

Introduction

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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.

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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 *another* but *the* Other. At the same time, it is plain that there are many “others” 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

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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.”