sickness the end and outcome of which is death. In this sense despair cannot be called the sickness unto death....

Yet in another and still more definite sense, despair is the sickness unto death. It is indeed very far from being true that, literally understood, one dies of this sickness, or that this sickness ends in bodily death. On the contrary, the torment of despair is precisely this, not to be able to die. So it has much in common with the situation of the moribund when he lies and struggles with death, and cannot die. So to be sick unto death is not to be able to die—yet not as though there were hope of life; no the hopelessness in this case is that even the last hope, death, is not available. When death is the greatest danger, one hopes for death. So when the danger is so great that death becomes one's hope, despair is the disconsolateness of not being able to die.

It is in this last sense that despair is the sickness unto death, this agonizing condition, this sickness in the self, everlastingly to die, to die and yet not to die, to die the death. For dying means that all is over, but dying the death means to live to experience death.... The despairing man cannot die; no more than "the dagger can slay thoughts" can despair consume... the self, which is the ground of despair, whose worm dieth not, and whose fire is not quenched. Yet despair is precisely self-consuming, but it is an impotent self-consumption, in which again, however, the despairer is not able to do what he wills, namely to consume himself.

Unlike a physical sickness, then, despair does not simply run its course upon being contracted. Instead of simply killing a person, it involves not being able to die, even when death would be a release from the torments of despair. As Kierkegaard puts it, one suffering from despair continually consumes himself without being able to be rid of the self.

Another important thing you need to know about despair is that Kierkegaard asserts that despair has nothing to do with anything external to oneself:

A despairing man despairs over something. So it seems for an instant, but only for an instant; that same instant the true despair manifests itself, or despair manifests itself in its true character. For in the fact that he despaired of something, he literally despaired of himself, and now would be rid of himself....

So to despair over something is not yet properly despair. It is the beginning, or it is as when the physician says of a sickness that it has not yet declared itself. The next step is the declared despair, despair over oneself. A young girl is in despair over love, and so she despairs over her lover, because he died, or because he was unfaithful to her. This is not a declared despair; no, she is in despair over herself. This self of hers, which, if it had become "his" beloved, she would have been rid of in the most blissful way, or would have lost, this self is now a torment to her when it has to be a self without "him"; this self which would have been to her riches (though in another sense equally in despair) has now become to her a loathsome void, since "he" is dead, or it has become to her an abhorrence, since it reminds her of the fact that she was betrayed. Try it now, say to such a girl, "Thou art consuming thyself," and thou shalt hear her reply, "Oh, no, the torment is precisely this, that I cannot do it."

To despair, therefore, is to despair over one's own self, one's own being, one's own existential condition.

The final thing to understand about Kierkegaard's analysis of despair—and this will be highly important for his analysis of the various types of despair—is that despair is universal. As Kierkegaard says, there is no one who is not touched to one extent or another by this sickness:

Just as the physician might say that there lives perhaps not one single man who is in perfect health, so one might say perhaps that there lives not one single man who after all is not to some extent in despair, in whose inmost parts there does now dwell a disquietude, a perturbation, a discord, an anxious dread of an unknown something, or of a something he does not even dare to make acquaintance with, dread of a possibility of life, or dread of himself, so that, after all, as physicians speak of a man going about with a disease in him, this man is going about and carrying a sickness of spirit, which only rarely and in glimpses, by and with a dread which to him is inexplicable, gives evidence of its presence within. At any rate there has lived no one and there lives no one outside of Christendom who is not in despair, and no one in Christendom, unless he be a true Christian, and if he is not quite that, he is somewhat in despair after all....

Therefore it is as far as possible from being true that the vulgar view is right in assuming that despair is a rarity; on the contrary, it is quite universal. It is as far as possible from being true that the vulgar view is right in assuming that everyone who does not think or feel that he is in despair is not so at all, and that only he is in despair who says that he is. On the contrary, one who without affectation says that he is in despair is after all a little bit nearer, a dialectical step nearer to being cured than all those who are not regarded and who do not regard themselves as being in despair.

Simply because someone does not recognize that he is in despair, does not mean that he is in fact free of despair. He is simply unconscious of his despair. As we'll see, when a seemingly happy person is plunged into despair because of some great crisis, we should not assume that he has been free of despair until that point. In fact, the despair has been with him all along, and the crisis that occurred simply provided the opportunity for the individual to become conscious of his despair.

While we might be tempted to view despair purely in a negative light, because of the intense psychological toll it takes on those who suffer from it, in fact, the recognition that one is in despair is a first step, according to Kierkegaard, on the road to being cured of despair:

Is despair an advantage or a drawback? Regarded in a purely dialectical way it is both. If one were to stick to the abstract notion of despair, without thinking of any concrete despairer, one might say that it is an immense advantage. The possibility of this sickness is man's advantage over the beast, and this advantage distinguishes him far more essentially than erect posture, for it implies the infinite erectness or loftiness of being spirit. The possibility of this sickness is man's advantage over the beast; to be sharply observant of this sickness constitutes the Christian's advantage over the natural man; to be healed of this sickness is the Christian's bliss.

Those who experience despair in its most intense form (i.e., are acutely conscious of their despair) are actually better off than those who are completely unaware that they are even suffering from this sickness (i.e., those who are totally unconscious of their despair). One who at least recognizes that he is in despair has the motivation to seek out a cure for what ails him.

II. THE FORMS OF DESPAIR

Now we come to the heart and soul of *The Sickness Unto Death*: Kierkegaard's analysis of the various forms that despair takes. Actually, what Kierkegaard provides us with is a survey of different levels of despair, from the completely unconscious despair of the crass sensualist to the most absolutely conscious despair of defiance. And with each advance in consciousness, there arises a corresponding increase in the intensity of the despair experienced. As he writes:

With every increase in the degree of consciousness, and in proportion to that increase, the intensity of despair increases: the more consciousness, the more intense the despair.

This is everywhere to be seen, most clearly in the maximum and minimum of despair. The devil's despair is the most intense despair, for the devil is sheer spirit, and therefore absolute consciousness and transparency; in the devil there is no obscurity which might serve as a mitigating excuse, his despair is therefore absolute defiance. This is the maximum of despair. The minimum of despair is a state which (as one might humanly be tempted to express it) by reason of a sort of innocence one does not even know that there is such a thing as despair.

Keep in mind that Kierkegaard maintains that every human being who has ever lived—and this means YOU as well—exhibits one form of despair or another. As you read the summary of the forms of despair, therefore, you might want to consider which form of despair you actually possess. Consider this exercise, as Kierkegaard himself does, as a kind of therapy for the soul.

A. Unconscious Despair

The first level of despair is what Kierkegaard calls “the despair that is ignorant of being despair” or unconscious despair. This is the despair suffered by one who lives such a superficial, externally oriented sort of existence that he isn't even aware at all of being a self. Although such an individual may not even be aware of being in despair, he is in despair regardless.

The two existential types that Kierkegaard uses to characterize unconscious despair are the sensualist and the system-builder. Both types, as we shall see, are just about as far away from being freed from despair as one can get.

A1. The Sensualist

At the very lowest level with regard to consciousness of despair, according to Kierkegaard, is the sensualist—one who spends his life totally in pursuit of pleasure. This sort of individual judges everything in terms of the categories of the agreeable and the disagreeable:

[W]hen a man is supposed to be happy, he imagines that he is happy (whereas viewed in the light of the truth he is unhappy), and in this case he is generally very far from wishing to be torn away from that delusion. On the contrary, he becomes furious, he regards the man who does this as his most spiteful enemy, he considers it an insult, something near to murder, in the sense that one speaks of killing joy. What is the reason of this? The reason is that the sensuous nature and the psycho-sensuous completely dominate him; the reason is that he lives in the sensuous categories agreeable/disagreeable, and says goodbye to truth etc.: the reason is that he is too sensuous to have the courage to venture to be spirit or endure it. However vain and conceited men may be, they have nevertheless for the most part a very lowly conception of themselves, that is to say, they have no conception of being spirit, the absolute of all that a man can be.

Kierkegaard goes on to draw an analogy between the sensualist and a boarder in a house, who chooses to reside in the basement of the dwelling:

In case one were to think of a house, consisting of a cell, first floor, and second floor, so tenanted, or rather so arranged, that it was planned for a distinction of rank between the dwellers on the several floors; and in case one were to make a comparison between such a house and what it is to be a man—then unfortunately this is the sorry and ludicrous condition of the majority of men, that in their own house they prefer to live in the cellar. The soulish-bodily synthesis in every man is planned with a view to being spirit, such is the building; but the man prefers to dwell in the cellar; no, he loves that to such a degree that he becomes furious if anyone would propose to him to occupy the best floor which stands empty at his disposition—for in fact he is dwelling in his own house.

The sensualist, according to Kierkegaard, is living a life of delusion—imagining that he is happy, when in fact, he is totally dependent upon the objects of pleasure that make his life so agreeable. But when fate conspires to remove the objects of his pleasure, despair must inevitably result, and the sensualist is the least equipped of any type to deal effectively with it.

A2. The System-Builder

The second type that Kierkegaard uses to illustrate unconscious despair is what is best described as a “system-builder.” A system builder could be any sort of thinker prone to abstract speculation—a scientist, a historian, a philosopher, or anyone who lives totally in the realm of ideas. The philosopher, for example, may create an elaborate metaphysical system, but it has nothing to do with life per se. His entire system is an illusion, but one he must cling to for the sake of the system itself:

A thinker erects an immense building, a system, a system which embraces the whole of existence and world history etc—and if we contemplate his personal life, we discover to our astonishment this terrible and ludicrous fact, that he himself personally does not live in this immense high-vaulted palace, but in the barn alongside of it, or in a dog kennel, or at the most in the porter’s lodge. If one were to take the liberty of calling his attention to this by a single word, he would be offended. For he has no fear of being under a delusion, if only he can get the system completed...by means of the delusion.

So what’s the problem with the sort of unconscious despair suffered by the sensualist or the system builder, if in fact these individuals are not actually “suffering” as a result of their despair?

The despairing man who is unconscious of being in despair is, in comparison with him who is conscious of it, merely a negative step further from the truth and from salvation... [U]nawareness is so far from removing despair, that, on the contrary, it may be the most dangerous form of despair. By unconsciousness the despairing man is in a way secured (but to his own destruction) against becoming aware—that is, he is securely in the power of despair.

In unconsciousness of being in despair a man is furthest from being conscious of himself as spirit. But precisely the thing of not being unconscious of oneself as spirit is despair, which is spiritlessness—whether the condition be that of complete deadness, a merely vegetative life, or a life of higher potency the secret of which is nevertheless despair. In the latter instance the man is like the sufferer from consumption: he feels well, considers himself in the best of health, seems perhaps to others to be in florid health, precisely when the sickness is most dangerous.

For Kierkegaard, unconscious despair is actually the worst form of despair, because it is so far removed from the truth about the way we should actually be living. It means that we are living more like an animal than a true human being, and therefore, means that the possibility of liberation remains all but impossible.

B. Conscious Despair

The second level of despair is described by Kierkegaard as “the despair that is conscious of being despair.” In unconscious despair a person isn’t even aware that he is in despair; on the level of conscious despair, there is a greater understanding of the truth of one’s condition, and at least some degree of awareness of the reality of despair in one’s own life

Consciousness of despair, however, must be understood as existing on a continuum. A person could be aware of being in despair, but be completely ignorant about its cause:

A distinction of course must be made as to whether he who is conscious of his despair has the true conception of what despair is. Thus a man may be right, according to the conception he has, in asserting that he is in despair, it may be true that he is in despair, and yet this is not to say that he has the true conception of despair, it may be that one who contemplated this man's life in the light of the true conception would say, "You are far more in despair than you are aware, the despair lies far deeper." So with the pagan (to recall the foregoing instance), when in comparison with others he considered himself in despair, he doubtless was right in thinking that he was in despair, but he was wrong in thinking that the others were not; that is to say, he had not the true conception of despair.

As consciousness of one's condition is raised, the intensity of despair increases proportionally. At one extreme, the unconscious individual suffers little or not at all from his despair; at the other extreme—what Kierkegaard calls "demonic despair," no subterfuge about one's condition is possible and consequently the amount of suffering one experiences at this stage is almost unendurable.

B1. Despair of Weakness (In Despair Not Willing to Be Oneself)

In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard discusses two distinct forms that despair can take—despair of weakness and despair of defiance.

B1a. Despair Over the Earthly (Immediate Man)

The first existential type that Kierkegaard examines in his analysis of conscious despair of weakness is what might be referred to as the Immediate Man. This is an individual who lives completely externally, and therefore has no real conception of self. Although this sort of person may experience despair in his life, he views the cause as always being somehow outside of himself:

This is pure immediacy, or else immediacy which contains a quantitative reflection—Here there is no infinite consciousness of the self, of what despair is, or of the fact that the condition is one of despair; the despair is passive, succumbing to the pressure of outward circumstance, it by no means comes from within as action. It is, if I may say so, by an innocent misuse of language, a play upon words, as when children play at being soldiers, that in the language of immediacy such words as the self and despair occur....

Now when there *happens*, befalls (falls upon) this immediate self something which brings it to despair; in no other way can this come about, since the self has no reflection in itself, that which brings it to despair must come from without, and the despair is merely passive. That where immediacy has its being, or (supposing that after all it has a little bit of reflection in itself) that part thereof to which it especially clings, a man is deprived by "a stroke of fate," in short, he becomes, as he calls it, unfortunate, that is, the immediacy in him receives such a shock that it cannot recover itself—he despairs.

So then he despairs, that is to say, by a strange and preposterous attitude and a complete mystification with regard to himself, he calls this despair. But to despair is to lose the eternal—and of this he does not speak, does not dream. The loss of the earthly as such is not the cause of despair, and yet it is of this he speaks, and he calls it despairing....

Meanwhile time passes. If outward help comes, then life returns to the despairer, he begins where he left off; he has no self, and a self he did not become, but he continues to live on with only the quality of immediacy. If outward help does not come, then in real life something else commonly occurs. Life comes back to him after all, but "he will never be himself again," so he says. He now acquires some little understanding of life, he learns to imitate other men, noting how they manage to live, and so he too lives after a sort. In Christendom he too is a Christian, goes to Church every Sunday, hears and

understands the parson, yes, they understand one another; he dies, the parson introduces him into eternity for the price of \$10—but a self he was not, and a self he did not become.

The immediate man has no concept of self, because his life is lived in a purely external way. The way he often responds to crises is, not to attempt any sort of inner reflection that might actually uncover his true self, but rather to wish to be someone else—to wish, in other words, for a new self:

When immediacy despairs it possesses not even enough self to wish or to dream that it had become what it did not become. The immediate man helps himself in a different way: he wishes to be another. Of this one may easily convince oneself by observing immediate men. At the moment of despair no wish is so natural to them as the wish that they had become or might become another..... For the immediate man does not recognize his self, he recognizes himself only by his dress, he recognizes...that he has a self only by externals....

B1b. Despair Over the Eternal (The Cynic)

Kierkegaard calls the second form of conscious despair of weakness, “despair over the eternal.” In this form of despair an individual recognizes his own weakness and limitations, but instead of turning to God for a cure, he despairs over his own weakness—or to put it another way, he despairs over his despair.

This despair is a significant step forward. If the former was the despair of weakness, this is *despair over his* weakness, although it still remains as to its nature under the category “despair of weakness,” as distinguished from defiance in the next section. So there is only a relative difference. This difference consists in the fact that the foregoing form has the consciousness of weakness as its final consciousness, whereas in this case consciousness does not come to a stop here but potentiates itself to a new consciousness, a consciousness of its weakness. The despairer understands that it is weakness to take the earthly so much to heart, that it is weakness to despair. But then, instead of veering sharply away from despair to faith, humbling himself before God for his weakness, he is more deeply absorbed in despair and despairs over his weakness. Therewith the whole point of view is inverted, he becomes now more clearly conscious of his despair, recognizing that he is in despair about the eternal, he despairs over himself that he could be weak enough to ascribe to the earthly such great importance, which now becomes his despairing expression for the fact that he has lost the eternal and himself.

B2. Despair of Defiance (Willing Despairingly to Be Oneself)

The last and most profound form of despair discussed by Kierkegaard is called despair of defiance (or “willing despairing to be oneself), although Kierkegaard also calls this form of despair “demonic despair.” In despair of defiance, a person recognizes that he is in despair, tries to find some way of alleviating his despair, but when no cure occurs, he becomes hardened against any form of help:

Note that in the foregoing the form of despair was represented which is in despair over the earthly or over something earthly, so understood that at bottom this is and also shows itself to be despair about the eternal, i.e. despair which wills not to let itself be comforted by the eternal, which rates the earthly so high that the eternal can be of no comfort. But this too is a form of despair: not to be willing to hope that an earthly distress, a temporal cross, might be removed. This is what the despair which wills desperately to be itself is not willing to hope. It has convinced itself that this thorn in the flesh gnaws so profoundly

that he cannot abstract it—no matter whether this is actually so or his passion makes it true for him, (From this standpoint, it is well to note here, one will see also that much which is embellished by the name of resignation is a kind of despair, that of willing despairingly to be one's abstract self, of willing despairingly to be satisfied with the eternal and thereby be able to defy or ignore suffering in the earthly and temporal sphere. The dialectic of resignation is commonly this: to will to be one's eternal self, and then with respect to something positive wherein the self suffers, not to will to be oneself, contenting oneself with the thought that after all this will disappear in eternity, thinking itself therefore justified in not accepting it in time, so that, although suffering under it, the self will not make to it the concession that it properly belongs to the self, that is, it will not humble itself under it in faith. Resignation regarded as despair is essentially different from the form, "in despair at not willing to be oneself," for it wills desperately to be itself—with exception, however, of one particular, with respect to which it wills despairingly not to be itself.) and so he is willing to accept it as it were eternally. So he is offended by it, or rather from it he takes occasion to be offended at the whole of existence, in spite of it he would be himself, not despitefully be himself without it (for that is to abstract from it, and that he cannot do, or that would be a movement in the direction of resignation); no, in spite of or in defiance of the whole of existence he wills to be himself with it, to take it along, almost defying his torment. For to hope in the possibility of help, not to speak of help by virtue of the absurd, that for God all things are possible—no, that he will not do. And as for seeking help from any other—no, that he will not do for all the world; rather than seek help he would prefer to be himself—with all the tortures of hell, if so it must be.

The despairing individual at this stage begins to revel in his own despair and suffering, seeing his pain as lifting him above the common rung of mankind:

But the more consciousness there is in such a sufferer who in despair is determined to be himself, all the more does despair too potentiate itself and become demoniac. The genesis of this is commonly as follows. A self which in despair is determined to be itself winces at one pain or another which simply cannot be taken away or separated from its concrete self. Precisely upon this torment the man directs his whole passion, which at last becomes a demoniac rage. Even if at this point God in heaven and all his angels were to offer to help him out of it—no, now he doesn't want it, now it is too late, he once would have given everything to be rid of this torment but was made to wait, now that's all past, now he would rather rage against everything, he, the one man in the whole of existence who is the most unjustly treated, to whom it is especially important to have his torment at hand, important that no one should take it from him—for thus he can convince himself that he is in the right. This at last becomes so firmly fixed in his head that for a very peculiar reason he is afraid of eternity—for the reason, namely, that it might rid him of his (demoniacally understood) infinite advantage over other men, his (demoniacally understood) justification for being what he is. It is himself he wills to be; he began with the infinite abstraction of the self, and now at last he has become so concrete that it would be an impossibility to be eternal in that sense, and yet he wills in despair to be himself. Ah, demoniac madness! He rages most of all at the thought that eternity might get it into his head to take his misery from him!

III. Pointing to a Cure

In Part One of *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard offers the following tantalizingly brief formula that expresses his beliefs about how despair might be cured:

This then is the formula which describes the condition of the self when despair is

completely eradicated: by relating itself to its own self and by willing to be itself the self is grounded transparently in the Power which posited it.

To put it as simply as possible, according to Kierkegaard's account, two things are necessary for an individual to be freed of despair: (1) he has to understand the nature of himself a self and (2) he has to find his ultimate cure in a power higher than himself—namely God.

Unfortunately, it's not within the scope of this text to assess the merits of Kierkegaard's religious worldview. I'll readily admit that his solution to the problem of despair is certainly debatable (an atheist, for example, would have big problems with it).

While the cure for despair may be open to debate, what is much more certain is that in *The Sickness Unto Death* Kierkegaard has provided us with a first class account of the mechanics of despair that is as profound in its depth and relevance as anything we have seen in contemporary psychology.

All quotes from Kierkegaard are taken from *The Sickness Unto Death*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941.

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