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Despair as Defiance: Kierkegaard's Definitions in "The Sickness unto Death"

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Abstract: How are we to read and how translate the brief formulae with which "The Sickness unto Death" introduces two forms of 'authentic despair'? In response to Michael Theunissen's claim that, to conform with the actual drift of Kierkegaard's thought, the first of the two forms of despair should be given priority, an alternative reading that conforms with the published ordering is defended on the strength of both the text itself and the development of Kierkegaard's thought up to the time of its writing. The further aim, shared with Theunissen, is to widen the basis for assessing the continuing relevance of Kierkegaard's analysis of despair.

Keywords: acedy; choice; defiance; despair; eternal; irony; psychology; selfhood; spirit; Theunissen

The points raised here focus on a straightforward question: how to read, and for Anglophone readers how to translate, the brief formulae with which *The Sickness unto Death* introduces two forms of despair described there as 'authentic despair' (*egentlig Fortvivlelse*).¹ A further aim is to widen the basis for assessing the continued relevance of that work.

Why, first of all, is this important? The topic is despair in a philosophical context and there are several ways in which it can be handled in that context. One is to get clear on the notion itself as we actually use it, making distinctions between say, being 'in despair' and 'despairing', the latter more closely associated with a distinct feeling than the former. Thus, we know what it means to be desperate; I reach 'desperately' for the rope thrown out to me to save me from drowning, still thinking I might reach it. But if I keep stretching out when the rope drifts inexorably out of my reach, I do so despairingly, I know that my exertions will not succeed. The core sense of 'despair' here is *loss of hope*; the word is derived from the Latin *desperatio* with its root in *spes*, and from the French *désespoir*. It is in this sense that I take Kierkegaard to use the term in the above definition of the two kinds of despair. In doing so he follows a theological usage to be found in a succinct definition by Thomas Aquinas:

Regarding a good not yet possessed, in which the notion of the arduous can be verified because of the difficulty of obtaining it, if that good is judged to exceed the capacity of the one seeking it, despair ensues; but if it is judged not to exceed that capacity, hope arises.²

Secondly, we must examine how far despair in *The Sickness unto Death* can be read as loss of hope in the above sense. The text provides a brief definition of two distinct cases, or forms, of what it calls 'authentic despair' (inauthentic despair occurs in those who are not yet conscious of having a self and, for reasons to be given, may be disregarded here).³ At first glance the definition offers a disconcerting pair: (1) 'not

¹ *SuD*, 43 (*KW* 19, 38).

² Aquinas, *Truth*, 264.

³ *SuD*, 43 (*KW* 19, 38).

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wanting in despair to be oneself' and (2) 'wanting in despair to be oneself'.⁴ Readers of *Either/Or* may be reminded of the 'ecstatic lecture' in the opening section entitled 'Diapsalmata'. There the ecstatic lecturer says that whichever way you choose, to believe the girl or not to believe her, to marry or not to marry, or to hang yourself or not to hang yourself, you will regret it.⁵ In his journals Kierkegaard says that by universalizing the proposition 'Marry or don't marry, you'll regret it either way' you turn it into 'a kind of resumé of life's wisdom'.⁶ But it also deserves to be called despair, for what else is despair if not being denied all expectation of a desirable satisfaction, or the sense that what you hope for will escape you whatever you do?

Here, too, despair can be regarded in different ways. In one it inherits a place taken previously by notions such as *accidia* (or acedy), that is to say spiritual sloth, one of the seven capital (or deadly) sins. Sin implies a saving alternative, but in Romanticism a cult of melancholy (or spleen as it was once called), in German *Schwermut* and Dano-Norwegian *Tungsind*, makes despair the mood proper to an illusion-free life. A whole group of notions, such as 'anomie', 'alienation', 'ennui' and Sartre's '*nausée*', are associated with a post- or late-Romantic reaction to an official nineteenth-century belief in universal progress. These attitudes or moods express a detachment from social values and a personal isolation that may nonetheless be exploited positively, especially in art, but can also lead to despair. In this case despair may be seen as an expression of the need for a re-constructive critique of the human situation beyond Romanticism.

Seven years after *Either/Or*, at a time when he was proclaiming himself as a lifetime religious author, Kierkegaard offered just such a reconstructive critique with, as we now expect, a clear religious component. *The Sickness unto Death* (henceforth *Sickness*) is subtitled: 'A Christian Psychological Exposition for Edification and Awakening.' Rather than presenting the two above and apparently exhaustive alternatives as a further advance in life's wisdom, *Sickness* now offers faith as a way out. But faith is referred to – in different ways – only in a brief formula; the substance of *Sickness* is an account of the manifold ways in which we avoid faith. It seems in the end that almost everything we try to believe and do is despair, even when we do not know it and, not least, where we do not want to know it. But then Kierkegaard says of *Sickness*'s pseudonymous author, Anti-Climacus, that he is a Christian 'to an extraordinary degree'.⁷

Of its two forms of despair, *Sickness* says that the second (wanting to be oneself) is basic in that it enters also into the first form (not wanting to be oneself): '[F]ar from its being simply the case that this second form of despair (wanting in despair to be oneself) amounts to a special form of despair on its own, all despair can in the end be resolved into or reduced [or traced back] to [*opløses i og tilbageføres paa*] it'.⁸ Since the second form (wanting to be oneself) evidently bears no trace of the first (not wanting to be oneself), the latter cannot be basic.

Characterized as it is by defiance, we should then expect this second form to be found also in the first, and this *Sickness* duly acknowledges: 'No despair is entirely without defiance; indeed defiance is implicit in the very formulation "not wanting to".'⁹ That may seem too simple an argument; surely dissatisfaction in itself does not amount to defiance, or even refusal for that matter; for this there must be some hope-inspiring alternative in view. But here, too, we can follow Aquinas, who, having defined despair as what arises when 'the good is judged to exceed the capacity of the one seeking it', adds that '[i]f the object is considered impossible to attain it becomes repulsive.' Finding the offered good beyond our reach, we may comfort ourselves with the thought that it is not *worth* reaching. This strategy commonly known as 'sour grapes' may develop into hostile confrontation with the source of the tantalizingly out-of-reach offer. In *Sickness* it is described as the extreme 'offensive warfare' that, in its context, means 'abandoning Christianity as a falsehood and a lie'.¹⁰

⁴ SuD, 43 (KW 19, p. 13). The phrase 'in despair' (*fortvivlet*) might be placed alternatively either at the beginning or the end without alteration of sense.

⁵ E/O, 54.

⁶ Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals*, 139.

⁷ Ibid., 393.

⁸ SuD, 44 (KW 19, 14).

⁹ SuD, 80 (KW 19, 49).

¹⁰ SuD, 158 (KW 19, 125).

Sickness's extreme case can dispose us to read its analysis and diagnosis as addressed, from first to last, to a historically local readership, its analysis of despair presupposing a particular religious premise that leaves other-believers and non-believers in the clear. For surely not everyone who thinks that Christianity is false is in despair? Are we to say, then, that the account of despair in *Sickness* is, for many, only of historical interest?

Apart from failing to do justice to the psychological substance of Kierkegaard's analysis, this view also obscures the scope and continuing relevance of that analysis. As a first step towards a more generous reading, let us therefore note that psychology in Kierkegaard's sense is best understood in terms of the now unfashionable notion of 'spirit'. However one chooses to reify 'spirit' or chooses not to, this notion provides a dimension of despair that probes deeply into the human psyche: 'Despair is an aspect of spirit and has to do with the eternal in a person' and something one 'cannot be rid of, not in all eternity'.¹¹

Whatever this something 'eternal' in the self may be, it involves a deep sense of dissatisfaction with being a composite of body and mind that is also conscious of being such. *Sickness* here follows a theme inherent in German Idealist philosophy that sees freedom in the self-conscious soul's ability to rise above a generic and historical inheritance and to take control of it. Human being faces the task of realizing its spiritual possibilities beyond those of the psychical and the bodily, anchored as these are in nature, inheritance, and environment. *Sickness* sees the task as being typically solved by 'despairingly' attaching the notion of the eternal to circumstances that are inherently secular. For instance: 'Equalization ...is the false anticipation of the eternal life, which people have done away with as a "beyond" and want to realize here in *abstracto*.'¹² Whether the 'beyond' here is meant ironically or Kierkegaard believed in some form of life after death, it is clear that whatever is eternal in the psychosomatic composite is bound up with an innate disposition to be dissatisfied with its own secular limitations. But this disposition coexists with the pressures that lead people (and these would include Hegel) to disfigure the eternal by seeing it instantiated in ways that make it easier to accept, and which are therefore also obstacles to their becoming individuals in whose wills alone the eternal can enter the world.

The self, says *Sickness* at the outset, is a 'self-relating' relation.¹³ Although 'God made the relation', he also 'lets go of it', thus leaving the individual to reconstitute the relation against these pressures.¹⁴ The descriptions of the self in despair thus focus on a tendency to appropriate the world as our own, to feel at home in the earthly (*det jordiske*). When seen from the perspective of this something eternal in the self, such concern with the earthly is inherently out of place and, when it becomes excessive, may be considered pathologically *obsessive*.¹⁵ The very nature and degree of a concern with the world, the over-investment made in it, testifies to a reluctance to face this 'something eternal' in the self. A person in despair is said in *Sickness* to despair *over* the earthly, which on reflecting over the self's failure to have the earthly live up to its unsuited eternal expectations, leads to despair over this very self for so failing.¹⁶ The diagnosis offered by the text is that the despair is, in each case, *of* the eternal, a giving up of this hope. The same is the case if, in order to avoid such failure, the self takes to fantasizing itself out of the actual world.¹⁷ In the text's classification of despairs, these two are included respectively under finitude's despair and infinitude's despair.¹⁸ They need not be felt as such and indeed, if felt, the despair will be directed at what it is 'over', at something finite and not at what it is 'of', namely the eternal. Where the measures people have at their

¹¹ *SuD*, 47, trans. adjusted (*KW* 19, 17).

¹² Kierkegaard, *Papirer*, VII, 1 B 125, 338. The passage was deleted from the final draft of *A Literary Review*.

¹³ *SuD*, 43 (*KW* 19, 13).

¹⁴ *SuD*, 46, trans. adjusted (*KW* 19, 16).

¹⁵ 'Worldliness [*Verdslighed*] is ... to ascribe infinite value to the indifferent' (*SuD*, 63 [*KW* 19, 34]); cf. *SuD*, 101 (*KW* 19, 70): '... earlier we presented the form of despair that despairs over the earthly or over something earthly, understood as being basically, and manifestly, despair of the eternal, that is, as an unwillingness to be comforted and healed in the eternal, as placing such a high value on the earthly that the eternal cannot be any comfort.'

¹⁶ *SuD*, 91 (*KW* 19, 61).

¹⁷ *SuD*, 63 (*KW* 19, 33). The despair of infinitude involves fantasizing, or being 'vaporized into the infinite' (*ibid.*, cf. 60-63). Cf. *A Literary Review*, 72f.

¹⁸ *SuD*, 63ff. (*KW* 19, 33ff.).

disposal to ensure that the world does *not* let them down succeed, there will be no *sense* of a despair 'of' the eternal.¹⁹ But this despair will be there nonetheless.

In telling the aesthete in *Either/Or* that his way of life 'is' despair,²⁰ Judge Wilhelm knows that the aesthete will not see it in that way until confronted by the judge's ethical alternative. But once it is offered, and with a glimmering of the advantages of an ethical life such as Wilhelm outlines, the aesthete can in principle come to reject his own life as a falsehood and a lie. On the other hand, he is just as likely to look for reasons for rejecting this alternative as a lie put out by the bourgeoisie. Yet, the more vehement his rejection, the greater the likelihood that he has an underlying appreciation of the advantages of the ethical life yet despairs of his ability to free himself from the serial attractions of his present lifestyle. Such a concealed disposition to despair is an indication of the presence of 'spirit'. Despair, whether concealed or explicit, means that you are already more than a psychosomatic system interacting with the environment. It signifies that you are in some sense free in relation to that environment and capable of controlling your psychosomatic interactions with it.

Judge Wilhelm memorably urges the aesthete to 'choose himself' but also to 'choose despair'. Once aware of an alternative, you still have to be willing to see your way of life in this new light; you must 'choose' it whether or not you decide to keep going as you are.²¹ Choosing one's self in *Either/Or* is seeing one's life for what it is, for good or bad, from the ethical point of view, that is to say, whether it is adopted or its merits merely duly acknowledged. Later, indeed quite soon after *Either/Or*, Wilhelm's ethical life is presented as also being one of despair. In *Fear and Trembling*'s second 'Problema' it is suggested that to take the 'ethical' (as the 'universal') to be thereby 'the divine' is a self-serving mistake.²² The suggestion is not that Wilhelm has mistaken selfhood to be a matter of civil responsibility and status; he has, after all, talked of an inner history, something that the aesthete eschews and which begins with choice of the definite self that he is. What is true, rather, is that the notion of 'inner' has for Kierkegaard in the meantime acquired those additional and partly revisionary characteristics charted just over two years later in *Stages on Life's Way* as a progression that ends in *Quidam*'s disappearance into the *privacy* of faith (and thus out of the universal). It was on the basis of this new and sharper distinction between inner and outer that *Sickness* could present a typology of the facades adopted by potential individuals to escape the prospect of their singularity.

Judge Wilhelm's 'first shot at a definition', when replying to his own question, 'what, then is this self of mine,' is to say that it is 'the most abstract thing of all which yet, at the same time, is the most concrete thing of all – it is freedom'.²³ What is this 'most concrete thing'? It is 'this definite individual with these aptitudes, these tendencies, these instincts, these passions, influenced by these definite surroundings, as this definite product of a definite outside world'.²⁴ *Sickness* agrees seven years later: the self is 'this quite definite thing [*dette ganske Bestemte*], with these aptitudes, predispositions etc.' but now also 'talent'.²⁵ Not a 'thing' of course, and the Danish helpfully avoids that idea; selfhood is a reflexive relation to be understood in terms of a 'measure' of what it means to acquire it. A self is *potentially* what it would be 'in truth' if the goal were reached. Selfhood can therefore be described as a project: '[t]he self is the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude, which relates to itself, whose task is to become itself, which can only be done in the relationship to God.'²⁶

¹⁹ To see what the despair is really *of*, once it is recognized that it is *not* over the earthly as such or over something earthly in particular, requires that one be a *Sjælekyndig* (*SuD*, 53-54, 56 [*KW* 19, 23-24, 26]), a psychologist in other words, though 'kyndig' also implies someone with first-hand experience, and not just a degree in psychology and perhaps preferably not that, since general theory can get in the way of particular observation. We may presume that Kierkegaard, though qualified as a theologian, saw himself in that role and able to make the bottom-line diagnosis of what is merely a symptom, whether what is observed is hand-wringing despair at yet another failure of the world to live up to expectations, or just complacent and more or less dishonest disclaimers of despair. It is because *The Sickness unto Death* is concerned with the symptoms that it talks consistently of what one despairs 'over' as a sign of what one despairs 'of'.

²⁰ *E/O*, 525.

²¹ *E/O*, 502, 511, 513.

²² Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 96.

²³ *E/O*, 516.

²⁴ *E/O*, 542-3.

²⁵ *SuD*, 68, 86 trans. adjusted, see 67 (*KW* 19, 68, 56, see 36).

²⁶ *SuD*, 111 (*KW* 19,70).

Selfhood as a ‘task’ is already anticipated in Kierkegaard’s dissertation *On the Concept of Irony*. We read there that in irony’s most reflective form, Romantic irony, the individual is too abstract to engage the world of morals or ethics. It is a world that should appear in the ‘twofold form’ of a ‘gift that refuses to be rejected ... and a task that wants to be fulfilled’.²⁷ Irony is nevertheless a step towards selfhood: ‘Anyone who does not understand irony at all, who has no ear for its whispering, lacks precisely thereby what could be called the absolute beginning of personal life.’²⁸ A journal entry from 1843 says that the ‘mature’ personality is one able to ‘absorb truth and make it its own’,²⁹ while the dissertation asserts that ‘true earnest’ is possible only in ‘a totality to which the subject no longer arbitrarily decides at every moment to continue his imaginative constructions but feels the task to be something that he has not assigned himself but has had assigned to him’.³⁰ This latter anticipates the nature of, as well as the reason for, the second of the two forms of despair in *Sickness*: ‘If the human being were self-established, there would only be a question of one form, not wanting to be itself.’³¹

The dissertation contains another anticipatory passage. It says that, in entering on a personal life, one ‘first proceeds as naked as a child from its mother’s womb’; but ‘the next instant’ one is ‘concrete’ in oneself and only by ‘an arbitrary abstraction’ does one remain in this naked state. One ‘becomes’ oneself—‘quite the same as before, down to the least peculiarity—and yet ... becomes another, for the choice permeates everything and transforms it’.³² A journal entry from the same period distinguishes between the necessity that a metaphysical perspective seeks and the contingency in which things actually appear (the ‘phenomenological’) with the ‘possibility that every event could take place in infinitely many ways’. Where in Hegel the unity of these, and with it human freedom, is found in metaphysics, which means that the historical is ‘annulled’, for Kierkegaard ‘[t]he meaning of the historical’ is that one is to be ‘free within it’. Moreover, the unity of the metaphysical and the contingent in which freedom consists ‘resides already in self-consciousness, and this is ‘the point of departure for personality’. In other words, it is in a unity wrought *from* its point of view within historical contingency that true selfhood is to be found. I then become conscious of ‘my eternal validity’ or ‘so to speak ... in my divine necessity’. It is in ‘my contingent finitude (that I am this particular being, born in this country, at this time, under the many-faceted influence of all these changing surroundings)’ that the ‘concrete’ self sees its task and where the ‘true life of the individual’ finds its ‘apotheosis’.³³

In what way or ways is this concrete self ‘abstract’? The answer lies somewhere in the freedom that resides ‘already’ in self-consciousness. But where, in German Idealism, the freedom of self-consciousness lies in an ability to rise *above* historical contingency and the generic, encompassing it in thought, here it is the freedom to accept the concretely given self as a task *within* history.

In *Sickness* this is not, however, the only respect in which the self is abstract. There is the abstraction of the ‘infinite form of the self’, the ‘negative’ or ‘most abstract form of the self’. It is not a matter of hovering ‘freely’ over the concrete self but of detaching itself from the very thought of selfhood as a task with God as its measure. In its abstraction, the negative self wants to ‘refashion the whole thing’ into a self of its own design.³⁴ This open and ‘active’ version of despair of the second form (wanting to be one’s [own] self) has a ‘passive’ counterpart, in which some earthly impediment to the freedom of the abstract and infinite form of the self is turned into an ‘excuse’ for ‘taking offence at all existence’.³⁵

Earlier we asked whether *Sickness*’s definitions of despair were consistent with the claim that the second form of despair is basic. Michael Theunissen raised the same questions some years ago in *Der Begriff Verzweiflung: Korrekturen an Kierkegaard* from 1993, and as his title indicates, finds it necessary to make a

²⁷ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, 276, 277.

²⁸ Ibid., 326.

²⁹ Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals*, 155.

³⁰ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, pp. 256, 257.

³¹ *SuD*, 43 (KW 19, 14).

³² *E/O*, 523.

³³ Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals*, 127-8.

³⁴ *SuD*, 99 (KW 19, 68).

³⁵ *SuD*, 101-2 (KW 19, 70).

correction. Although aiming to describe Kierkegaard's 'actual thought processes' (*tatsächliche Denkpraxis*), or 'what Kierkegaard actually does' (*das, was Kierkegaard faktisk tut*), Theunissen finds Kierkegaard 'now and then' saying things 'against his stated intention' (*bisweilen wider seine erklärte Absicht*).³⁶

In what follows I offer some reasons for supporting the text's own version of Kierkegaard's thought processes in *Sickness*, to that extent eliminating some of the need for Theunissen's *Korrektur*.

We recall that according to the text the second form is basic because it supplies the basis for understanding the deeper structure of the first. Both are said to have the form of defiance, even if in the case of the first form it is in an extended sense. Theunissen gives substance to our earlier difficulty in discerning any defiance in simply not wanting to be oneself. He claims that Kierkegaard's ordering of the two forms should be reversed. Wanting not to be oneself is the basic form.

Up to the point where Christianity comes into the analysis, *Sickness* outlines a 'progression in consciousness' that 'occurs within the category of the human self, or of the self that has man as its standard of measurement'. So far no God, but in every case the 'standard for the self' is 'that directly in the face of which it is a self'.³⁷ The self that consciously faces God 'acquires an infinite reality' in which its hopes are expanded beyond human measure but a correspondingly greater need for 'evasive' strategies introduced, especially if there remains a strong inclination to meet the demands at the human level. It is there that the all-too-human self is naturally predisposed to remain. As already noted, the requirements of selfhood here are such that if evasion is avoided, defiance can be the outcome perhaps even more readily than faith.

Let us ask whether there is anything like this in 'simply' not wanting to be oneself'. Defiance requires something like a force or an authority to face up to. Natural forces can be defied and one's weaker as also better nature. Moral scruples may incline a whistle-blower to defy authority, but a whistle-blower may have the welfare of the family at heart, and avoiding the risk is also defiance. The authority can be inner as well as outer; it might be the principles of good behavior instilled in you through following unquestioned practices in your society or community.

Theunissen interprets the 'self' that one does not want to be in the first of the two forms of despair as the *given self*: 'We don't want to be what we are [*Wir wollen nicht sein, was wir sind*].'³⁸ When there is nothing but dissatisfaction with our historical, sociological, and psychological inheritance in view, all there is to describe is an unwillingness to go along with this inherited mix, one into which the early Heidegger would say we are 'thrown'. But, with Heidegger still in mind, we can say that one alternative that can come within sight is that of the self as occupant of the point zero of particularity: this self is something that we are prone to avoid by joining the *they* (*Das Man*). It is not without significance that Heidegger's own source here is to be found in Kierkegaard's remarks on leveling in *A Literary Review* from 1847. On this reading there is no *simply* pre-given self; what we are given is a self with inherited protection from what we are.

In the second chapter of *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) we are told that the original sin that anxiety introduces, once there, brings with it its own anxiety, which then becomes a background feature of the world into which later generations are born. The dawning sense that I am more than a mere psychosomatic synthesis conjures a vision of the 'yawning abyss' that opens up for the individual on first glimpsing the fact that the world in general does not present itself to human being as a natural habitat.³⁹ Spiritually, we awaken to a world that, through the centuries, has accommodated itself to the trials of spirit by giving spirituality a homely sound, or by giving people ample opportunity to keep their minds off the larger existential worry. Not only amusements but also whole ways of life have been cultivated that alleviate the restlessness or unease that any intimation of a spiritual destiny might cause. These then place a host of other and diversionary worries in their path. The modern world is one in which events have overtaken the situation where survival and chatter were ways of closing the mind to the fragile nature of our being. Widespread unemployment and lives with extensive built-in leisure periods provide increasing exposure to the *ennui* that was once the doubtful privilege of the few. Boredom, says *Anxiety*, is 'a continuity in

³⁶ Theunissen, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair*, 121, note 6.

³⁷ *SuD*, 111 (*KW* 19, 79).

³⁸ Theunissen, *Der Begriff Verzweiflung*, 56.

³⁹ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 73.

nothingness'.⁴⁰ By identifying the self that we do not want to be as 'nothingness', we make room not only for despair but also defiance in a 'self' that has still to become a self.

By the time he wrote *Sickness* Kierkegaard believed that the 'category of the single individual' had been granted him by circumstances that were divinely appointed. By sweeping away the scenarios in which lives blur the nakedness and isolation of a self-conscious being, his suffering had given him privileged access to what this actually means. A journal entry goes: 'If only this was the right category, if what was said about it was in order, if I perceived it correctly and understood properly that this was my task ... then I stand and my writings with me.'⁴¹ In its concluding 'Two Notes' the *Point of View* presents the single individual as the thread that connects the earlier pseudonyms with these religious writings. There is this other basis, then, for believing that the self we do not want to be in the first form of despair is a self that we have still to become in order to face the world as a task.

Consider, too, the following. *Sickness* says, as noted, that if the self were 'self-established' there would be a question of just one form of despair: 'not wanting to be itself, wanting to be rid of the self.'⁴² There would be no question of a form of despair that is 'wanting to be oneself'.⁴³ The latter is a self-designed self using the negative or infinite self as its matrix and putting it back into what are only speciously 'eternal' activities. For Kierkegaard there has to be this second form and for him it is basic because the defiance that emerges in that form is already implicit in the first form. One might deny that there was any defiance in despair of the first form and argue that defiance in the second form is something new. One advantage of Theunissen's choice of the pre-given self as the basis of Kierkegaard's analysis is that it avoids the problem of defiance here and makes it correspondingly clearer how the religious premise can come into play further along. However, the same result is achieved by taking the unwanted self of the first form to be the *negative* self that Kierkegaard, at this point in the development of his thought, *now* takes to be the true point of departure for a selfhood measured by the high Christian standards that he is now presenting to his defaulting readers. It is our unwillingness to face *negative* selfhood that can count as defiance in the first form of despair

Sickness distinguishes three progressively 'lower' forms: despair at not wanting to be oneself, despair at not wanting to be *a* self, and lowest of all, despair in wanting to be another. The latter 'has not even enough self to wish or dream that it had become what it has not become'.⁴⁴ Despair is then not *just* a matter of 'not wanting'; it is the mood in which the unwillingness occurs. It is a matter of not wanting to proceed where the positive possibility lies. In the lowest form, *consciousness* of this possibility has not yet arisen; wanting to be *another* is an indirect expression of the fact that there is indeed room for a self, while wanting to fill it with another merely indicates that this room is empty. Put in this way, it is hard to see how a reading of the first form of despair in which the unwanted self is pre-given can accommodate this 'lowest' case. There is no self here. It might be argued that for this reason it is not an *authentic* case of despair. But the definition of the first form is explicit about it being ourselves we want to be rid of. *Sickness* describes in detail a case of someone lacking a self yet with some inkling of what he lacks:

As it says in the novels, he has now been happily married for several years, a forceful and enterprising man, father, and citizen, even perhaps an important man. At home in his house his servants refer to him as 'himself'. In the city he is one of the worthies. In his conduct he is a respecter of persons, or of personal appearances, and he is to all appearances a person. In Christendom he is a Christian (in exactly the same sense that in paganism he would be a pagan and in Holland a Hollander), one of the cultured Christians. The question of immortality has frequently engaged him, and on more than one occasion he has asked the priest if there is such a thing, whether one would really recognize oneself again; which for him must be a particularly pressing matter seeing he has no self.⁴⁵

Asking the priest about immortality reveals this paragon citizen's despair as unwillingness to see the

⁴⁰ Kierkegaard, *Anxiety*, 160; see Translator's Introduction, xxiii.

⁴¹ Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 118.

⁴² *SuD*, 43 (KW 19, 14).

⁴³ *SuD*, 43-44 (KW 19, 14).

⁴⁴ *SuD*, 83 (KW 19, 53).

⁴⁵ *SuD*, 87 (KW 19, 56).

eternal in himself. What lack of this 'consciousness' means here is that 'himself' cannot yet be read as 'his self'.

This attempt at clarifying Kierkegaard's concept of despair has up to now assumed that, in defining 'authentic despair', the Danish *fortvivlet* stands in *apposition* to the two expressions 'wanting not to be' and 'wanting to be' oneself. That is to say, these two expressions refer to the despairs themselves, a despair that consists in wanting not to be one's negative self and another despair that consists in wanting to be one's own self.

The assumption hangs on a slender thread if this translation of the text is mistaken. Theunissen, in remarking on an earlier attempt of mine to clarify these concepts, has implied that it is. He said that my attempt represented a 'counter-thesis' to his account while his corresponded to Kierkegaard's own understanding, namely, that the 'really authentic despair was that one despairingly wants to be oneself' [*dass die eigentlich eigentliche Verzweiflung die sei, verzweifelt man selbst sein zu wollen*].⁴⁶

In a way that is correct. As I have just argued, we can elicit an element of resistance to authority in the first form of despair that vindicates Kierkegaard's claim that this form can be 'traced back' to the despair that takes the form of open defiance. This means that 'wanting to be the self-edited self' is anticipated in a despair that has still to confront the challenges of the infinite form of the self. But whatever Theunissen's view is, the English translation misrepresents my counter-thesis as claiming that the basic ('really authentic') despair is 'despairing of wanting to be the self'. As I have argued, wanting to be the self, the self-edited self, *is in itself* despair. The Danish *fortvivlet* and the German *verzweiflet* do not describe a way in which these projects are approached, that is to say, without hope of carrying them through; the loss of hope lies already in the projects themselves.

There is a tendency among Anglophone commentators on *The Sickness unto Death* to apply the adverbs 'despairingly' and 'desperately' indiscriminately. Hubert L. Dreyfus modifies my own translation by putting 'desperately' for 'in despair' in the formula for the first form of authentic despair, and 'despairingly' in that for the second. His own understanding of the first form of despair is close to Theunissen's: 'the feeling that your life isn't working and, given the kind of person you are, it is impossible for things to work for you; that a life worth living is, in your case, literally impossible.'⁴⁷ But from what has been argued here, the reference to *feeling* omits most of what *Sickness* refers to as 'despair', while the assumption that despair first arises when a project of selfhood already entered upon appears intractable is the reverse of what the text tells us. It says, once more, that despair lies in the project itself: in the one case that of not wanting to be the self one inherently is, and in the other that of wanting to be a self of one's own making. Yes, both can be described as not wanting to be oneself, and there is a strong temptation to see this unwillingness serially: progressively comprehensive goals of selfhood prove to be beyond the resources with which one is willing to pursue them, so that, as in Hegel, despair is a kind of solvent that opens the way to more embracing conceptions of the task.⁴⁸ This reversal of Kierkegaard misrepresents also the second form of despair. 'Wanting in despair to be oneself', instead of being a defiant refusal of a self-made self to be established by another, becomes 'despairing of wanting to be oneself'. This makes it logical to say that not wanting to be oneself is the 'truly authentic despair',⁴⁹ but it is not a reading that the text supports.

Those who today find Kierkegaard's writings rewarding are understandably inclined to do Kierkegaard the favor of repackaging the insights in a way that lets them be grafted on to the main body of our own

⁴⁶ *Der Begriff Verzweiflung*, 10. See Theunissen, 'Für einen rationaleren Kierkegaard. Zu Einwänden von Arne Grøn und Alastair Hannay', *Kierkegaard Studies: Yearbook 1996*. Theunissen's comments there derive from 'Die Existenzdialektische Grundvoraussetzung der Verzweilungsanalyse Kierkegaards', presented in Oslo in 1992 and published in revised form as the first of two studies in *Der Begriff Verzweiflung*.

⁴⁷ Dreyfus, 'Kierkegaard on the Self', 15.

⁴⁸ Despair in the *Phenomenology* takes us in the wrong direction. To simplify Hegel's own simplifying metaphors, despair occurs when the credentials that consciousness is carrying on its journey to self-awareness prove untrustworthy. First there comes doubt but then more cogently despair. Dissolving doubt hardens into despair, thus preparing the mind for a better set of credentials down the pathway to spiritual satisfaction. Despair in Hegel has as its object the 'conscious insight into the untruth of phenomenal knowledge'. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 49, 50.

⁴⁹ See footnote 46.

attitudes and beliefs. Particularly interesting in Theunissen's analysis is his interest in preserving the religious component, though it would be difficult to ignore it in any attempt to get to grips with what we take Kierkegaard *actually* to have thought. What Theunissen offers is an existential dialectic that includes an intersubjective component to the effect that the senses in which a human being despairs of itself are interpreted as negative anticipations of an ideal of wholly free interchange, which idea in turn presupposes the 'gift' of communicative freedom through the absolute freedom of God. The terms in which God is introduced faithfully follow the text: God is the 'power' that 'establishes' or 'posits' the self and becomes the source of unlimited possibility ('God is that everything is possible'), a source that offers an alternative to the self that doesn't want to be itself.⁵⁰ It allows *Sickness's* religious premise to come into play as a basis for *accepting* the pre-given self, the self that initially one does not want to be. Not wanting to be ourselves⁵¹ is the form that despair takes when the 'measure' of the true self comes to be seen, while despair in its first form is dissatisfaction with how one 'immediately' finds oneself as Theunissen also says.⁵² The *Korrektur* is required because the reverse ranking more properly captures the not always explicit drift of Kierkegaard's thought.

It is understandable that with some textual adjustment Theunissen would look for a closer affinity between his own and Kierkegaard's account of a fulfilled life. He found in Kierkegaard a valuable resource in working out his own philosophical anthropology. I nevertheless believe (and readers can test this for themselves) that in the account developed in the second part of Theunissen's book, entitled 'Zur transzendierenden Kritik der Verzweiflungsanalyse Kierkegaards',⁵³ we lose sight of what Kierkegaard himself seems clearly to have been thinking in writing *The Sickness unto Death*. The difference between them is not just an illusion due to the polemical thrust of that work. Although Kierkegaard admits to not being a Christian on the scale of Anti-Climacus, his journal records how it had been 'granted' to him in *Sickness* to 'illuminate Christianity on a scale greater than [he] had ever dared hope; crucial categories are plainly brought to light there'.⁵⁴ Rather than looking for anticipations of Heidegger here, we might do better to look for the sources of *The Sickness unto Death* in Kierkegaard's Idealist background. A study of Schelling will leave little difficulty in seeing where Kierkegaard found and re-formed these ideas.

But then Schelling is also one of Theunissen's sources! So even if the *Korrektur* provides an inaccurate account of *Sickness's* thought processes, Theunissen and Kierkegaard are on the same wavelength, and a topic focal to both is how to connect the unity of selfhood with that of society. Many questions are there to be asked, for example whether Kierkegaard's notion of 'something eternal' finds a counterpart in Theunissen's 'communicative freedom'. It is also a pity that the latter's definition of despair, when applied to the second form of despair, makes no mention of Kierkegaard's second form of despair: self-established selfhood. Does that mean that the distinction between self-established selfhood and selfhood 'posited' by another plays a smaller part in Theunissen's thinking? That would surely widen the gap between them. The gap may still be productive nonetheless. Kierkegaard focuses on the defensive strategies of the individual will and challenges it with the example of Christ. The 'negative' is more than fully acknowledged by Theunissen, but in the spirit if not the letter of Hegel, he offers a broadening of the positive in which the 'eternal' in the sense of a fulfilled life enters time in our social relationships. How much 'correction' Kierkegaard needs in order to join him here is still an open question.

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⁵⁰ Theunissen, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair*, 82; cf. SuD, 70 (KW 19, 40).

⁵¹ Theunissen, *Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair*, 21.

⁵² 'Wir wollen unmittelbar nicht sein, was wir sind' / 'We want immediately not to be what we are' (*Der Begriff Verzweiflung*, 18).

⁵³ *Der Begriff Verzweiflung*, 56 ff.; *Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair*, 34ff.

⁵⁴ Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals*, 373-4.

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