

A. That Despair is the Sickness unto Death*

Despair is a sickness of the spirit, of the self, and so can have three forms: being unconscious in the despair of having a self (inauthentic despair), not wanting in despair to be oneself, and wanting in despair to be oneself

The human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates to itself, or that in the relation which is its relating to itself. The self is not the relation but the relation's relating 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 terms. Looked at in this way a human being is not yet a self.

In a relation between two things the relation is the third term in the form of a negative unity, and the two relate to the relation, and in the relation to that relation; this is what it is from the point of view of soul for soul and body to be in relation. If, on the other hand, the relation relates to itself, then this relation is the positive third, and this is the self.

Such a relation which relates to itself, a self, must either have established itself or been established by something else.

If the relation which relates to itself has been constituted by another, then of course the relation is the third term, but then this relation, the third term, is a relation which relates in turn to that which has established the whole relation.

Such a derived, constituted relation is the self, a relation which relates to itself, and in relating to itself relates to another. That is why there can be two forms of authentic despair. If the human self were self-established, there would only be a question of one form: not wanting to be itself, wanting to be rid of itself. There could be no question of wanting in despair to be oneself. For this latter formula is the expression of the relation's (self's) total dependence, the expression of the fact that the self cannot by itself arrive at or remain in equilibrium and rest, but only, in relating to itself, by relating to that which has established the whole relation. Indeed, so far from its being simply the case that this second form of despair (wanting in despair to be oneself) amounts to a special form on its own, all despair can in the end be resolved into or reduced to it. If a person in despair is, as he thinks, aware of his despair and doesn't refer to it mindlessly as something that happens to him (rather in the way someone suffering from vertigo talks through an internally caused delusion about a weight on his head, or its being as though something were pressing down on him, etc., neither the weight nor the pressure being anything external but an inverted image of the internal), and wants now on his own, all on his own, and with all his might to remove the despair, then he is still in despair and through all his seeming effort only works himself all the more deeply into a deeper despair. The imbalance' in despair is not a simple imbalance but an imbalance in a relation that relates to itself and which is constituted by another. So the lack of balance in that 'for-itself' relationship also reflects itself infinitely in the relation to the power which established it.

This then is the formula which describes the state of the self when despair is completely eradicated: in relating to itself and in wanting to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the power that constituted it.

*Søren Kierkegaard, The Sickness unto Death, trans. Alastair Hannay, pp. 43- 44. (Modified.)