

**Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Sickness Unto Death. A Christian Psychological Exposition for Edification and Awakening by Anti-Climacus.* Translated by Alastair Hannay. New York: Penguin Books, 2004.**

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855 A.D.) was the youngest of seven children of a strict Lutheran father, whose religion Kierkegaard viewed as debilitating. In his youth, his mother and five siblings died. Kierkegaard became engaged to Regine Olsen when she was fourteen years old, but four years later broke off the engagement to devote himself to writing. Kierkegaard suffered deep depressions and considered suicide. He died at age forty-two, following spirited attacks upon the Lutheran state church, of a lung infection.

**PREFACE.** This book aims to edify persons of Christian faith. Its perspective is interested, not objective. Only edification is serious; disinterested talk is frivolous. Despair is dialectical, in the Hegelian sense.

**INTRODUCTION.** When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, Lazarus had not avoided “the sickness unto death.” All human suffering, including death, is to the Christian inconsequential. Such confidence emerges in eternal life with Christ. But the Christian learns a new misery, one hidden from the unbeliever. The Christian learns “sickness unto death.”

**PART ONE. The Sickness Unto Death is Despair.**

**A. *That Despair is the Sickness unto Death.***

1. Humans are selves, which is to be spiritual. Selves are conscious of their own existence. Self-consciousness has three synthetic parts: infinite-finite, temporal-eternal, and freedom-necessity. Human beings may not be selves; self emerges from conscious recognition that one is a soul in a body, aware of this mixed state. Self is either self-created or created. The dialectical self (soul-body-aware) relates to its creator. For such a creature as man, authentic despair takes two forms: first, if one were to believe himself self-created, authentic despair would mean wishing one were not a self. But, second, if a self believes himself created, he must relate to that creator. But if he does not, he enters the second form of authentic despair, that is, wanting to be oneself without his creator. Ultimately, humans can emerge from the sickness unto death, which is despair, only by being a soul-body-aware conscious self transparently grounded in the self’s creator.
2. *Possibility and Actuality of Despair.* Is despair good or bad? Only man has this despair, which may lead to salvation. Therefore, despair is an infinite good. Despair emerges from imperfect synthesis in self-awareness. It continues every moment, and a person is responsible for it every moment. The individual enters a sacred space where exists only the now.
3. *Despair is “The Sickness Unto Death.”* Death is not, to the Christian, final, but rather a transition. All life’s miseries are, to the Christian, transient, and hence less important. Real despair sets in when one realizes he will never die. Unless he is grounded in God, his discomfiture will persevere forever. One dies forever; death itself dies. A person struggles against despair, only to deepen its grip. He stands forever before God, wishing he was not so positioned. A person ends up wishing he could be rid of himself, wishing he could be a self he is not and cannot become. God makes people selves, but in despair they wish to shake off God’s hand.

**B. *The Generality of This Sickness (Despair).*** Every human, living and dead, has experienced despair, except the true Christian, and pieces of the true Christian remain in despair. This is not hyperbole. People do not know best about themselves in this regard. Existential despair is so generalized that people are unaware of it. What is in fact rare is escape from despair. To be ignorant of one’s despair is another pernicious form of despair. One cannot trust the self-reports or even experiences of others concerning despair. Despair emerges in men because of its relation to the eternal. Existential despair is human. Peace may be despair. Happiness may be despair. Only the saved have exited despair. With respect to despair, the human condition is always critical. Buried within good fortune is despair. Happiness is despair’s

favorite retreat. Recognizing despair hidden in one's everyday experiences is good fortune, if one wishes to be rid of it. Because one may in fact be rid of it. Despair is hidden from most people. To waste a life is never to recognize that one is a spirit standing before God. One reaches this recognition through despair. Eternity handcuffs a person to himself forever.

C. *The Forms of This Sickness (Despair)*. The forms of despair emerge from the syntheses that constitute the self: finite/infinite, freedom/necessity. [Kierkegaard leaves out time/eternity.] The degree of consciousness of despair distinguishes one type of despair from another. More consciousness leads to more will, which leads to more self.

1. *Despair Considered with Regard to Its Being Conscious or Not, and so with Regard Only to the Factors of the Synthesis.* a) *Despair under the aspect of finitude/infinity.* An individual synthesizes the finite and infinite in his self, but only through his relationship with God. Despair is failing to be oneself. Infinity in the mind (imagination and conceptualization) without finitude (concrete reality and specificity) gives way to fantasy. Finitude in the mind without infinity leads to soul-killing worldliness. The concrete individual must venture if the spirit is to live. b) *Despair viewed under the aspect of possibility/necessity.* i) *Possibility's despair is to lack necessity.* In possibility, the self becomes abstract, and hence despairs. The possible self yearns and strives; the necessary self exists already. The possible expands constantly, tempting the individual to imagine himself growing into it. But every possibility demands time to become actual. There is a limit to possibilities. Those limitations are one's necessities. Denying one's limitations is to lose oneself, hence, despair. ii) *Necessity's despair is to lack possibility.* When all imagining collapses into harsh realities from which there is no escape, that is when one must grasp by faith that possibilities remain open to God. Salvation is to man impossible, but to God possible. To be a person is to amalgamate in oneself limitations and possibilities, back and forth, back and forth. A determinist despairs for lack of possibility. The petty bourgeois despairs because to him all is trivial.

2. *Despair Viewed Under the Aspect of Consciousness.* Rising consciousness increases despair. a) *The despair which is ignorant of being despair, or the despairing ignorance of having a self and an eternal self.* Such persons are happy in their little worlds, and too timid to dare being spirit. Human beings are psycho-physical syntheses of the spirit. But people are little fearing being wrong. To be unaware of despair is despair, and to despair more deeply than one aware of his despair. It is the most common form of despair, the crown of the pagan. Pagans soar to aesthetic heights. From the viewpoint of ethical religion, their state is despair. The despair comes to light in pagan attitudes toward suicide. Pagans view suicide as a personal matter; they cannot conceive it as crime against God. b) *The despair which is conscious of being despair, which is therefore conscious of having a self in which there is, however, something eternal, and which now either in despair does not want to be itself or in despair wants to be itself.* Conscious despair knows real despair and also the despairing person, but in fits and starts, and with varying degrees of insight. The greater the consciousness, the deeper grows the despair. i) *In despair not wanting to be oneself. The despair of weakness.* This despair is feminine; its theme is weakness. *Despair over the earthly or over something earthly.* Pure immediacy does not know itself. It lives in its impressions, needs, and the company of others. This level of consciousness swoons at life, like prey playing dead to avoid death. This is not wanting to be oneself, or worse, not wanting to be a self at all. Such thinking leads to fantasy. The person who lives in pure immediacy knows only the surfaces, even of himself. But real selves are infinitely distant from this perspective. If such a person gains a bit of self-consciousness, the presentation changes a bit. He remains passive, but has an inkling of the eternal in himself. Then he collapses into not wanting to be himself. A real, deep self can only emerge from infinite abstraction from externals; the self takes possession of its time-delimited self and conceives itself infinitely. For this person with an inkling, a real self never emerges. He dissuades himself, convinces himself that his insight was a silly error. This person becomes an upstanding citizen, prospering in the midst of civil society,

thinking himself the pinnacle of propriety. But he is wrong. This is despair, and he is sorely deranged about where real dangers lie. He is among the many. Few live in knowledge of the eternal in themselves. Standing before God looks like a huge waste of time from the perspective of this man with but an inkling. These civil men are comforted by their pastors, but never really leave childhood. Spiritual maturity is voluntary, not a process of natural growth. Such men need to despair desperately, so that God may break in from below. *Despair over the eternal or over oneself.* Higher consciousness grows aware of its weakness, and comes to despair that it has not grasped the eternal or that it cannot be the self it desires. Holding on to that despair is so important, because out of gripping despair emerges a chance of being saved. This level of despair is scarce. Such people value solitude, unlike social butterflies and love-birds. Their despair may break into full recognition, destroying the despairer's self-deceptions. For such person, if they fail to enter faith, suicide is a danger. *The despair of wanting in despair to be oneself—defiance.* The masculine mode of despair defies God, demanding to be oneself in the face of God's request to the contrary. This despairer knows the infinite in himself, but wants to stand on his own, to cut himself off from God. He wants to be self-created, to fabricate his own identity. When active, such a person experiments, creating hypothetical selves that are increasingly removed from reality. When passive, such a person vents a negative self, chastising himself for his flaws and shortcomings. Both the passive and active decline the unconditional help God offers. Resistance in such despairers grows in intensity, becoming demonic. They rage against the whole world rather than see themselves before God. Such despair is rare indeed. It clings to its misery in spite, eschewing offers of assistance from every quarter.

#### **PART TWO. Despair is Sin.**

A. *Despair is Sin.* If one conceives God or stands before God in despair, demanding to be oneself, that is sin. Such a person is religious poet. He sins by writing instead of existing.

1. *The successive stages in the consciousness of the self (under the aspect: before God).* To stand before God is to take God as one's standard. This person becomes a theological self. In this sense, pagans never stand before God and therefore never strictly sin. Faith exists where a person self-consciously and without self-deception stands before God without reservation.

*Addendum.* *That the definition of sin includes the possibility of offence: a general observation about offence.* Some ask where is the Decalogue in this definition of sin and faith. This question misses the essence of Christian existence. Real Christianity is absurd, based in paradox. If one thinks about it, one is offended. The Christian individual stands before God, is cared for by God, lives for and with God. This event does not extend to all mankind. It is particular and limited to the individual. Thus, it is offensive to humankind who wishes to know what is universally true. One cannot defend Christianity by explaining away its offence. The absurdity is integral. Common wisdom says that the mean is best; avoid extremes. Christianity says otherwise. Faith is absurd; that is its merit.

2. *The Socratic definition of sin.* Socrates defined sin as ignorance. Despite Socrates' influence, the definition is empty as compared the Christian concept. Socrates fails to specify the origin of ignorance or its relation to will. Socrates fails to reach an understanding of sin. Socrates' definition fails to comprehend common events; people know what is right, and still do wrong. Socrates misses defiance. Socrates naively believes that if a person knows right, he does right. The Socratic ethicist, seeing this, says that the malfasant has not "really" understood, because if he had, he would act properly. This is the height of irony. Kierkegaard acknowledges that even to him, Christianity seems hypercritical; how can good, moral, civil people be abject sinners? Unlike Socrates, Christianity starts ethical inquiry with the Will, not the understanding. Christianity roots its concept in the paradox of faith and the

belief in original sin, unlike speculative philosophy. Christianity says not the Cartesian thought, to think is to be, but rather, to believe is to be. Because it relies on understanding as its fundament, modern philosophy is little more than paganism freshened up. Yet, modern philosophy pretends to be Christianity. Men live in an internal conversation. The intellect says something is true. The lower self, which is the basis of the will, evaluates the intellect's claims, approving some claims, rejecting others. As the will stalls about the claims of the intellect, the idea proffered fades. The intellect abandons its position, going over to the other side, approving the will's foot-dragging. Then people turn to aesthetic and metaphysical niceties, which utterly distract them. Greek thought failed to recognize that people know the wrong and do it nevertheless. Being in sin, it lacked perspective to see sin. Man sees sin by revelation from God. The story revelation tells man about himself is disparaging. Sin changes consciousness, making that consciousness unaware of sin. Revelation of the nature of sin brings man back, but through despair.

3. *That sin is not negative but affirmative.* Sin is not a negation of virtue. Sin is a revelation that reframes man's view of himself. Sin is a higher concept, redefining the landscape below it, which is all of human existence. Any concept that makes of sin just a negation of what already exists is mere pantheism. Without sin as Christians define it, repentance is impossible. One must turn to something, some definition, higher than oneself, in order to repent. Thus, sin is a paradox. One can believe it, or be offended by it, but one cannot rationalize it. Sin demands belief or unbelief. Sin is the sort of thing of which Socrates always professed himself ignorant. Knowing it lies beyond human capacities. And the essence of Christianity lies in faith. Christianity sets up sin so formidably, so paradoxically, that only belief or unbelief is possible. Speculative philosophy explains away sin by distorting it, to make it easier for the philosopher; then he claims to understand the doctrine. There is no understanding it.

*Appendix to A: But then in a certain sense does not sin become a great rarity? (The moral).* In Christian comprehension, no pagans sin, and few Christians and Jews sin, because none really grasps the nature of sin which is known only by revelation. But really even non-comprehension of sin is sin; it should be spewed from God's mouth. Everyday Christianity makes of every man a Christian. It distorts Christianity and abuses real Christianity by its existence. The Christian millions are no Christians. These faux-Christians present Christianity in a manner that leads most to attach no importance to the telling. People of faith are not thinkers or talkers, but lovers. They exude ardor, and tirelessly speak of their beloved. Half-baked pastors are constantly offering three reasons to do this or that from their pulpits. Do lovers offer three reasons for their affection? Do they entertain doubts about their passion? No, the lover is in love. Those not in love defend love. Preaching has degenerated into offering reasons for faith. Such preaching makes washed-out Christians; their sins are too spiritless to really count as sin.

- B. *The Continuation of Sin.* Sin is a state, not an action. Actions make one aware, on a good day, of one's sin. People's consciousness is interrupted by everydayness, by the mundane and banal. People emerge (brutishly) into consciousness for an hour a week at church service. But sin itself is continuous for the sinner; it grows of its own course, while we ignore it. Failing to get out of sin is itself a new sin. Sin is unlike compound interest, which grows only when new debts are added. With sin, sin compounds sin and all is sin upon sin. Individual actions emerge from the state of sin. Most people lack self-consciousness, which is to fail to exist as spirit. They live in snippets, this good act here, that event, this peccadillo there. They never rise to spirit, never seek the eternal continuity in themselves. Spiritual persons fear sin; they stand to lose eternity. Demonic persons, like their spiritual counterparts, fastidiously avoid good. It would ruin their consistency. There is a general law that applies here: internal intensification moves inward, and ever toward high states of self-consciousness.

- a. *The sin of despairing over one's sin.* As one grows internally self-consistent, one despairs over one's state of sin. One wants to hear nothing of goodness. In despair over sins, one forsakes goodness. In despair over the state of sin, one forsakes repentance. Normal people are mired in surface appearances; they recognize something deeper in despair over sin and doff their hats to it as though to acknowledge something good. People in despair about their sinful state impress others (their ministers, their wives) with their grief over sin. The responses of ministers and wives make the despairer's situation worse.
- b. *The sin of despairing of the forgiveness of sins (offense).* When a self-consciousness comes into the presence of Christ, despair takes the form of despairing of forgiveness. The self before Christ is intensified by God's immense reaching in the incarnation and suffering and death of Jesus. Such persons measure themselves by Christ, and so are immense selves. Immense selves have immense sin. The stance of such a person before Christ has a strange geometry. He stands close, but is very distant. From the distance, he brawls with God hand to hand. Near and far at once. Now such people take their inability to believe as a badge of honor. The "shalt" has disappeared in favor of "I can't." To despair of forgiveness is to offend, yet more sin. Christians are commanded by God to believe in forgiveness of sins. In Christendom, the faux Christians believe they know forgiveness, when in fact they know nothing of it. The priests encourage this horde in their misconceptions. The big problem is loose-talkers and loose-thinkers and those that extol either. God intends that very human individual should recognize himself consciously as an individual. In thinking, when one admits the collectivity, the mob enters, and the mob becomes the God-man. This is distortion. The problem in sin is not mankind's sin, but my sin. There are no general categories. There is only the individual in sin before God. Ethics emerge from the individual, not the abstracted collective. Offense implies an offended person. Christianity makes every human into a individual in sin before God. This is God's first and final word to the individual: be offended or believe. Groups cannot be judged or praised or anything else. These events happen to individuals. We think if we stick together, we can compel God into submission. Sin's opposite is faith, not virtue.
- c. *The sin of abandoning Christianity modo ponendo (positively), of declaring it to be untruth.* To announce Christianity as untruth is the ultimate sin, sin against the Holy Spirit. Here battle with God turns from defense to offense. To affirmatively denigrate Christianity is sin's last stand. It dares offense against God, to be offended by Christ. That divine offense may occur guarantees that man cannot come too close to God. Even the incarnation does not remove the possibility of offense. God makes people more miserable, in his love, than they might ever have otherwise been. God's love, in drawing the person near, looks as though it intends to drive the human off. Where a person has faith, that person worships. He rightly enters the dialectical movement between faith and sin. For this person, the possibility of offense is stabilized by standing transparently before God. But offense remains a possibility. It takes several forms. The first and lowest form of offense is agnosticism, failing to decide about Christ. God commands all persons, they *shall* have an opinion about Christ. The second form of offense is self-conscious passivity in the face of the paradox of sin. The passive person lives a shadow life. The final form of offense is active denial of the Christian message. Jesus only seemed to be God (Docetism) or he is a man and the church made up his claims to divinity. This is the most intense form of despair. Faith releases one from despair, as a self-conscious person satisfied to be a creation standing transparently before his creator. Such is faith.