

The moral implications of Kierkegaard's analysis of despair

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Abstract: Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death* famously characterizes despair as the sickness of any human being who does not live a life of faith. Kierkegaard supports this claim by providing a detailed analysis of despair in the first part of this essay. This analysis, I claim, presents the thesis that to be healed of despair is not only to maintain a correct relation to God but also to the world and, moreover, that the two relations are interdependent. Thus, in contrast to prominent readings of this essay, I claim that Kierkegaard's analysis of despair bears the important moral implication that a believer's relationship with other humans is indispensable to a life of faith.

Introduction

At the first part of *The Sickness unto Death* – a religious treatise published in 1849 under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus – Kierkegaard presents a detailed analysis of despair. His claim is that despair is a spiritual sickness which afflicts the majority of people.¹ His analysis, however, serves not only to shed light on a human phenomenon that he considers more common than is usually acknowledged but, more crucially, to present what he considers to be the only cure for it – namely, faith. Notably, this account of faith is taken to express his ideal for a religious life.² Thus many scholars find it disturbing that Kierkegaard seems to exclude relationships with people from his so-called 'formula for faith'.³ Commentators such as John Davenport, John Elrod, C. Stephen Evans, and Sylvia Walsh express unease when addressing this point, and adduce Kierkegaard's earlier *Works of Love* to complete or strengthen the 'social dimension', which they consider missing from or not emphasized enough in *The Sickness unto Death*.⁴

My claim in this article is, however, quite the opposite. I believe that Kierkegaard's analysis of despair presents a complex system of intertwined relationships, and I attempt to show that this analysis leads to the conclusion that one's relation to God and one's relation to the world are *interdependent*. The meaning of this interdependence is that while one's relation to God conditions one's relation to the world, at the same time one's relation to the world conditions one's relation to God. Namely, not only is it the case that a correct relation to the world cannot be satisfactorily fulfilled without sustaining a correct relation to God, but also the other way around – to achieve a correct relation to God, one must necessarily sustain a correct relation to the world.

Thus, even if Kierkegaard's 'formula for faith' presents only one's relation to *God*, given that his analysis of despair demonstrates that such a relation depends on one's relation to the *world*, we can say that his 'formula' *eo ipso* includes the latter. And if we take 'relation to the world' to consist necessarily, and even primarily, of relations to other people, we can clearly see the moral implications of Kierkegaard's analysis of despair: one cannot be healed from despair, one cannot have faith, one cannot sustain a correct relation to God, without sustaining correct relations with other people.⁵

Kierkegaard's definition of the self

Kierkegaard opens his discussion of despair⁶ with a well-known and widely quoted section, where he presents three key claims:

1. '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)
2. 'The human self is . . . a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another.' (*ibid.*, 13–14)
3. 'The formula that describes the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out is this: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it.' (*ibid.*, 14)

Although Kierkegaard presents a specific way of understanding the meaning of being 'a self', I suggest understanding his idiosyncratic conception against the background of a more common use of the term – namely, the self as denoting one's identity, that which distinguishes one from others.⁷ The picture that arises is as follows. First, we have to distinguish between 'being a human being' and 'being a human self'. Every human being has the *potential* to become a human self but, according to Kierkegaard, most humans fail in fulfilling their selfhood

(and are thus in a state of despair). Being a human being is a given; *becoming* a human self is an undertaking, a task for which each and every one of us is responsible. More specifically, we can distinguish between any given person's potential self (the self one has in potential) and actual self (the self one has in actuality). Let us then say that a person whose actual self is identical to his potential self has a *fully actualized* self, whereas one whose actual self is different has a *partially actualized* self. Most people, according to Kierkegaard, have only a partially actualized self. Let us call the former the 'fulfilled self' and the latter the 'partial self'. Thus, although Kierkegaard uses the same term – 'self' – in discussing the different phases of despair (namely, the failure to become a 'self'), I suggest that we distinguish among 'potential self', 'partial self', and 'fulfilled self'.⁸

Second, Kierkegaard defines a human being as a synthesis. What does he mean by this? A synthesis, he says, is a relation between two contraries, and he uses this idea to formulate an observation about human nature. A human being can be characterized (in a sense that will soon be explained) as finite *and* infinite, as bound to necessity *and* free, as temporal *and* eternal. However, claims Kierkegaard, such a human being is still not a self. What does it take, then, to turn a 'human being' into a 'self'?

Kierkegaard, as we saw in claim 2 above, defines the human *self* as follows: (a) a self is a relation that relates to itself, and (b) by relating to itself it relates to *another*. Elaborating on Kierkegaard's claim that a human being is a synthesis, and on his understanding of a synthesis as a relation between opposites, I suggest that we understand (a) as the claim that to be a self is to succeed in harmonizing those 'existential' opposites which are essential to human nature. As we shall shortly see, those who fail in doing this and accordingly perceive themselves as essentially only finite/bound to necessity/temporal or, alternatively, as only infinite/free/eternal, are in a state of despair. Moreover, and this is now claim (b), the act of relating to oneself – of harmonizing the opposites that are essential to one's nature – necessitates a relation of the self to another: both other humans and God ('the power that established it').⁹

Thus, Kierkegaard's claim is clearly that the self is not autonomous: it is necessarily constituted by the relationships that it sustains with others. Our experience, indeed, shows that this claim is true. It often seems that our selfhood is affected and shaped by our interactions with other people. Our relationships with our parents, friends, lovers, and children all leave their marks on us, turning us into who we are. At the same time, however, this claim may also seem a little strange. It is intuitive to imagine that in each and every one of us there is a kind of antecedent self (as it were), which exists prior to this kind of shaping: a self that transcends and influences such a shaping. We will return to *this* kind of self when introducing Kierkegaard's idea of 'the eternal in the self' below (see the section 'Despair: a failed relation to God').

Having presented a preliminary examination of Kierkegaard's definition of the self, we can say that he sees the self as a 'bundle' of relations, and that to be healed of despair is to succeed in sustaining these relations properly. In this way one's potential self becomes completely fulfilled. Hence, there is a correlation between 'fulfilled self', healing from despair, and properly sustaining the relations that constitute the self. Accordingly, my suggestion is that Kierkegaard's choice of defining a human being as a synthesis between (1) finitude and infinitude (hereafter 'Synthesis 1'), (2) necessity and freedom (or possibility) ('Synthesis 2'), and (3) temporality and eternity ('Synthesis 3') offers a picture in which every person, whether he is aware of it or not, sustains a threefold relationship: with the world, with himself, and with God. Despair amounts to failing in these three relationships, and Kierkegaard presents this by analysing the failure to synthesize each of the pairs.

More specifically, the failure to synthesize the first two pairs (Syntheses 1 and 2) represents two different aspects of the same phenomenon, namely, a dissonance with the *world*, while failure to synthesize the third represents a dissonance with *oneself*.¹⁰ The latter dissonance, as we shall see, is the deeper reason for the former, and in itself is the result of a dissonance with *God*. Thus, while the failure to synthesize the first two pairs involves improper ways of relating to the constraints, the possibilities, the events, and (mostly) the people that compose one's reality (namely, 'the world'), the failure to synthesize the third pair is what *causes* these improper ways of relating. In this sense, I claim, the third synthesis is on a different level from the other two.

To be sure, this is a rather unconventional interpretative position. The three pairs of syntheses are often taken to be various expressions of the same thing: namely, human limitedness and the individual's ability to transcend it. Accordingly, commentators usually do not regard the differences among the types of synthesis as particularly significant. Why not follow this (let us call it 'conventional') interpretation? There are several reasons:

1. It leaves unexplained Kierkegaard's choice to mention only the first two pairs of syntheses when discussing despair 'only with regard to the constituents of the synthesis' (SUD, 29). I take this to be a textual clue for the need to regard the third pair as being on a different level.
2. The conventional interpretation takes 'the eternal' (from Synthesis 3) to be a variation of 'the infinite' (from Synthesis 1) and 'freedom' (from Synthesis 2). However, the term 'the eternal', unlike 'the infinite' and 'freedom', is used by Kierkegaard (as well as by the religious tradition in general) to signify 'God'. It seems, then, that while Syntheses 1 and 2 do indeed express human limitations and the ability to transcend them, Synthesis 3 expresses something else. (That is, while 'the infinite' and 'freedom' stand for the human ability to transcend 'the finite' and

- 'necessity', respectively, 'the eternal' does not seem to stand for a human ability to transcend 'the temporal'.)
3. However, if we accept that 'the eternal' signifies God, in what sense are human beings 'eternal' (Synthesis 3)? The conventional interpretation does not specifically answer this question or account for the failure to synthesize the temporal and the eternal. Accordingly, it does not address the question of why being 'too eternal' should be a problem at all. I shall return to these questions, and their implications for understanding Synthesis 3 as being on a different level from the other two, when I discuss the 'eternal in the self' below.
 4. There is broad agreement among commentators regarding the crucial role that a person's relation to God plays in Kierkegaard's understanding of despair. However, the conventional interpretation does not provide the tools for incorporating this relation into the structure of the 'self as a synthesis'. An example of this shortcoming is a recent, and otherwise compelling, treatment of *The Sickness unto Death*. In 'Selfhood and "spirit"', John Davenport adds another level to the threefold structure of selfhood – freedom as spirit, which is the synthesizing power (that is, the factor that synthesizes the poles of each synthesis) – to provide room for the believer's relation to God.¹¹ However, I hope to show that if we interpret Synthesis 3 differently, we need not add further factors (or relations) to Kierkegaard's picture of selfhood to account for one's relation to God.

Let me return to my suggestion. We may think of the state of despair as rooted in three layers of failed relations – to the world, to oneself, and to God – and of the enquiry into this state as a geological one: the deeper we dig, the more hidden and fundamental layers we find. We shall begin with the upper and most accessible layer: the failed relation to the world.

Despair: a failed relation to the world

To understand what such a failed relation might mean, let us look at two examples of persons in despair; call them Despairer A and Despairer B.¹² The former does not take finitude and necessity seriously enough: call his despair 'the despair of *detachment* from the world'. The latter disregards infinitude and possibility: call his despair 'the despair of *confinement* to the world'.¹³ Despairer A is reluctant to acknowledge the facts entailed by the limitations of his existence, of his finitude. The place and time of his birth, his physical and mental abilities, the choices he has already made – he sees all these as marginal trivialities. He places his freedom to achieve 'the possible' at the centre, thus belittling the value of 'the necessary'. In this way he is focused on what *may* be, and becomes less and less patient with regard to what 'there is', namely, his actual life.

It is not difficult to understand why such a person would be in a state of despair. Since there is an unbearable gap between what he desires and what he actually realizes, he becomes blind to the value of what reality offers him. Compared to his imagined possibilities, life seems disappointing, pale, insipid. Looking at himself through 'the mirror of possibility' (SUD, 37), he is unable to accept himself as a particular person living a particular life. He is unable to value what he has and, accordingly, feels estranged and detached from his own life. Kierkegaard expresses the need to synthesize possibility and necessity (and thus infinitude and finitude) by saying that '[p]ossibility is like a child's invitation to a party; the child is willing at once, but the question is whether the parents will give permission – and as it is with the parents, so it is with necessity' (*ibid.*). After all, possibility constantly presents a tempting invitation to our will and desire. However, we cannot accept any invitation without acknowledging the limitations of our concrete situation: we must take them into consideration and accept the unpleasant fact that there are parties we will not be able to attend. If we fail to do this, as does Despairer A, we may find ourselves participating in a very thrilling party – but one which takes place only in our fantasy. Needless to say, as exciting as such parties may be, the problem with them is that they prevent us from taking part – and finding joy and meaning – in our actual lives.

The party metaphor is also well suited for explaining the existential stance of Despairer B. Imagine that the child obeys his strict, forbidding parents so thoroughly that he rejects any kind of invitation in advance. This is what happens when a person submits himself completely to finitude and necessity while disregarding infinitude and possibility. Here, one of the less inspiring characters in Kierkegaard's philosophy, the 'philistine-bourgeois', comes to mind. 'Bereft of imagination', Kierkegaard says, 'he lives within a certain trivial compendium of experiences as to how things go, what is possible, what usually happens' (SUD, 41). This kind of despairer aspires only to the probable, and so he never surpasses the securely achievable. His goals are tailored to his given reality and shaped in accordance with the levelling expectations of society.

Why does Kierkegaard call this despair? Such a person, he says, 'forgets his name divinely understood . . . finds it too hazardous to be himself and far easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man' (SUD, 34). Under the assumption that every person wants to feel irreplaceable and *valuable*, a person who reflects upon himself and comes to the conclusion that he is only 'a number' may well feel worthless. He may feel that he could easily be replaced by anyone else and, accordingly, that nothing attaches him to his world (since it is not really *his* world; after all, anybody else could take his place). Since he feels this way, it is no wonder that his life sinks into insipidity and meaninglessness. Despairer B, then, although coming from the opposite direction (being confined to the world, while Despairer A is detached from it), ends up in the same spot. Incapable of finding value and joy in his life, he is in a state of despair.

In both cases the most poignant implications of either detachment or confinement involve the despairer's relations to other people. We can easily imagine how, having detached himself from his given reality, the despairer fails to have satisfying relationships with the people in his life. After all, to be focused on possibility rather than actuality amounts first and foremost to failing in interactions with either the people who already constitute part of his world, or those who could have been part of his world if he had not overlooked them by looking for something else. In the opposite case, to be confined to the world is to be enslaved not only to the limited conception the despairer has of himself, but also to the limited view he has of the others in his life. Thus, it means not only to refuse to let himself change, but also to reject (not necessarily consciously) the possibility that either the people surrounding him, or his relationships with them, will ever change for the better.

We have distinguished among 'potential self', 'partial self', and 'fulfilled self'. Looking at Despairers A and B, we can describe the person experiencing despair as wavering between two selves. On the one hand, he possesses a partial, incomplete self which is profoundly dissatisfying. Corrupted by either 'plung[ing] wildly into the infinite' (SUD, 33) or by 'permit[ting] itself to be tricked out of its self by "the others"' (*ibid.*), this is not the self that he could and should have been. On the other hand, he nevertheless has traces of his *potential* self: had he actualized that self properly, he would have become the self that he is supposed to be; he would have been healed from his despair.

However, to bring this about, one has to go through a process of turning one's gaze from the world toward *oneself* and, finally, toward God. Having understood what it means for a person to have a failed relationship with the world, we must now ask what it means for him to have a failed relationship with *himself*. To realize that he is improperly related to himself, a person must have a conception of himself, some idea of who he is; namely, some idea of his *self*. Such an idea, Kierkegaard thinks, is acquired as a person becomes conscious of his despair, in the course of a dark journey that Kierkegaard sketches when he analyses despair 'as defined by consciousness'.

Despair: a failed relation to oneself

This journey has three stages, and its starting point is a state that Kierkegaard describes as 'unconscious despair'. The person *is* in a state of despair, but he does not *experience* his despair and thus is not aware of it.¹⁴ Immersed in daily preoccupations – in a numbing routine or a restless pursuit of achievements – he is oblivious to the despair that nevertheless 'lies underneath' (SUD, 44), waiting for the right opportunity to reveal itself. And such an opportunity always comes. I suggest that this happens when a painful loss strikes the person's life, bringing it to a halt. Kierkegaard calls this state (hereafter referred to as 'the first stage of despair') 'despair over the earthly': the person at this stage

associates his experience of despair with the loss of something valuable to him 'in the world' (a person, a relationship, a job), without realizing that his despair is rooted in something else.

Now, to avoid misunderstandings, it should be emphasized that there is an important difference between despair and sorrow. While the latter is a proper response to loss – it reflects upon the value of the *lost thing* – despair is an improper way of responding to loss. Rather than focusing on the loss, it focuses on the person who suffers it. Thus, condemning this kind of despair ('over the earthly'), Kierkegaard does not denounce an attachment to the earthly *as such*, but rather denounces a *wrong* attachment to the earthly, one that leads to despair.¹⁵ However, the despairer at this stage is not yet in a position to understand that the real reason for his despair is *not* the loss; he cannot as yet see where his despair is truly rooted.

At the same time, with a little reflection upon his situation, a crucial understanding begins to stir: the despairer begins to understand that while the loss he has experienced is a fact beyond his control, how he *approaches* that loss is entirely his responsibility, depending on the *self* that he is (see SUD, 54). In a Kierkegaardian spirit, let us think of a young man forsaken by the girl he loves. The beloved is his whole world; without her, he feels, his life is empty and meaningless. There is no doubt that he is suffering a great loss, but at the same time he faces a broad spectrum of possible responses to the loss. He might be angry, he might be hateful, he might be bitter, he might despair. But he also might be sorrowful without holding any resentful feeling, and he might even (while experiencing sorrow over the loss) find new meaning for his life, and hope for the possibility of a new love.¹⁶ His way of responding to the loss is his responsibility: it depends on the position he takes, on *the self that he is*. However, at this point in the process such a 'self-discovery' is very limited. Unwilling to take the course of action his new understanding demands – namely, a re-formation of himself – the despairer does everything he can to escape this understanding. Kierkegaard calls the despair at this stage 'weak despair', which he defines as the position of one who 'does not will to be oneself'.

This brings us to the second stage of despair: 'despair of the eternal or over oneself'. Understanding what 'despair of the eternal' means requires a clarification of what Kierkegaard means by 'the eternal', which is discussed in the next section. Let us begin, then, by considering what 'despair over oneself' means. The second stage of despair introduces a shift of focus from the loss (of something earthly, say, a love relationship) to one's *position* towards this loss and, accordingly, from 'the earthly' (the world) to 'the self'. The despairer at this stage reflects upon the way in which he is responding to the loss he has suffered, and *this* becomes the object of his despair. He despairs because of *himself* – because, for example, he has been taken over by self-pity, bitterness, or emptiness. His despair is over the weak self that he is (see SUD, 61).

Against the background of this dissatisfaction (with his present self), the despairer discovers the possibility of a *different* self, a better one: the self that he would have wanted to be. In other words, he now discovers the self that he can *potentially* be. In this way the despairer sustains a failed relation to *himself*. Divided between two selves – the self that he actually is (his partial self) and the self he would have wanted to be (his potential self) – as long as he fails to bridge this gap (between these two ‘selves’) he is in a state of despair.

The individual's awareness of having a potential self turns the second stage of despair into a crucial crossroads. In accordance with the path he chooses, he will be on his way either to *heal* his despair or to *intensify* it. Standing at this crossroads, the despairing individual is not willing to be his partial self (which is already a positive thing), so his position with regard to his potential self determines whether or not he will be healed of despair. If he does not want to be his partial self but is also unwilling to fulfil his potential self, he will remain where he is, at the second stage of despair.¹⁷ If, however, he *wills* to become his potential self, his choice between healing and intensifying his despair will depend on how he views the source and nature of this potential. If he perceives it as originating from God, he thereby chooses the path of faith and is, according to Kierkegaard, on his way to being healed of despair.¹⁸ But if he *severs* its connection to God and perceives *himself* as the source of his potential self, his despair intensifies. This brings us to the third stage of despair – defiance – which exhibits despair in its severest form.

Despair: a failed relation to God

Unlike the first stage of despair, this stage is characterized by the despairer's consciousness of having a ‘self’ (a partial self) and of the possibility of transcending it and becoming a different one (his potential self). Further, unlike the second stage, it is characterized by the despairer's willingness to be that other self. Namely, the despairer wills to fulfil his *potential* self, which he conceives, as we have seen, to be independent (that is, as originated in himself, severed from its connection to God):

In order in despair to will to be oneself, there must be consciousness of an infinite self. . . . this is the self that a person in despair wills to be . . . With the help of this infinite form, the self in despair wants to be master of itself or to create itself. (SUD, 67–68)

What is an ‘infinite self’? This term, I suggest, expresses the despairer's idea that he can form his self to be whatever he desires. ‘Infinite’, then, refers to the limitless field of possibilities – namely, freedom – that such a person considers himself as having. It is telling that Kierkegaard calls the ‘infinite self’ a ‘negative’ one (see *ibid.*). As I see it, this is because the attempt to achieve such a self negates one's concrete self (while refusing to affirm the actuality of one's life): this is the

'detached' version of defiance. Further, in the 'confined' version, such an attempt negates the hope that 'an earthly need, a temporal cross, can come to an end' (SUD, 70). In other words, it negates the possibility of overcoming a failure in one's concrete situation, because such a possibility means dependence on help that transcends one's own powers.¹⁹

Somewhat akin to the idea advanced in later existential theories, the despairer at this stage takes himself to be his own – and his *only* – creator. In this way the despairer puts himself in the place of God: in his view, the potential that he wishes to fulfil is not *bestowed* on him but rather *created* by him. We may think of one's potential self as reflecting a promise for an 'ideal self' that one wills to be. If one is a despairer, then, this ideal is nothing but the fruit of one's imagination. The despairer strives to create himself as an invented self, an 'infinite self'. Kierkegaard considers this kind of despair to be the most severe not only because the despairer's misery at this stage is the greatest,²⁰ but also because it manifests a bold defiance of God's will.²¹ What does this mean?

Kierkegaard does not explore specifically the nature of one's (correct or failed) relation to God in his discussion of despair. At the same time, he describes the second stage of despair as 'despair of the eternal', and defines the human being as a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal. Thus, given Kierkegaard's use of the term 'eternal' in analysing despair, and keeping in mind the traditional identification between 'the eternal' and God, let us ask what we can learn about one's relation to God from Kierkegaard's analysis of despair.

As early as his discussion of the first stage of despair, despair over the earthly, Kierkegaard says that the despairer 'has a dim idea that there may even be something eternal in the self' (SUD, 55). That is to say, despite associating his despair with the loss of something valuable in the world, the despairer needs no more than a little reflection to understand that even though he has lost 'everything' (or so, at least, he feels), he is nevertheless left with something: himself. In other words, considering himself to be more than just a cluster of passing experiences (including the experience of loss, no matter how significant and dominant), the person realizes that he has an 'anchor' that transcends the contingencies of his existence: he realizes that he has some kind of validity logically prior to the relationships he maintains and the events he has undergone.

Now, from a non-religious point of view this anchor or validity may be described (and experienced) as 'eternal' in the sense that it is independent of the flow of one's life, immune to its constant changes.²² However, given Kierkegaard's frequent association between 'the eternal' and God, he clearly uses the phrase 'the eternal in the self' to mean something on a theological level. I therefore propose understanding Kierkegaard's use of this phrase as referring to one's essential connection to God, and I suggest understanding this connection as follows.²³

If one assumes that humans are created by God, 'the eternal in the self' may signify the divine element – divine 'imprint' – that humans have as part of

their nature. Following Kierkegaard's thesis in *Works of Love*, this 'divine element' can be understood as the human capacity for loving.²⁴ But what shape does this capacity take? Or, to put it differently, how does this abstract, universal, capacity manifest itself concretely and individually in each person (assuming that the connection between God and each man/woman is personal and individual)? I suggest that it does in the form of one's distinctive ability to fulfil love relationships *given the unique self that one is*. The 'eternal in the self', then, signifies one's individual connection to God both in the sense of having the (divine) capacity for loving and in the sense of having a particular set of (divinely bestowed) factors that conditions the realization of love. These factors stand for one's potential self.

Against this background, we can say that there are two possible ways for a person to conceive his potential self. On the one hand, it can be understood as an outline for the self that God intends him to be, and thus as expressing the essential connection between himself and God. On the other hand, it can be understood independently of his connection to God, and thus as human-created, the fruit of his will and imagination.

Let us briefly summarize Kierkegaard's thesis. There is one phenomenon here, despair (a failure to be the self that God intends one to be), which has three stages of intensity or severity. The first two stages are 'weak despair': the despairer does not want to be himself. The third is defiance: the despairer wants to be himself, but not the self that God has intended him to be. At each stage this despair may take either the form of detachment (for Despairer A), or the form of confinement (for Despairer B). At each stage all three pairs of syntheses are dissonant, but while the dissonances of Syntheses 1 and 2 manifest the despairer's failed relation to the world, the dissonance of Synthesis 3 manifests the *reason* for this failure: the failed relation to oneself and, more deeply, to God. We are now in a position to understand how one's failure in harmonizing the poles of Synthesis 3 (the temporal and the eternal) amounts to being improperly related to God.

Synthesis 3 embodies the relation between the self a person currently is (his partial self, the temporal pole of the synthesis), and the self he can potentially be (his potential self, the eternal pole of the synthesis). If one places too much emphasis on temporality, one fails to harmonize this synthesis and becomes enslaved to the partial self that he is. Such a despairer either apprehensively evades his potential self (weak despair: he does not will to be the self that God intended him to be), or rebelliously wills to be his own master (defiance: he refuses to rely on anything that transcends his domination). In either case, he limits himself to his concrete situation; the former case embodies the bourgeois/philistine type of despairer, while the latter embodies the demonic type who dwells wilfully in his unhappy, restricted situation.²⁵ Rejecting his potential self, the despairer *eo ipso* distorts or rejects his connection to God (because one's potential self – the eternal in the self – is a connecting link between man/woman and God), thus sustaining a failed relation to Him.

Failing to harmonize the synthesis by putting too much emphasis on eternity, on the other hand, leads to the rejection of one's partial self (weak despair), or the desire to be one's 'infinite self', namely, one's potential self, *when this self is taken to be one's own creation* (defiance). In the latter case, the despairer, in his will to be an 'infinite self', creates an imagined self, and in *this* image (rather than God's) he wills to be. The despairer thus boldly places himself in God's position, takes himself to be his own creator, rebels against God.²⁶

The healing from despair

Kierkegaard's claim is that the self which is healed from despair is a self which 'rests transparently in the power that established it' (SUD, 14, 49). Having explored Kierkegaard's analysis of despair, the following hypothetical description (which he does not delineate explicitly) may help us understand this claim. Let us suppose that humans do not come to this world with a fixed self, a ready-made identity. Rather, they have the task of forming their identity, of fulfilling their potential self by giving it concrete form. How is this to be done? By listening to the will of God – a lifetime project carried out (as we can see from the analysis of despair) through careful attentiveness to one's given reality. Such attentiveness amounts to acting in accordance with the demands one's reality requires, as well as with the gifts it bestows.²⁷ More specifically, as I suggested above, it amounts to fulfilling love relationships in accordance with the particular individual that one is (namely, in accordance with one's special character, capacities, capabilities, talents, etc.).

We can liken this kind of attentiveness to the process of painting, thereby making somewhat unusual use of the familiar metaphor of life as art.²⁸ The painter begins by envisioning the figure he or she wishes to paint, but the canvas and the paint are needed to fulfil the vision. This fulfilment depends on one's success in adhering to one's vision, while using the materials at hand creatively. God gives both the vision (one's potential self) and the materials (one's existence in the world, including the others inhabiting this world), but it is one's task to create a harmonious relationship between the two. Being guided by vision reflects one's relation to God; using the materials creatively reflects one's relation to the world. And selfhood, like painting, requires both vision and materials, which themselves depend on each other; without vision the materials are lifeless, without materials the vision remains only unfulfilled potential.

To rest transparently in the power that establishes the self, then, means to become the self that God intended one to be, to fulfil God's will, God's vision. Doing this, however, necessarily requires maintaining a relation to the world. Thus, 'the world' (as my reading of Kierkegaard's analysis of despair has demonstrated) plays a crucial and indispensable role in adhering to God's will. One cannot be a fulfilled self without sustaining an interdependent twofold relation: to

God and the world. Failing in one's relation to *God*, one necessarily fails in one's relation to the world (and is either detached from it or confined to it). And on the other hand, failing in one's relation to the *world* amounts to distorting the task endowed on one by God (namely, becoming a particular person who loves in a particular way), and thus failing in one's relation to God.

We can therefore see that even though Kierkegaard's 'formula for faith' – 'in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it' (SUD, 14, 49) – seems to include only the self and God, once we understand what 'resting transparently in God' amounts to, our relation to the world (and thus to other people) becomes an essential part of this 'formula'. Let me recap the steps presented thus far which lead to this conclusion. Kierkegaard's 'formula' describes the state of being healed from despair, which is equivalent to being a self. Thus, 'to rest transparently in God' is to be a self. At the same time, the entire discussion of despair is devoted to analysing the self in terms of harmonizing the poles of the three syntheses which are essential to human nature. Thus, to be a self is to succeed in synthesizing the three syntheses. When we are doing this, as was demonstrated throughout this article, we are not only properly related to God and ourselves, but also, crucially, to the world. Thus, to be a self is to be related properly to the world. Now we can see how 'the formula' necessarily includes 'the world': if 'to rest transparently in God' is to be a self, and to be a self is to be related correctly to the world, then 'to rest transparently in God' is (among other things) to be related correctly to the world, and thus to other people.

Now, we have already acknowledged that Kierkegaard is not explicit about one's relations to other people; rather, he analyses despair by discussing wrong attitudes towards one's world (namely, the failure to harmonize finitude with infinitude and necessity with freedom). However, to be placed thus *eo ipso* involves relations with other people. The practical meaning of being detached from the world or confined to it – the content of these rather abstract sketches, if you will – is failing (in various ways) to sustain satisfying relationships with concrete persons in one's life. Thus, even if Kierkegaard's analysis mainly reflects the way one acts in the world, this must include other humans because actions in the world are largely carried out in relation to other people.

The way that Kierkegaardian faith – *qua* a proper relation to the world – crucially involves proper relationships with other people is aptly demonstrated in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. In this earlier essay (1843) faith is described in terms of affirming finitude (namely, the world), and its crux is manifested through a proper relationship with other humans (namely, Abraham's relation to his son). To give a fuller picture of the believer's relation to other people in the context of Kierkegaardian faith, then, let us take a brief look at this essay.²⁹

Fear and Trembling, as is well known, retells the story of the Binding of Isaac. When discussing the story of Abraham, Kierkegaard analyses faith as comprised of

two seemingly contradictory positions; he calls the first the movement of resignation, and we may call the second the movement of affirmation. Resignation is a necessary condition for faith, as one must perform the first movement before one can succeed in performing the second. What is resignation, then?

Fear and Trembling, like *The Sickness unto Death*, emphasizes finitude as essential to human nature. Given the human condition as finite, loss is a constant ingredient of every human being's life. Accordingly, loss is a central (though implicit) theme in this essay.³⁰ Now, one way to define loss is that we cease to possess something we value. Thus, we can say that since everything is finite (therefore subject to loss), we do not genuinely possess anything. Namely, the nature of things and our relation to them – our control over them, our ability to secure our hold over them – is such that we do not possess them, and *cannot ever* possess them. I therefore claim that everything is in essence lost for us: everything finite is essentially lost. Resignation amounts to fully acknowledging this fact.

Thus, renouncing X means acknowledging that I do not possess X: I cannot secure its presence in my life. Accordingly, taking seriously the status of X as essentially lost amounts to being connected to X only conjointly with feeling pain. This is because, although resignation is a ceasing of possession, it is not a ceasing of desire. On the contrary, a renunciation of X is an *intensification* of one's desire for X. In what way? Often our possession of something (namely, our feeling that something is securely 'ours') blunts our ability fully to perceive its value. Considering it as 'our own', we may take its presence in our life for granted and become blind to its special qualities, those which made us desire its presence in our life to begin with. In resignation, on the other hand, we conceive everything we thought we possessed as essentially lost: its potential absence becomes very much present. Accordingly, we return to the position we occupied before the blurring fog of possessiveness hid the value of the desired thing from us: we see it in its full value. And clearly, to desire intensely that which is not in one's possession – that which is essentially beyond one's reach, essentially lost – cannot but cause deep, irremediable pain.

If we honestly acknowledge human temporality and finitude, resignation is unavoidable. Nevertheless, as Kierkegaard claims, resignation is not a common position – let alone *religious* resignation. The difference between ordinary resignation and religious resignation is that the latter assumes that while one is not the possessor of X, there is nevertheless someone else that possesses it: God. Taking God – who is conceived as an infinitely good and loving entity – to be the true owner of X makes resignation no less painful but at least peaceful. It is easier to accept the loss of X if it is taken to be the responsibility of someone who is interested in one's well-being. However, what is truly significant about religious resignation is that it makes the second movement of faith – affirmation – possible.

On the face of it, taking real joy in X is incompatible with considering X as essentially lost (that is, resisting any secure hold on it), because the pain involved

in acknowledging (and in a way 'living') the possibility of its absence does not allow a wholehearted joy in its (insecure) presence. And indeed, the two forms of resignation are typified by deep pain. However, faith is the ability to regain security based on the believer's trust in God. As a person of faith, he still acknowledges that X is essentially lost for him, but he can also see it as a gift and take joy in it as one does in a gift. Faith is thus the ability to take joy in the things one values, while ceasing to expect any possession of them.

The extreme difficulty of doing this is illustrated by Kierkegaard's analysis of Abraham's faith. God's demand that Abraham sacrifice Isaac stands for the status of Isaac as essentially lost (it clarifies to Abraham that he does not possess Isaac). However, while Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son exemplifies resignation, his *faith* exemplifies his trust that Isaac, despite all evidence against it, will nevertheless live.³¹ Kierkegaard also imagines four *failed* versions of the Binding of Isaac: in each case Abraham achieves resignation but fails to trust God. These stories demonstrate that in Kierkegaard's view Abraham's faith does not consist primarily in his willingness to sacrifice Isaac (resignation) but rather in his ability to trust God and *find joy in his son* when they descend from the mountain, even though he is aware that God may demand Isaac again. Indeed, Kierkegaard presents Abraham not only as the father of faith but also as an exemplar of great parental love.³² In *Fear and Trembling*, then, faith is explicitly equated with achieving a moral position. To have faith is to be related correctly to the world (it is more advanced than the two forms of resignation, in the context of which one cannot affirm one's attachment to finitude), and being related correctly to the world is manifested in loving other persons.³³

Returning to *The Sickness unto Death*, we may conclude by saying that even if it is true that Kierkegaard's theory needs to be developed more fully if we want to specify the exact nature of our relationships with other people, this does not in any way weaken the moral implications of his analysis of despair. The crucial significance of *The Sickness unto Death* is that it presents the *essential kernel* – the inner logic – of what Kierkegaard developed in earlier essays such as *Fear and Trembling*.³⁴ Namely, that a person (the self), God ('the power that established' the self), and the world (other persons) are connected to each other, and that each of these is essential to the life of faith.

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Notes

1. See Kierkegaard (1980), 23. References to this work (hereafter SUD) appear in the text.
2. Accordingly, the use of a pseudonym in this case does not indicate an ideological distance between Kierkegaard and Anti-Climacus, but rather a 'practical' distance. Kierkegaard considered the ideal he expressed in this essay to be so high that he did not want his readers to think that he managed to adhere to it. Thus, as his translators put it, '[t]he shift to Anti-Climacus as author . . . was made to preclude any confusion of Kierkegaard himself with the ideality of the book.' See the historical introduction to SUD, xxiii.
3. Namely, 'in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it' (SUD, 14; see claim 3 in the next section). This quotation presents Kierkegaard's formula for healing from despair, and later in SUD (p. 49) he repeats it and states that this is the formula for faith. On the face of it, it seems that only the self and God take part in this 'formula'.
4. See Elrod (1987), 108–109; Walsh (1987), 125–126; Evans (2006), 269, 273–275; Davenport (2013), 248–249. On the other hand, two recent articles on *The Sickness unto Death* demonstrate how the failure of individuals to become a self results in a sick society, thus showing that 'the social dimension' does play a significant role in Kierkegaard's understanding of faith. Both Graham Smith and Clare Carlisle analyse Kierkegaard's claim that modernity is typified by despair, and bring evidence for an essential connection between a life of faith and a healthy society. See Smith (2005) and Carlisle (2011). The thesis that in Kierkegaard's view a correct way of living goes hand in hand with a correct attachment to society is also considered (from a slightly different angle) in Jonathan Lear's recent book, *A Case for Irony*. Lear presents Kierkegaardian irony as the ability to examine one's social activity (which he takes to constitute one's identity and selfhood) in light of one's ideal of this activity. Irony thus involves stepping back from social commitments, but it is a detachment that serves as an occasion for a renewed, more authentic, attachment. See Lear (2011). However, while these three recent studies amplify the thesis of the present article by showing the strong connection between relationships with other persons and Kierkegaardian faith, the emphasis of my article is a little different: it aims at showing not only how one's correct relationship with God conditions one's correct relationship with other persons (Smith's and Carlisle's thesis), but also how one's correct relationship with other people conditions one's correct relationship with God.
5. It is true that Kierkegaard could have been more explicit. He does not directly include relations with other people in his 'formula', and his analysis of despair describes such relations only implicitly (in the context of his explicit analysis of the wrong ways of relating to the world). However, it makes sense that Kierkegaard thought that a correct relation to the world includes correct relationships with other

people. Accordingly, if (as I attempt to show) a correct relation to the world is a necessary condition for 'resting transparently in God', then we can easily see that Kierkegaard's analysis of despair has important moral implications.

6. For the purpose of the present article, what is at stake is Kierkegaard's analysis of despair with regard to his understanding of the self as being a synthesis, which he explores in the first part of *The Sickness unto Death*. Thus, despite its importance, I will not discuss the second part of the essay here. Some commentators, however, consider the second part to present a higher formulation of religiosity. See, for example, Roberts (1987), who interestingly claims that the division of the essay into two parts reflects Kierkegaard's division of religiosity into 'Religiosity A' and 'Religiosity B'. However, although I do not have the space to justify this here, I believe that Kierkegaard's understanding of faith as presented in the first part is also valid from the standpoint of the second part.
7. This implies two things, which work well with Kierkegaard's analysis. First, the self is a human being (a substance), but this does not as yet make the person into a self (that is, someone who is a self is a human being, but not every human being is a self). Thus, second, the self in the relevant sense is like a special trait that a human being can either have or not: it is like a special quality, a crucial one, that turns the person into someone who lives correctly. Kierkegaard's analysis of 'being a self' is aimed at exploring the fulfilment of this special 'trait' or 'quality'.
8. Moreover, Kierkegaard's discussion of the self in effect accounts for the *formation* of one's self: a dynamic process and, ultimately, a project that spans a lifetime. Thus, since such a formation is an ongoing *process*, it might be helpful to distinguish between two senses of the term 'self', as denoting either *the result* of the process or the state of the individual *in the course* of the process. Adding this to the distinction between 'fulfilled self' and 'partial self', we should keep in mind that by using the term 'self' Kierkegaard is referring to either the former, which amounts to the successful *result* of the 'formation process', or the latter, which amounts to a *phase* in this process. The former is the state of someone who is healed of despair, a person of faith; the latter is the state of someone who is currently *failing* to achieve his 'fulfilled self' and is accordingly in despair. For a different distinction between several senses of 'self' see Stokes (2010).
9. There are interpreters who assume that by 'another' Kierkegaard is referring exclusively to God. However, as Stephen C. Evans states, there are good reasons 'not to be too hasty in concluding that the other Anti-Climacus views as essential to selfhood must always be identified with God' (Evans (2006), 269; see his justification of this claim on pp. 269–272). At the same time, it is clear that even if Evans allows relations with human others to take part in the formation of selfhood, he considers these relations *inferior* to one's relation to God: 'God remains the crucial other for selfhood in the highest sense' (*ibid.*). My attempt to show the *interdependence* between the two kinds of relations is directed at demonstrating that this is not the case.
10. I thank Ariel Meirav for helping me to understand the failure of the third synthesis in these terms.
11. See Davenport (2013), 235–241.
12. However, although they are described in terms of the first two pairs of syntheses only, the two types of despair they exemplify are the result not only of the failure of Synthesis 1 and Synthesis 2, but of Synthesis 3 as well. Furthermore, presenting despair through these two prototypes does not mean that there are only two possible manifestations of despair. Rather, there are *two basic kinds of despair*, which can have many possible manifestations.
13. For the sake of simplicity I will refer to the despairer throughout this article with the masculine pronoun, but this is only a stylistic choice that obviously does not imply that despair (as well as healing from it) is confined only to males.
14. According to Kierkegaard's thesis despair is not only, and not necessarily, an emotional experience; it is first and foremost a position towards one's life. As this article attempts to demonstrate, to be in despair is to sustain – frequently without understanding it – a failed relation to the world, to oneself, and to God. Accordingly, the despairer does not necessarily *feel* that he is in despair. His despair is effectively veiled by the many distractions of mundane tasks, hidden by the flow of life. When, however, this flow is abruptly interrupted (which usually happens, as I shall argue, when one experiences loss), then this despair shows itself through disturbing feelings such as emptiness and depression. These are only symptoms, however, and addressing them does not cure the sickness. The despairer finds a new distraction (a new enterprise, a new pursuit of happiness) and so, by pushing aside the *feeling* of despair (the symptom), he succeeds in hiding his *state* of despair (the sickness)

from himself. Kierkegaard draws a helpful analogy between sickness of the body and despair: a person may not be aware of his sickness, because he does not understand its nature and thus cannot recognize its symptoms. He may experience headaches, for example, but when they are gone he feels healthy again without realizing that they might be indicative of something deeper. The same holds for despair.

15. Accordingly, the phenomenon that Kierkegaard calls on us to eradicate is not sorrow over the loss (or the deep attachment to the earthly that leads to this sorrow). What he calls on us to eradicate is despair (and the wrong attachment to the earthly that causes it).
16. See Kierkegaard's analysis of resignation in *Fear and Trembling*.
17. Remaining at this stage results in a state of mind that Kierkegaard calls 'inclosing reserve'.
18. See the final section.
19. To immerse oneself in actuality in this way is therefore characteristic of the demonic version of Despairer B, who declines the possibility of change not out of cautious calculation but rather out of his refusal to rely on anything beyond his control (see SUD, 70–72). I thank an anonymous reader, who commented on an earlier version of this article, for indicating the relevance of the 'despair of confinement' to the third stage of despair.
20. For obvious reasons: he either gets as far away as possible from his concrete situation or immerses himself as deeply as possible in the distress its limitations entail.
21. Although the despairer does not necessarily need to acknowledge God. He could very well be an atheist who, denying God, in effect places himself in His position, thus rebelling against Him.
22. Such an account can be viewed as a version of Judge William's position in the second part of *Either/Or*, where he understands the 'eternal in a person' in terms of a-temporal ideals, the adherence to which constitutes one's 'self'. For an exploration of the relation between the understanding of the self in *Either/Or* and that in *The Sickness unto Death*, see, for example, Stokes (2010) and Davenport (2013).
23. I intentionally use the term 'connection' and not 'relation' to indicate that 'the eternal in the self' does not as yet stand for an active relationship with God. Rather, it stands for the 'link' that connects each human to God, whether the person acknowledges it or not. To be wrongly related to God is to ignore (in various ways) one's connection to God (namely, to ignore 'the eternal in the self'). To the best of my knowledge no attempt has been made in the scholarship on *The Sickness unto Death* to explicate the nature of such a connection in this specific context (namely, Kierkegaard's analysis of the self as a synthesis, and in particular as a synthesis between the temporal and the eternal).
24. For an elaboration of this idea see Krishek (2010).
25. See note 19 above.
26. Indeed, in his will to be an 'infinite self' he is no more rebellious than his fellow despairer who violates the synthesis in favour of the temporal. However, his rebellion might be more conspicuous. This is the reason it seems that, as James Marsh claims, 'despair of defiance emphasizes the poles of infinitude and possibility' (Marsh (1987), 72). At the same time, as stressed above, despair of defiance can express itself while emphasizing the poles of finitude and necessity.
27. See Davenport's discussion of 'unique potential', which presents the idea of *individual* vocation, as this vocation can be discerned in one's contingencies. See also the discussion of Evans that he refers to (Davenport (2013), 245–246 and n. 21 in his article).
28. This metaphor is often used to indicate 'self-creation'. From Kierkegaard's perspective, the latter, as we have just seen, constitutes the deepest form of despair. The use of this metaphor here, then, is almost antithetical to its common use: it aims at demonstrating the idea that one's life – and one's self – is a *joint* creation, of man and God.
29. For an elaborated discussion see Krishek (2009), chs 2 and 3.
30. The threatened loss of Isaac, a loss of a beloved princess, the loss of everything in time – all play an important role in Kierkegaard's analysis of faith. (See Krishek (2015).)
31. Abraham's trust in this specific case is grounded in God's promise to him that Isaac would live. So the point is *not* that a person of faith is entitled to believe that a dead son will be restored to life. Rather, what the story demonstrates is the ability to trust God under the most horrifying circumstances.
32. See for example Kierkegaard (2006), 25–26.
33. Although *Fear and Trembling* analyses faith in different terms (namely, as a double movement of resignation and affirmation), it presents the same basic structure of faith as *The Sickness unto Death*: an

interdependent relation of the believer to God and the world. It is only the relation to God that allows the believer to affirm his or her relation to the world (and in particular to other people), and it is *this* affirmation that serves as the occasion for the believer to express the highest relation to God. '[W]hoever loves God without faith considers himself', says Kierkegaard; however, he continues, 'whoever loves God with faith' – namely, by carrying out the double movement that amounts precisely to a correct relation to the world – 'considers God' (Kierkegaard (2006), 30). I elaborate on this key quotation elsewhere.

34. And also *Works of Love*, as suggested by the critics of *The Sickness unto Death* mentioned above.