A Challenge on Kierkegaard’s Theory of Despair

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In the first chapter of *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard explains his theory of despair and the intrinsic suffering involved in humanity. His aim in explaining despair stands as his foundation for the importance of Christian faith for the human psyche and overall stability. It could be argued though, that his statement is over-generalized, and his perspective is warped specifically to serve his own ideological ends. I will be refuting his assumption that the self is an entirely internal matter and that despair, in conjunction, has only one source and salvation.

Kierkegaard’s theory revolves around his definition of the self. The “self”, in Kierkegaard’s view, is a set of relations and internal conflicts that make up a person’s existence on Earth. The self is not a personality or a feeling, rather it is a mass of connected desires and compulsions tied together under the force of one’s will. As long a person maintains a focused will, they maintain a self. By framing the self as an activity or set of related ideals, Kierkegaard leaves allowance for the possibility of those relations becoming tangled or misinterpreted, leaving the “self” unknown or rejected and the person thrust into sorrow and panic, or, as he defines it to be, despair.

Although despair at its root is always a matter of selfhood, it manifests in different ways. The existence or non-existence of a self has different ramifications on how a person relates to themselves in terms of will and motivation. There are two core categories of despair that relate to the will of the self: the will to be a self, and the will not to be a self. The will to be a self stems from the inability to see or accept one’s identity (identity being synonymous with the latent self). As the self is an evolving construct rather than a static entity, the “inability of the self to arrive at
or be in equilibrium”¹ leaves a person unsure of their own paths and perceptions of the world. The failure of the self to manifest would theoretically leave a person rudderless, without any true guiding will, and the absence of that will leads in time to a state of desperation and deterioration in which someone succumbs under the infinitude of their own life and choices. Of course, the supposed lack of self is more so an illusion than a reality. The nature of the will insists that even if it continues in a negative state, it must continue, thus, everyone has a self, even if they lack the ability to be conscious of or approve of it. Indeed, the inability to conceive your own self is the most basal form of despair.

The self is the core of human experience and suffering. Acknowledging the self is also to acknowledge the fact that one must have an opinion of their own self. For someone to find themselves unacceptable is the second form of despair: the will to not be a self. Instead of a search to find fruition, this form of despair seeks destruction of the aspects of a person they find unacceptable. The problem with this approach is that the self is a whole- it cannot be split into parts that are tolerable and parts that are not. To find flaw in one area of a psyche is to find the psyche flawed in its entirely. Man, in their conquest for greed and greatness is unable at every continuous instant in every circumstance to find themselves wholly acceptable and thus all men are, at a given point, trapped within despair. By this corollary, despair is not just a passing feeling; rather it is a condition that, once inflicted, remains within the affected party and eats away at their relation to themselves. The logical end of this deterioration is, in a manner of speaking, the inevitability of death in both an eternal and spiritual sense as well as death in terms of the potential of a human life and mind. One cannot reach their true potential in any sense if

¹“…the expression for the inability of the self to arrive at or to be in equilibrium and rest by itself, but only, in relating itself to itself, by relating itself to that which has established the entire relation.”
-Kierkegaard, Søren, The Sickness Unto Death, pg. 14
they continue to deny themselves dignity and effect. Despair is “the sickness unto death” because it manifests like a terminal illness: a tangible, diagnosable affliction with a known cause (a misrelation within the self) and outcome (suffering leading up to and surpassing death). Kierkegaard uses a metaphor of the physician² to explain to nature of sickness in terms of patient awareness and prognosis. A patient may not be aware they are sick, and even if they are aware, they may overestimate their odds of survival. It is in the human inclination to assume “imaginary health”³ due to innate egoism and ignorance of their own body. Similarly, a human who is spiritually deficient may not be aware of a problem as they are not well versed on matters of the spirit. Alternatively, they may just assume that their suffering is temporal or that its ramifications are not deep, which is erroneous; an ailment of the spirit as relating to despair is a terminal affliction. By this metaphor, a physical ailment needing a physician’s care is analogized to a starving soul seeking redemption that only the Christian God- the Great Physician- can give. And just as illnesses need direct action in order to be expelled from the body, a person in despair must acknowledge their ailment and make a concentrated effort to escape from it by turning to God. The only cure for a misrelation of the self is to relate the self to God at the highest level.

Now, how does relating to God put an end to despair? In truth, God does not necessarily end despair so much as his existence makes it possible for “True Christians” to pull themselves out of despair. A “True Christian” is one who acknowledges that the core element missing from the self is their relationship with God. As a result, they make every effort to bring this relation into the core of their being, thus reinforcing their coherent identity. The escape from despair is a journey into faith, and the vision of religion that Kierkegaard pursues is not one of absolute

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² Detailed in Kierkegaard, Søren, The Sickness Unto Death, pg. 22-24
³ Kierkegaard, Søren, The Sickness Unto Death, pg. 23
security in God’s mercy, but of a hunger for the promise of mercy to be true, and an honest relief upon the decision that it is. The foundation, thus, of any relationship with God, has a small level of doubt in his power of salvation. Only when faced with the reality that all religion could be a lie can someone fully appreciate and devote themselves to believing in its truth, as now their own sanity and self is at risk. Belief must be a constant, passionate choice, just as the question of the existence of the self must have a constant, passionate answer to be valid. To escape despair, one must “have hope in the possibility of help, by virtue of the absurd, that for God everything is possible”⁴ and make the conscious choice to reject doubt and embrace belief in God. Through strong faith, a True Christian is able to transfer their fear and worry onto an entity that is able to take the burden lifting him out of despair. Thus, any possibility of succumbing to despair vanishes because there is conviction within the self that they will be protected. Despair forces man to call upon God for guidance, which is, in fact, one of its essential functions, second to its role in self-development and growth.

The ability to despair is synonymous with the ability to introspect and understand personal failings. Thus, despair is “man’s superiority over the animal”⁵ because it marks the unique ability of man to search for higher meaning and purpose. To despair is to long for worth, an internal conflict that animals are not able to conceptualize. In this way, to despair is essential for human life; without it, humans would simply remain in their weakened and godless existence. By extension, anyone incapable of living in despair suffers a “ruination”⁶ of the core of their being due to the loss of their human sense and introspection. A person who is ignorant in this

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⁴ “Hope in the possibility of help, especially by virtue of the absurd, that for God everything is possible-no, that he does not want.”
- Kierkegaard, Søren, The Sickness Unto Death, pg. 71
⁵ Kierkegaard, Søren, The Sickness Unto Death, pg. 15
⁶ See above.
way bars themselves from both earthly and heavenly guidance. This is the “worst misfortune and misery”\(^7\) that Kierkegaard is truly mourning: the inability to long for and feel the relief of God’s forgiveness.

Just as we are not always conscious of despair, we are not always conscious of the origins of our transient feelings. Humans experience sorrow and fear throughout life, and most often those emotions are traced back to individual incidents that caused distress. Yet, according to Kierkegaard’s theory of the self, for someone to be easily rattled by external matters is only an outward indication of their innate despair. Nothing can affect the self but the self, therefore it is impossible for superficial inconveniences to result in visceral self-injury. It would not be possible for someone to be rattled by external circumstances if they did not feel that external circumstances were somehow a reflection of themselves. This is why the concept of “happiness” is not a solution to despair, but rather is a way of enabling and succumbing to it. To seek happiness brought about by outside influence is just a mechanism to hide conscious despair under a sheen of false fulfilment. This drags a person back into the realm of unconscious despair, the most pitiable form of despair, as it is impossible to escape a condition when you are unaware of what you are suffering from. Thus, these people search for materialistic means of coming to terms with their existence that they will never find. The failure of an aesthetic life is inconsequential to the self, as “no essential change has taken place”\(^8\) in terms of internal rearrangement and thus the state of the self should remain the same. To be momentarily satisfied is only to have a facsimile of self-worth and stability.

All of this to say: there is no shortcut to escape despair. To wish for transient happiness is only to sink deeper into unconscious despair as you lose sight of your inner self. To will oneself

\(^7\) Kierkegaard, Søren, *The Sickness Unto Death*, pg. 15
\(^8\) Compare A. Wood, “Despair and the self-question”, Canvas, pg. 8
out of it is not possible, for willing to not be in despair is the fact of despair itself. The human constitution is not strong enough to untangle the self on its own. Even death cannot free someone from despair. Death only erases the consciousness of despair, not the condition of it. Death within despair means the tension surrounding the issue of the self is never resolved, and thus the condition of despair can never be resolved either. The only way to escape despair is through God, and the only way to find God is through despair.

By Kierkegaard’s argument, any effort to maintain an aesthetic lifestyle is simply an affirmation of despair and not any attachment to the (superficial) relationship or sign of wealth that was lost. Popular culture seems to support Kierkegaard in this point: the sentiment that a person should be able to find happiness no matter their struggles in life is parroted throughout folktales across civilization. People who are religious are often stereotyped to have an easier time recovering from traumatic events. The theory seems to be self-affirming. Yet, this pattern of despair and peace only works when it is self-contained. Once extrapolated, it becomes harder to dismiss the role of external factors on the self and on its condition of despair, and more difficult to defend God’s salvation as the only solution.

In the first instance, the concept of self that Kierkegaard paints demands a rejection of external input and classification. Kierkegaard’s theory assumes that a person’s self is implicit and intrinsic to them, and that despair is only a result of the state of their self and its relation to the image of God. His dismissal of outward effects on the self not only gives an incomplete picture of the inner life of a person but calls into question the existence of the capacity for self in people who are yet incapable of forming complex desires and ideas. Take for example, a child. Children up to a certain age are free from the burdens of having complex inner lives and conflicting motivations. Most of their mental and emotional substance revolves around basal
needs or is simply parroted and copied from caregivers and influential peers, thus, any significant change in those persons would essentially destroy a large amount of a child’s self- and world-perception. Although Kierkegaard does not fully expound on the true origin of a self, he does insist that in its fulfilled state, it should be self-sustaining. Therefore, the psychological condition of a child should not be possible, as their self is solely influenced by external conflict. Thus, the conclusion would then have to come that children do not have a self, or at least do not have a self that is developed enough to seek for meaning and relations with God. Evidently, children do have personal identity, thus the claim that they do not have a self is nonsensical. Disregarding that, if children were in fact unable to have a self, they would be unable to be in despair. Additionally, it would be erroneous to claim that children are unable to find safety or relief in religion as they are taught it, so despair as a precursor for religious belief also does not hold, as children are not in despair, which of course means that not everyone is in despair.

Following the example of children, who will all grow up into adults whose identity did not spontaneously appear upon the onset of adulthood, it would be erroneous to claim that a human’s concept of their identity is not at least partially influenced by external opinion and circumstance. The place that a person inhabits in the world shapes their sense of identity. The pressure to adhere to societal standards is just as urgent and omnipresent as the pressure to adhere to the standards of God. To assert that any life event should be viewed as inconsequential is disregard of the social conditioning that is wound deeply into the fabric of a person’s inner mind. Although Kierkegaard states that a self cannot create the standards it measures itself by, he does explain that despair is centrally about a lack of fulfillment that must be satisfied by a higher power. Thus, the conjecture could be drawn that the higher power only needs to have more authority than the self in question. If the escape from despair is belief, then it must be
acknowledged that not only deities garner belief. In the case of children, any authority figure is
seen as infallible and to adhere to their standards is as important as adhering to the standards of
God. Creating the image of a “god” only takes a certain level of widespread devotion to an ideal
and, by Kierkegaard’s own word, an unshakeable belief that the ideal will relieve you of your
torment. In Kierkegaard’s view, the only agent powerful enough to do this is the Christian God,
but that is in part due to his own resolution of despair (which even he admits is a personal and
difficult journey) and cannot necessarily be generalized as he attempts to do in this theory.
Although The Sickness Unto Death is written for a Christian audience, assertions made in the
name of humanity, and not just Christianity, must hold true for all humanity, and the truth is that
humanity has many “gods” and that many of them are capable of providing the relief and
security that Kierkegaard insists is needed. Therefore, his insistence on salvation from despair
through the Christian God is a true, yet extremely narrow net cast in a wide sea of conjectures
following from his original condition of selfhood.