Introduction

Jeffrey Hanson and Sharon Krishek

Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813–1855) was a prolific author who published his philosophical writings in various styles and often pseudonymously. In this diverse authorship, *The Sickness unto Death* stands as something of an exception. Although signed pseudonymously – a method that Kierkegaard often used to put distance between his own view and the one expressed in the text – Kierkegaard regarded this book as highly reflective of his own understanding of the religious life. Rapidly written in the spring of 1848 and published in 1849 after some agonizing, the motivation behind *The Sickness unto Death*, according to Kierkegaard's journal, was in part a conscientious conviction that the whole of his authorship needed to be curated in the direction of the religious. The appearance of the second edition of *Either/Or* in particular provoked him to accompany the reissue with a new and more religiously inflected text. "The second edition of *Either/Or* really can't be published without something accompanying it," he fretted in his journal. "Somehow the emphasis must be on the fact that I've made up my mind about being a religious author . . . If this opportunity passes, virtually everything I've written, viewed as a totality, will be dragged down into the aesthetic" (KJN 5, NB10:69/SKS 21, 293–294).

Even in the final publication, though, Kierkegaard felt compelled to defend the form of the book, which, given its argumentative elements, would seem to resemble his earlier "aesthetic" works, as opposed to his more explicitly religious edifying writings. In the voice of Anti-Climacus – the pseudonymous persona upon which he belatedly settled, keeping his own name as editor on the title page – the opening words of the Preface signal his recognition of the unusually hybridized style of the work, and read as follows: "Many may find the form of this 'exposition' strange; it may seem to them too rigorous to be upbuilding and too upbuilding to be rigorously scholarly. As far as the latter is concerned, I have no opinion. As to the former, I beg to differ" (SUD, 5/SKS 11, 117). Anti-Climacus

pursues this objection by arguing that everything "from the Christian point of view" should be upbuilding (SUD, 5/SKS 11, 117), even the scholarly. Introducing for the first time a medical metaphor that will recur throughout the text, Anti-Climacus asserts that Christian communication must resemble the "way a physician speaks at the sickbed; even if only medical experts understand it, it must never be forgotten that the situation is the bedside of a sick person" (SUD, 5/SKS 11, 117). Aspects then of *The Sickness unto Death* are indeed highly technical, but the technical in this work is tempered by the theological conviction that all insight must serve the interests of edification. This blend of styles is anticipated by the book's subtitle – *A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening* – and ultimately the Preface defends the book's methodological approach as both achieving the goals of upbuilding and awakening (which call to mind the aim of religious edification) and attaining the more "psychologically correct" effect (which satisfies the readers' expectation that they have in their hands a work of philosophy that attempts to explore the psyche of its readers) (SUD, 6/SKS 11, 118).[1]

The title itself is not invoked and explored until the Introduction, which Anti-Climacus opens with a citation of John 11:4, wherein Jesus declares of his dying friend Lazarus that his "sickness is not unto death," the irony of which, as Anti-Climacus notes right away, is that "and yet Lazarus did die" (SUD, 7/SKS 11, 123). Continuing with the medical metaphors, Anti-Climacus interprets Jesus to have meant that even fatal sickness is not "unto death" in the sense that even physical death is not the same as – or as dire as – spiritual death. Raising Lazarus from his grave, hence "nullifying" his physical death, signifies that the real death at issue is rather a spiritual one. This is the first indication in the text of the book's central topic: despair, which is a spiritual sickness, the true "sickness unto death."

The main body of the text opens with arguably the most notorious paragraph in Kierkegaard's oeuvre:

> A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self. (SUD, 13/SKS 11, 129)

[1] Contemporary readers should not be misled by Kierkegaard's terminology, which predates the rise of psychology as an empirical science. He designated a few of his works as "psychological," but he meant by this term something like the philosophical analysis of mental states.

So densely tangled is this opening that some commentators have contended that it is a deliberate satire on the tortured prose of Kierkegaard's frequent target, G. W. F. Hegel, but this verdict has not been seconded much in the literature. Nevertheless, echoes of Hegel's thought do resonate in the text. Much of Anti-Climacus's diagnostic follows a dialectical path: first through four forms of despair that are mutually defined without respect to whether or not the despairer is conscious of being in despair or of what despair even is, and then through a number of stages defined by increasing consciousness, from comparatively passive weakness to active defiance.[2] The dense core sections of Part One are littered with Hegelian vocabulary, and a celebrated passage from the opening of Part Two is unmistakably a reference to Hegel's dialectic of the master and servant:

> A cattleman who (if this were possible) is a self directly before his cattle is a very low self, and, similarly, a master who is a self directly before his slaves is actually no self – for in both cases a criterion is lacking. The child who previously has had only his parents as a criterion becomes a self as an adult by getting the state as a criterion, but what an infinite accent falls on the self by having God as the criterion! (SUD, 79/SKS 11, 191)

The theory of selfhood put forward in this text has been enormously influential on contemporary thinking about personal identity and related themes. To be a self, according to the account developed by Anti-Climacus, is to relate properly to the constitutive dimensions of the human being. The human being just is a synthesis of limiting and expansive aspects that are in dynamic relation with each other; to be a self is to be conscious of oneself as exercising this dynamic relation, this interplay of openness and limit.[3] The self though is not self-isolated; if it has not "established itself" but rather "been established by another" (SUD, 13/SKS 11, 130), then that means that the self sustains a further relation – to the other that established it. That this is so, Anti-Climacus argues, is attributable to the fact that there are two types of despair: It is possible for the self who is in a state of despair either "to will to be oneself" or "not to will to be oneself" (SUD, 14/SKS 11, 130). In the absence of a constitutive relation

[2] An analysis of the Hegelian form of dialectic in this text is provided by Jon Stewart in his "Kierkegaard's Phenomenology of Despair in *The Sickness unto Death*," *Kierkegaard Studies Year Book* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 1997), 117–143. See also Alastair Hannay, "Kierkegaard and the Variety of Despair," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 329–348.

[3] The complexity of Kierkegaard's conception of the self invites different understandings. Indeed, various interpretations of Kierkegaard's analysis, which do not necessarily concord in every respect, are presented in this collection.

to another, one could of course not will to be oneself, because one could always reject or resist being oneself. But because it is possible to affirm oneself – to will to be oneself – and yet still be in despair, this possibility entails that the self is in relation to another that has some decisive bearing on the self, a bearing that the self rejects or resists. For the sake of clarity, it might be more appropriate to say that such a self in despair wills to be its *own* self; it wills to be itself on its own terms or without relation to another.

The detailed analysis of these two forms of despair comprises much of the book, and the chapters that follow will exposit this material for the reader. For now let it be noted that Anti-Climacus claims that "all despair ultimately can be traced back to and be resolved in" this form – that is, the self's will to be its *own* self (SUD, 14/SKS 11, 130). All despair is a rejection of or resistance to relation with another; even when despair has the form of not willing to be oneself, this unwillingness is reducible to a will to be one's own self, on one's own terms, without relation. The critical consensus seems to be that the "another" to whom the self might be related is paradigmatically God, such that the highest pitch of despair, which Anti-Climacus will call demonic defiance, is defined by its willful refusal of relation to God, by open rebellion against not just *an*other but *the* Other. At the same time, it is plain that there are many "anothers" to whom the self can be related and generally is, namely, other human beings. All of us are who we are by way of relations with others: family, friends, lovers, people in our milieu and beyond it, and so on. The account of the self put forward by *The Sickness unto Death* alone of all of Kierkegaard's writings ought to suffice to put to bed once and for all the persistent criticism of his thought as endorsing anti-socialism and self-sufficiency. The antidote to despair according to Anti-Climacus is precisely the opposite of self-sufficiency: "The formula that describes the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out is this: in relating to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it" (SUD, 14/SKS 11, 140). To be free of despair is to be at peace with one's self, at peace with others, and at peace with the Other that is the divine. This situation of the self Anti-Climacus will later call "faith."

The exact relation between the seemingly more philosophical Part One and the apparently more theologically inflected Part Two is a matter of ongoing discussion. Some earlier engagements with the text seemed content to disregard Part Two entirely, but this evasiveness is not much countenanced today. It is natural to read the book as something of a companion to 1844's *The Concept of Anxiety*. Kierkegaard designated both

The Sickness unto Death and *The Concept of Anxiety* as "psychological" texts (in the sense noted earlier). Yet from the outset of the former it is evident that the subtitle of that work is not arbitrarily chosen but marks out a significant difference in methodology. Vigilius Haufniensis, the pseudonymous author of *The Concept of Anxiety*, is engaged in a strictly philosophical study of anxiety and how that phenomenon sheds light on the theological issue of hereditary sin. Haufniensis does not borrow from or depend upon theological presuppositions, and he sharply delimits the concerns and object of philosophical psychology and dogmatic theology. That a philosophical examination can serve dogmatic theology, however, is foreshadowed by Haufniensis from the very beginning of the work. While distinct sciences, the discipline that Kierkegaard called psychology can nevertheless hand over the results of its deliberation for theological reflection and use, a possibility signaled by Haufniensis again at the very end of the book. The final words of *The Concept of Anxiety* are: "Here this deliberation ends, where it began. As soon as psychology [i.e., philosophical psychology] has finished with anxiety, it is to be delivered to dogmatics" (CA, 162/SKS 4, 461). Haufniensis, though, does not himself submit a Christian psychology or deliver the results of his psychological-philosophical investigation to dogmatics. Anti-Climacus can be read as having done so, hence the reference in his subtitle to the text being both "Christian" and "psychological." *The Sickness unto Death* is thus a diagnostic, hence normative, and not merely descriptive, text. The goal is healing, which is why *The Sickness unto Death* is "for upbuilding and awakening."

CHAPTER 1

Kierkegaard's Place of Rest

George Pattison

Introduction

Commentators have widely followed Kierkegaard himself in judging the pseudonym Anti-Climacus to be a Christian to an extraordinary degree, as much "above" Kierkegaard's own relation to Christianity as Johannes Climacus is "below" it (e.g., JP 6, 6433/KJN 6, NB11:209/SKS 22, 130). The "severity" of Anti-Climacus's writings seems to presage the "Attack on 'Christendom,'" an impression that is not entirely false but that does give a one-sided view of his work. The two books ascribed to Anti-Climacus are not to be read solely as exposing the universal despair rotting the foundations of Christendom (*The Sickness unto Death*) or as the refusal of discipleship by a soft and degenerate church (*Practice in Christianity*). As in the earlier "aesthetic" pseudonymous authorship, discussed in the Introduction, what we read in these works is also significantly complemented by accompanying upbuilding discourses, in this case three sets of discourses titled *The High Priest–The Tax Collector–The Woman Who Was a Sinner* (1849), *An Upbuilding Discourse* (1851), and *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* (1851). These constitute a closely knit group: three have texts from Luke 7, two are on the woman who is at the center of the episode described in that chapter, and all have more or less explicit discussions of love. Also, they all have the form of communion discourses.

Both the Anti-Climacus works and these last discourses emerge from a ferment of literary-religious productivity running from 1848 through to 1851, overlapping with the closing stages of Kierkegaard's work on *Christian Discourses* (published 1848) and concluding with the *Two Discourses*. At various points in this period Kierkegaard considered publishing varying combinations of works in a single volume titled *The Works of Accomplishment* (see, e.g., JP 1, 493/KJN 5, NB8:15/SKS 21, 151). In an early stage of writing, he also toyed with the idea of publishing *The*

Sickness unto Death with parts of what became *Christian Discourses* and *Practice in Christianity* under the title "Thoughts That Give Fundamental Healing: Christian Medicine" (JP 5, 6110/KJN 4, NB4:76/SKS 20, 324).[1] Although neither of these projects at that point included the discourses before us, their relation to the two Anti-Climacus works is well evidenced in the journals (see, e.g., JP 6, 6515/KJN 6, NB13:57/SKS 22, 309). Kierkegaard vacillated extensively over whether to publish various combinations of these works pseudonymously or under his own name, so although the discourses are signed and *The Sickness unto Death* is pseudonymous, this is not an entirely impermeable distinction (and Kierkegaard did allow his name to appear on the title page as editor).

The aim of this chapter is to explore further the relationship between these late discourses and *The Sickness unto Death* and to see how they illustrate or add to our understanding of that work. I should straightaway emphasize that the relationship in question is not one in which the discourses "correct" what we find in the pseudonym, as might sometimes seem to be the case in the relationship between the earlier, aesthetic pseudonymous works and their accompanying discourses. Rather, I shall argue that these discourses are saying essentially the same thing as the pseudonymous work and for this reason provide us with a valuable heuristic tool for drawing out what may in some respects be only implicit or perhaps scarcely discernible in the latter. Thus, it is not the case that the devotional tone of the discourses is to be understood as softening the severity or rigor of the Anti-Climacan writings; on the contrary, they point us to what is already central in those writings themselves. With specific regard to *The Sickness unto Death*, this hermeneutic approach suggests that the pseudonymous text is not to be read in the first instance as a negative exposure of the sinful condition of contemporary humanity but as an approach to clarifying the possibility and meaning of forgiveness. Thus read, *The Sickness unto Death* too finds its resting place "at the foot of the altar" (see WA, 165/SKS 12, 281 and discussion later in this chapter). Among other implications of this reading is that *The Sickness unto Death* is not primarily about despair, or about the self, but about the (Christian) experience of forgiveness.[2] Does this, then, mean that the reader must accede to Christian dogmatic presuppositions, and, if so, what are the

[1] Translations throughout are my own, though I have supplied references to available English translations.

[2] See Emmanuel Hirsch's comment on *The Sickness unto Death* that "The accompaniment provided by the Friday discourses to the main works is essential to understanding them. And this [i.e., Christ's] grace is essentially understood in the same way as previously: as the entire forgiveness of the

consequences for a philosophical interpretation of the work? I shall return to these questions in my conclusion, but first we need to examine the texts themselves. I start, however, with the question of Kierkegaard's "method."

Kierkegaard's Method

One of the most discussed approaches to *The Sickness unto Death* in recent years has been what Michael Theunissen called Kierkegaard's negativistic method.[3] Theunissen's idea is that Kierkegaard approaches the constitution of the self and the self's fundamental orientation toward God in a thoroughly philosophical manner that is guided solely by how human beings become aware of deep-rooted "deficiencies" in their lives as soon as they begin to reflect on themselves. This leads to a vision of the self as fundamentally despairing and to the claim that this despair can be cured only by appeal to God. Theunissen is, of course, aware that *The Sickness unto Death* opens with the famous definition of the self that relates itself to itself and strives to become transparent to the power by which it is grounded. This would seem to presuppose the outcome of the enquiry, but Theunissen argues that although this definition comes first in the order of presentation, it does not do so with regard to the investigation itself. In other words, Kierkegaard's method is properly negativistic but, like many researchers, he sets a preliminary summary of the outcome at the beginning of the enquiry.[4]

Reading the discourses alongside *The Sickness unto Death* in the manner I am proposing might seem to work against the negativistic approach, especially if we think that all of the writings associated with Anti-Climacus are parts of a single movement that present the "Accomplishment" or "Completion" of Kierkegaard's literary career and are directed toward

sinner that is new in each moment, so that the one in despair surrenders himself in confessing God and the desire for grace. In and with this forgiveness, [the believer] is transformatively enflamed by the life-giving Spirit, and for the one who [thus] confesses and desires, there is a new movement in faith, hope, and love." Emmanuel Hirsch, *Kierkegaard Studien*, vol. 2 (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1933), 296/898.

[3] Michael Theunissen, "Kierkegaard's Negativistic Method," in *Kierkegaard's Truth: The Disclosure of the Self*, ed. Joseph H. Smith (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 381–423. For discussion see Arne Grøn, "Der Begriff Verzweiflung," *Kierkegaardiana* 17 (1994): 25–41.

[4] This reading can be contrasted with approaches that take the opening definition of the self as a relation that relates itself to itself as the methodological starting point, from which the various forms of despair are dialectically developed. See, e.g., John D. Glenn, Jr., "The Definition of the Self" (5–22) and Alastair Hannay, "Spirit and the Idea of the Self as a Reflexive Relation" (23–38), both in *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 19: *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987).

"fundamental healing." For this procedure supposes that the negative analyses of the various deficient forms of selfhood encountered in *The Sickness unto Death* are a kind of diagnosis undertaken by someone – a doctor of the soul, let's say – who already understands what is required to bring healing and wants to share that knowledge with readers. Importantly, we should note that unlike most of the earlier sets of upbuilding discourses these have the form of actual talks given in the context of the communion service and some were delivered by Kierkegaard himself in that context. Consequently, they presuppose a commitment to Christian practice that some of the earlier discourses do not. In other words, they have profound and essential theological commitments.

Related to the negativistic approach is the view that *The Sickness unto Death* offers a kind of phenomenology of the self, and we see both approaches coming together in the book *Subjektivitet og Negativitet* (*Subjectivity and Negativity*) and a series of articles by Arne Grøn.[5] On this view, Kierkegaard's procedure is not determined by its Christian doctrinal outcome but follows the dynamics of the self along a strictly phenomenological path. The intuition that this is what Kierkegaard is attempting is enforced by the seemingly Hegelian structuring of the work, a feature that led one theological commentator to see it, despite Kierkegaard's intentions, as essentially atheistic.[6] Nor should we forget that at the outset of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel describes his own work as tracking the journey of Spirit down a "highway of despair."[7]

Reading *The Sickness unto Death* as integrated with the communion discourses does not preclude seeing it as being also in some way "phenomenological." Certainly, it is highly plausible to see important passages across the range of Kierkegaard's writings as phenomenological, at least in a loose sense.[8] However, such a reading by no means requires a commitment to finding the defining center of Kierkegaard's view of the

[5] See Arne Grøn, *Subjektivitet og Negativitet: Kierkegaard* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1997); Arne Grøn, "Kierkegaards Phänomenologie?" in *Kierkegaard Studies Year Book 1996*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Hermann Deuser (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1996), 91–116.

[6] S. U. Zuidema, *Kierkegaard* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1960).

[7] The "Hegelian" aspect of Kierkegaard's phenomenology is discussed by Grøn, and by Michael Theunissen in *Der Begriff Verzweiflung: Korrekturen an Kierkegaard* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), 149–156. See also Jon Stewart, "Kierkegaard's Phenomenology of Despair in *The Sickness unto Death*," in *Kierkegaard Studies Year Book 1997*, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Hermann Deuser (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997), 117–143.

[8] On my reservations regarding this approach see George Pattison, "Kierkegaard and the Limits of Phenomenology," 188–207; the collection of which this article is a part (*Kierkegaard as Phenomenologist: An Experiment*, ed. Jeffrey Hanson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010)) gives a good overall view of the relevant issues.

human condition in the "negativity" of the despairing self's self-experience. It can just as well serve to support the claim that this center is ultimately constituted by the "positivity" of the Christian experience of forgiveness and reconciliation with God. Nevertheless, to the extent that Kierkegaard's method was phenomenological it could only present this experience in a way that made it accessible to every well-intentioned reader who was prepared to follow where it led. As phenomenology, it seems unlikely that it could go further and compel the reader also to accept the metaphysical or doctrinal claims that, in Christian teaching, usually underwrite these experiences. Phenomenology does not take us beyond the human.

I leave open the question of phenomenology. Even if some aspects of the discourse material can be read phenomenologically, this does not apply to all aspects, and we need to take seriously that these discourses are thoroughly self-conscious rhetorical performances, speaking in and to particular situations as well as to a particular audience that the discourse itself also constructs in a manner comparable to the way in which a novel creates its ideal reader.[9] In these terms, the existential descriptions that Kierkegaard evokes in them may be better compared to the kinds of model used in scientific explanation than to the products of phenomenological investigations. Few physicists, I suppose, actually believed that atoms or molecules looked like the conglomerations of billiard balls that were standard visual aids in physics teaching in the mid-twentieth century, but they did believe that these could illustrate the kinds of relation and proportion that were most relevant to understanding atomic structures, at least for introductory purposes. Although Vigilius Haufniensis's comments about his own experimental method have been taken as supporting the phenomenological approach, they seem to fit more naturally with the model paradigm (see CA, 75–76/SKS 4, 378–379). To the extent that this analogy with the use of models in science is correct, it provides a way of reading the characters and situations in the discourses that does not require us to see them as the primitive data of phenomenological interpretation. Instead they appear as hypothetical exemplifications of particular spiritual stages or attitudes that are not necessarily instantiated otherwise than when they are appropriated by the reader.[10] They are a call to existential appropriation, not a representation of how things are.

[9] See George Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses: Philosophy, Literature, Theology* (London: Routledge, 2002), 69–85.

[10] In this respect, the role of the model is like that of the puppets described in Martin Thust, "Das Marionettentheater Sören Kierkegaards," *Zeitwende* 1 (1925): 18–38.