Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness Unto Death* is one of the great philosophical works of the 19th century, as well as a seminal work in existential literature. Unfortunately, many readers are frequently put off by Kierkegaard’s often unnecessarily obscure jargon in the work. In fact, I would hazard to say that most people who start reading *Sickness Unto Death* do not get beyond the first sentence in the text, in which Kierkegaard gives his famous definition of the self:

Man is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation which accounts for it that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but consists in the fact that the relation relates itself to its own self...If this relation which relates itself to its own self is constituted by another, the relationship doubtless is the third term, but this relationship (the third term) is in turn a relation relating itself to that which constitutes the whole relation.

With writing like this, it’s no wonder that *The Sickness Unto Death* never attained the kind of broader appeal that other existential works have. And yet despite the often convoluted language of the text, many of Kierkegaard’s ideas in *The Sickness Unto Death* are, of interest, not just for philosophers, but for anyone who is deeply concerned with understanding his or her own human condition. To understand what it means to be human, you have to understand the nature of despair. And to do that properly, there is no better place to turn than *The Sickness Unto Death*.

The aim of this text is to provide the newcomer to the thought of Kierkegaard with the background necessary to understand the concepts that he presents in Book One of *The Sickness Unto Death*. The specific focus will be on providing an overview of Kierkegaard’s analysis of the different forms of despair, since this discussion has tremendous existential, psychological, and spiritual relevance for most readers. I’ll be using generous portions of Kierkegaard’s text (taken from the Lowrie translation of the 1940s), so you have a real sense of the text. The ultimate goal, however, is to inspire you to tackle the work in its entirety, since no summarized version can do full justice to the complexity and richness of Kierkegaard’s thought.

I. WHAT IS DESPAIR?

For Kierkegaard, despair is a kind of sickness of spirit, stemming from a misunderstanding of who we actually are as human beings (or to use the more technical term, as selves). The self for Kierkegaard is a composit of various elements—finitude and infinitude, possibility and necessity. When any of these elements that constitute the self are out of balance, despair is the result. But, because we are not the source of our own creation, despair also results when the self fails to relate itself properly to “the power that posited” the self in the first place—namely
Despair, Kierkegaard tells us, is a “sickness unto death,” but, unlike a physical sickness, does not necessarily lead to death:

Unlike a physical sickness, then, despair does not simply run its course upon being contracted. Instead of simply killing a person, it involves not being able to die, even when death would be a release from the torments of despair. As Kierkaard puts it, one suffering from despair continually consumes himself without being able to be rid of the self.

Another important thing you need to know about despair is that Kierkegaard asserts that despair has nothing to do with anything external to oneself:

A despairing man despairs over something. So it seems for an instant, but only for an instant; that same instant the true despair manifests itself, or despair manifests itself in its true character. For in the fact that he despaired of something, he literally despaired of himself, and now would be rid of himself…...So to despair over something is not yet properly despair.

To despair, therefore, is to despair over one’s own self, one’s own being, one’s own existential condition.

The final thing to understand about Kierkegaard’s analysis of despair—and this will be highly important for his analysis of the various types of despair—is that despair is universal. As Kierkegaard says, there is no one who is not touched to one extent or another by this sickness:

Just as the physician might say that there lives perhaps not one single man who is in perfect health, so one might say perhaps that there lives not one single man who after all is not to some extent in despair,

Simply because someone does not recognize that he is in despair, does not mean that he is in fact free of despair. He is simply unconscious of his despair. As we’ll see, when a seemingly happy person is plunged into despair because of some great crisis, we should not assume that he has been free of despair until that point. In fact, the despair has been with him all along, and the crisis that occurred simply provided the opportunity for the individual to become conscious of his despair.

While we might be tempted to view despair purely in a negative light, because of the intense psychical toll it takes on those who suffer from it, in fact, the recognition that one is in despair is a first step, according to Kierkegaard, on the road to being cured of despair. Those who experience despair in its most intense form (i.e., are acutely conscious of their despair) are actually better off than those who are completely unaware that they are even suffering from this sickness (i.e., those who are totally unconscious of their despair). One who at least recognizes that he is in despair has the motivation to seek out a cure for what ails him.
absolute consciousness and transparency; in the devil there is no obscurity which might serve as a mitigating excuse, his despair is therefore absolute defiance. This is the maximum of despair. The minimum of despair is a state which (as one might humanly be tempted to express it) by reason of a sort of innocence one does not even know that there is such a thing as despair.

Keep in mind that Kierkegaard maintains that every human being who has ever lived—and this means YOU as well—exhibits one form of despair or another. As you read the summary of the forms of despair, therefore, you might want to consider which form of despair you actually possess. Consider this exercise, as Kierkegaard himself does, as a kind of therapy for the soul.

A. Unconscious Despair

The first level of despair is what Kierkegaard calls “the despair that is ignorant of being despair” or unconscious despair. This is the despair suffered by one who lives such a superficial, externally oriented sort of existence that he isn’t even aware at all of being a self. Although such an individual may not even be aware of being in despair, he is in despair regardless.

The two existential types that Kierkegaard uses to characterize unconscious despair are the sensualist and the system-builder. Both types, as we shall see, are just about as far away from being freed from despair as one can get.

A1. The Sensualist

At the very lowest level with regard to consciousness of despair, according to Kierkegaard, is the sensualist—one who spends his life totally in pursuit of pleasure. This sort of individual judges everything in terms of the categories of the agreeable and the disagreeable:

Kierkegaard goes on to draw an analogy between the sensualist and a boarder in a house, who chooses to reside in the basement of the dwelling:

In case one were to think of a house, consisting of a cell, first floor, and second floor, so tenanted, or rather so arranged, that it was planned for a distinction of rank between the dwellers on the several floors; and in case one were to make a comparison between such a house and what it is to be a man—then unfortunately this is the sorry and ludicrous condition of the majority of men, that in their own house they prefer to live in the cellar....

He loves that to such a degree that he becomes furious if anyone would propose to him to occupy the best floor which stands empty at his disposition—for in fact he is dwelling in his own house.

The sensualist, according to Kierkegaard, is living a life of delusion—imagining that he is happy, when in fact, he is totally dependent upon the objects of pleasure that make his life so agreeable. But when fate conspires to remove the objects of his pleasure, despair must inevitably result, and the sensualist is the least equipped of any type to deal effectively with it.

A2. The System-Builder

The second type that Kierkegaard uses to illustrate unconscious despair is what is best described as a “system-builder.” A system builder could be any sort of thinker prone to abstract speculation—a scientist, a historian, a philosopher, or anyone who lives totally in the realm of ideas. The philosopher, for example, may create an elaborate metaphysical system, but it has nothing to do with life per se. His entire system is an illusion, but one he must cling to for the sake of the system itself:

A thinker erects an immense building, a system, a system which embraces the whole of
existence and world history etc—and if we contemplate his personal life, we discover to our astonishment this terrible and ludicrous fact, that he himself personally does not live in this immense high-vaulted palace, but in the barn alongside of it, or in a dog kennel, or at the most in the porter’s lodge. If one where to take the liberty of calling his attention to this by a single word, he would be offended. For he has no fear of being under a delusion, if only he can get the system completed...by means of the delusion.

So what’s the problem with the sort of unconscious despair suffered by the sensualist or the system builder, if in fact these individuals are not actually “suffering” as a result of their despair? The answer is that, for Kierkegaard, unconscious despair is actually the worst form of despair, because it is so far removed from the truth about the way we should actually be living. It means that we are living more like an animal than a true human being, and therefore, means that the possibility of liberation remains all but impossible.

B. Conscious Despair

The second level of despair is described by Kierkegaard as “the despair that is conscious of being despair.” In unconscious despair a person isn’t even aware that he is in despair; on the level of conscious despair, there is a greater understanding of the truth of one’s condition, and at least some degree of awareness of the reality of despair in one’s own life.

Consciousness of despair, however, must be understood as existing on a continuum. A person could be aware of being in despair, but be completely ignorant about its cause. As consciousness of one’s condition is raised, the intensity of despair increases proportionally. At one extreme, the unconscious individual suffers little or not at all from his despair; at the other extreme—what Kierkegaard calls “demonic despair,” no subterfuge about one’s condition is possible and consequently the amount of suffering one experiences at this stage is almost unendurable.

B1. Despair of Weakness (In Despair Not Willing to Be Oneself)

In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard discusses two distinct forms that despair can take—despair of weakness and despair of defiance.

B1a. Despair Over the Earthly (Immediate Man)

The first existential type that Kierkegaard examines in his analysis of conscious despair of weakness is what might be referred to as the Immediate Man. This is an individual who lives completely externally, and therefore has no real conception of self. Although this sort of person may experience despair in his life, he views the cause as always being somehow outside of himself:

The immediate man has no concept of self, because his life is lived in a purely external way. The way he often responds to crises is, not to attempt any sort of inner reflection that might actually uncover his true self, but rather to wish to be someone else—to wish, in other words, for a new self:

B1b. Despair Over the Eternal (The Cynic)

Kierkegaard calls the second form of conscious despair of weakness, “despair over the eternal.” In this form of despair an individual recognizes his own weakness and limitations, but instead of turning to God for a cure, he despairs over his own weakness—or to put it another way, he despairs over his despair.

This despair is a significant step forward. If the former was the despair of weakness,
this is *despair over his* weakness, although it still remains as to its nature under the category “despair of weakness,” as distinguished from defiance in the next section. So there is only a relative difference. This difference consists in the fact that the foregoing form has the consciousness of weakness as its final consciousness, whereas in this case consciousness does not come to a stop here but potentiates itself to a new consciousness, a consciousness of its weakness. The despairer understands that it is weakness to take the earthly so much to heart, that it is weakness to despair. But then, instead of veering sharply away from despair to faith, humbling himself before God for his weakness, he is more deeply absorbed in despair and despairs over his weakness. Therewith the whole point of view is inverted, he becomes now more clearly conscious of his despair, recognizing that he is in despair about the eternal, he despairs over himself that he could be weak enough to ascribe to the earthly such great importance, which now becomes his despairing expression for the fact that he has lost the eternal and himself.

**B2. Despair of Defiance (Willing Despairingly to Be Oneself)**

The last and most profound form of despair discussed by Kierkegaard is called despair of defiance (or “willing despairingly to be oneself), although Kierkegaard also calls this form of despair “demonic despair.” In despair of defiance, a person recognizes that he is in despair, tries to find some way of alleviating his despair, but when no cure occurs, he becomes hardened against any form of help.

The despairing individual at this stage begins to revel in his own despair and suffering, seeing his pain as lifting him above the common rung of mankind:

But the more consciousness there is in such a sufferer who in despair is determined to be himself, all the more does despair too potentiate itself and become demoniac. The genesis of this is commonly as follows. A self which in despair is determined to be itself winces at one pain or another which simply cannot be taken away or separated from its concrete self. Precisely upon this torment the man directs his whole passion, which at last becomes a demoniac rage. Even if at this point God in heaven and all his angels were to offer to help him out of it—no, now he doesn’t want it, now it is too late, he once would have given everything to be rid of this torment but was made to wait, now that’s all past, now he would rather rage against everything, he, the one man in the whole of existence who is the most unjustly treated, to whom it is especially important to have his torment at hand, important that no one should take it from him—for thus he can convince himself that he is in the right. This at last becomes so firmly fixed in his head that for a very peculiar reason he is afraid of eternity—for the reason, namely, that it might rid him of his (demoniacally understood) infinite advantage over other men, his (demoniacally understood) justification for being what he is. It is himself he wills to be; he began with the infinite abstraction of the self, and now at last he has become so concrete that it would be an impossibility to be eternal in that sense, and yet he wills in despair to be himself. Ah, demoniac madness! He rages most of all at the thought that eternity might get it into its head to take his misery from him!

**III. Pointing to a Cure**

In Part One of *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard offers the following tantalizingly brief formula that expresses his beliefs about how despair might be cured:

This then is the formula which describes the condition of the self when despair is completely eradicated: by relating itself to its own self and by willing to be itself the self is grounded transparently in the Power which posited it.
To put it as simply as possible, according to Kierkegaard’s account, two things are necessary for an individual to be freed of despair: (1) he has to understand the nature of himself a self and (2) he has to find his ultimate cure in a power higher than himself—namely God.

Unfortunately, it’s not within the scope of this text to assess the merits of Kierkegaard’s religious worldview. I’ll readily admit that his solution to the problem of despair is certainly debatable (an atheist, for example, would have big problems with it).

While the cure for despair may be open to debate, what is much more certain is that in The Sickness Unto Death Kierkegaard has provided us with a first class account of the mechanics of despair that is as profound in its depth and relevance as anything we have seen in contemporary psychology.


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