

Basic Despair in *The Sickness unto Death*

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1.

The *Sickness unto Death* distinguishes between two main types of despair: “not wanting to be oneself” and “wanting to be oneself”.¹ Prior to these two there is another form, which Anti-Climacus (and I shall here assume thereby also Kierkegaard) describes as “being unconscious in despair of having a self (inauthentic despair)” (p. 43). The term “inauthentic” might indicate to the reader that there is some question whether this third (in effect first) form should really count as despair at all in the terms provided by the analysis in *The Sickness unto Death*. That there is a real question here can be seen from the fact that, according to that analysis, despair – defined as a sickness of the self – is an attitude adopted towards the self. Where someone is not yet conscious of his or her selfhood in the required sense, whatever that sense is, it is difficult to see how such an analysis can be made to apply.

Now Kierkegaard says quite unequivocally that it is the second of the two forms of despair properly so-called that is basic; all forms of despair can be “resolved into or reduced to this form” (p. 44), i.e. into “wanting to be oneself”. I have always assumed Kierkegaard had good reason to claim that the second form of despair represents despair in general and is therefore the basic form. Naturally, then, I have taken the further question of whether there is something to call “inauthentic despair” to be a matter of whether there is an unconscious, perhaps preconscious, form of despair satisfying this, the second form of authentic despair. Michael Theunissen, however, in a recent paper to which an earlier version of this essay was a response,² claims that if we reconstruct Kierkegaard’s analysis of despair we find that Kierkegaard is mistaken; according to the implications of his own analysis

Kierkegaard should have said that the first form of authentic despair is the basic one, the kind he calls *not* wanting to be oneself. So Theunissen proposes in his reconstruction as the *Grundsatz* of Kierkegaard's analysis: "Immediately we want not to be what we are [in our selves, our pre-given *Dasein*, and our human being]."

I try here to vindicate my own reading of Kierkegaard's text, but with a special eye on considerations to which Professor Theunissen's arguments have alerted me. At one level, what Theunissen's proposal, that we see "not wanting/not willing to be ourselves" as the basic form of Kierkegaardian despair, has drawn my attention to is how pervasive this formula actually is at the textual level. Not accepting oneself and wanting to be rid of the self one is are recurrent themes in Part One of *The Sickness unto Death*. There are good textual grounds, therefore, for suspecting a tension between Kierkegaard's preferment of the second form of authentic despair and what the text actually says. However, an attempt to *reconstruct* the analysis must be based on something deeper than cross-currents on the surface, and at a deeper, structural level Theunissen's proposal indeed raises some very interesting questions, both about what to make of the phenomenology behind Kierkegaard's account and about how to treat the text in general. The crux is to be found in what seems to be an inevitable implication of Theunissen's reconstruction, namely that the notion of a God-established self enters Kierkegaard's analysis as that form of selfhood in which the pre-given self can envisage its pre-given situation as acceptable, at least according to Kierkegaard. It is the form under which we can in principle finally accept what we are. Not wanting to be oneself, then, is not wanting to be the pre-given self until this grasp of it is available and appropriated. On my reading, however, the self we don't want to be is the God-established self right from the start. A good deal hangs on this, for if the theology can indeed be "deferred" as Theunissen in effect proposes, it will be easier to place Kierkegaard in the tradition of which many take him to be the founder. I shall myself argue that the theological premiss is essential to Kierkegaard's analysis and that any reconstruction that takes the full measure of his intentions must find room for it from the beginning. I open my case by commenting on the form of despair called "wanting to be oneself", the second form of authentic despair. The points that are relevant for my differences with Theunissen's proposed reconstruction will emerge on the way.

2.

As Kierkegaard himself stresses at the very beginning, the kind of despair he says is basic could not be a form of despair at all without the idea of a self established by God. Without it there would only be the despair of not wanting to be oneself. And were that indeed the only form available, it would be extremely paradoxical to be told that you are still in despair even if you want to be yourself. The only escape would be total indifference as to whether or not you are yourself, which obviously is not what Kierkegaard intends when he talks of a state in which “despair is completely eradicated” (p. 44). If we understand in a quite straightforward way what it is *not* to want to be ourselves, that is, where we have some idea of the self or person we are and we don’t want to be that person – the kind of case Theunissen’s *Grundsatz* refers to – and we are told that this is a state of despair, we would quite naturally assume that the way to avoid despair was to want to be this self, to be that self willingly, to go along with being it. Unless, that is, we are also told, as we are by Kierkegaard, that willingly being oneself still need not be being one’s *true* self. For in that case we can see how we may *still* be in despair *even if* we are now wanting to be the self we are. We need, then, some idea of a true selfhood to contrast with a selfhood we are willing to take on, in order for willing to be the self we take on still to count as a form of despair. We need this notion of a “true” self.

But does it have to be that of a God-established self? Might it not just as well be Heidegger’s notion of a self authentically related to its death as its “utmost, though indefinite, yet certain possibility”? The possibility before which, in Heidegger’s functional equivalent of Kierkegaardian despair, “Dasein flees in everydayness”.³ Or we might go further. Anyone with any notion of an ideal or better self, even within everydayness, can allow that presently wanting to be the self they previously didn’t want to be may still not be wanting to be what they take *really* to be their true or real self. And if that is all that the despair of wanting to be oneself – of willingly being what one is – amounts to, we could envisage escaping despair either by becoming a still better self or by adjusting to some everyday specification of selfhood we don’t immediately want to be though in some respects we allow it is this self we really *are*. But none of this captures Kierkegaardian despair. According to Kierkegaard, it is still possible in

either case to be in despair, because no self at all we become and like, and no self we didn't like but are now satisfyingly adjusted to being, is our real, proper, best or "true" self. To be that self, one has to make a U-turn and look and move in quite the opposite direction.

That direction is not confronting one's utmost possibility. For according to *The Sickness unto Death*, thinking that "the end is death ...death is the end" is precisely to despair (p. 47, emphasis added). So not only is it not enough just to have upgraded one's self according to some ideal of everydayness. It is not even enough to emerge from one's refuge in everydayness to face one's finitude. Indeed, embracing death as the end is to be the Kierkegaardian paradigm of the properly despairing self.

So Kierkegaard claims there is this notion of selfhood that is a notion of a God-established self and asserts that *any* striving after a goal of selfhood that is not an acceptance of this ideal is despair. In a way, I suspect, he is really claiming that any *striving* after a goal of selfhood at all is despair – any striving to become a "better" self than the self one is – because to strive in this self-improving way is to try to be a self in a way that is *not* that of being a God-established self, and only the latter gives you the condition in which you can be rid of despair. At any rate, I understand Kierkegaard's *main* claim to be that the fundamental form that despair takes – that is, the way in which despair manifests itself, the behaviour we should call despair in the most basic sense – is that of aiming at, or willingly accepting, specifications of selfhood that do *not* have the form of a selfhood established by God. As already indicated, the cases where this behaviour is most conscious (to the subject or agent in question) is what Kierkegaard calls defiance. But Kierkegaard says that there is an element of this in all despair (p. 80: "no despair is entirely without defiance"). It is both tempting and plausible to suppose that Kierkegaard would include here the case of inauthentic despair, where there is as yet no conception of being a self about which one can raise questions of wanting to be it or not. If Kierkegaard is right in this – though perhaps he isn't, in which case I think *this* is where we should first look to find out whether he is mistaken – all "trying to be/being willingly a self" is a way of trying to escape or deliberately disregard the form of a God-established selfhood. That is, of not wanting to be one's true, God-established self.

To elaborate, let us take the case Kierkegaard uses introductively to illustrate despair at the very beginning of his account: the "power-crazed" person whose motto is "Caesar or nothing" (p. 49). This means either that if you do not become Caesar you will remain nothing or that, since the test of being anything is to become Caesar, if you fail that test you have proved you are nothing. The slogan "nothing if not Caesar" need not be the monopoly of the power-crazed. In some forms it is also the typical goal-description of someone with a very *weak* self-image. But either way, whether you are Caesar or not you are still yourself, and what the disjunction expresses is some form of flight from this idea: not wanting to be that self, not wanting to be that so far unspecified self, to specify which one then despairingly thinks it has to become Caesar to be anything. Literally, the expression says there *is* no self, which means that positively speaking there is nothing yet to say, or worth saying, about this self that cannot be said in Caesar terms. However, failure to become Caesar does bring to light at least one specification of non-Caesar-like selfhood, for now there is at least one evident truth about one's self, and that is that it is a self that cannot become a Caesar. Accordingly, as Kierkegaard's text has it, one wants to be "rid" of this ineffectual self (p. 49). But being rid of this self becomes the more evidently impossible a task the more conscious one is of being the self in some way that is independent of any such specifications, whether negative or positive. In the psychological twilight of the gradual dawning of that consciousness, there is room for much depth-psychological manoeuvring. A fully conscious self can set about trying deliberately to improve its possibilities of becoming Caesar by enhancing its basic repertoire of abilities; or it can phantasize that it has already acquired and successfully employed that ability. A less than fully self-conscious self can easily conceal from itself the fact that it does not already have those talents, or conceal the fact that they are indeed necessary for achieving the desired end. But however clouded the self-consciousness may be, according to Kierkegaard's text what one is really doing is trying to get rid of the idea of being one's potentially true self. So that even if the self were capable of becoming Caesar, and actually became Caesar, it would still not have become itself, "[it] would have been rid of [it]self" (ibid.). Thus the very project of wanting to be Caesar (on pain of being nothing), even before we prove incapable of carrying it out, is a way of not wanting to be one's true self. It is a way of trying to be rid of *that* self, of trying to opt out of

the project of true selfhood. If I may put the point as succinctly as possible, Theunissen sees despair as at bottom a matter of not wanting to be the human being one is, or not even wanting to *be* a human being at all, where the idea of a God-established selfhood then arises as a new perspective from which the project of being human can be saved. But Kierkegaard would have us see despair as a matter of not wanting to be the God-established self one is. The point may sound too fine a one to be interesting, but it isn't. Let me spell it out once more. Kierkegaard is saying that the only undespairing way of willingly being oneself is to grasp oneself as God-established, and according to his analysis despair has the fundamental form "wanting to be oneself", because accepting any other version of selfhood is a form of despair. It is one thing to say that the pre-given Dasein can accept itself if, but only if, it adds a divine origin to its own specification and then go on to say that despair is not wanting to be the self without this added specification; but it is quite another to say that the self one does not want to be is the self *with* its divine origin already established, and that despair is turning one's back on *that* self-conception.

But if the claim that there are three forms of despair, and not just two, is to be taken seriously, Kierkegaard must be able to convince us that even where there is as yet no idea of such a true self, some form of motivation expressible in "Caesar or nothing" terms is at work, a motivation which *already* expresses a direction away from the notion of true selfhood. That sounds implausible perhaps. But not impossible. It might be shown that the very presumption that the only kind of selfhood desirable or available is Caesar-track selfhood embodies a deeply embedded resistance to the notion of a quite different kind of selfhood. If so, we could see even in "inauthentic" despair some hint of the form of despair Kierkegaard calls defiance – the second form of authentic despair – wanting to be oneself, or more perspicuously, wanting to be *one's* self. Such an underlying reluctance to pursue the path of true selfhood, manifested in the Caesar-or-nothing attitude, might then deserve to be called despair, even if it is only an inauthentic form. For, although a pre-condition of defiance proper is missing, namely the conscious sense of a true selfhood established by God which, in true despair, one shuns or denies (p. 98; cf. p. 80), there is still something there answering to the structure of defiance. There is a movement away from that form of selfhood, whether a flight or resistance. Some of the sense of this

might be put by saying that what even the *inauthentically* despairing person wants rid of is the ideal of a self for which Caesar-projects (making a name for yourself, making one's mark) are precisely that – renderings unto Caesar of what should be rendered unto God, or surrenderings even, since there is the hint of some psychological strategy at work. So one might be able to say that wanting to be rid of a weak self that can't be Caesar is “really” wanting to be rid of the self that shouldn't be attempting anything in the way of Caesar-projects in any case.

Whatever sense or plausibility this claim may have, it is interesting to note how Kierkegaard can exploit the ambiguity in the expression “not wanting to oneself”. In one sense it means simply that it is false that one wants to be oneself, while in another it means that among the things a person wants consciously not to be, is to be him- or herself. As it stands, on the first interpretation, the description can be true of someone who has never even conceived of a state of selfhood that he or she either is currently in or might possibly be in. Of course, not wanting to be oneself in this sense is compatible with total indifference as to whether one is or is not oneself, and you might think this kind of case should be excluded from an “existential dialectic” which should, after all, be concerning itself with the kinds of energy that keep things in motion. However, from what we have said it isn't clear that in the context of *The Sickness unto Death* the primary notion must be one of *actively* wanting not to be oneself. What Kierkegaard is providing is a depth analysis of forms of flight and, as we have observed, these need not take the form of open defiance of a clearly appropriated notion of selfhood. Behavioural patterns of various kinds, typically of the form “trying to be a self of a certain kind”, can be depth-read in terms appropriate to defiance but without actually amounting to defiance; that is, they can be depth-read in terms of unwillingness, reluctance, evasion, etc., where what is resisted is not at all clearly faced and may not yet even be formulated or even suspected. That does, of course, make the notion of “indifference” a trifle suspect, for the behaviour will be read in strategic terms even where there is no conscious strategy, and the indifference will be thought of as being rather of the “studied” kind. But this may still be a reasonable way of interpreting Kierkegaard. The second of the two forms of authentic despair, the kind called “wanting to be oneself”, is basic because all despair, even in its preconscious varieties, has the form of a flight from, or resistance to, that notion of

selfhood which alone can make you want to be a human being. Recall once more that on Theunissen's account the first form of authentic despair, "not wanting to be oneself", is basic because all despair has the form of a flight from our given selfhood. The only way of removing the motivation for that flight being, or so I read him as reconstructively reading Kierkegaard, to see the pre-given self in the light of an appended theological "premiss".

We may note that indirect support for the notion of an actively inspired indifference may be found in those parts of Kierkegaard's analysis of despair where indifference is clearly intended to be portrayed both as despair and as a symptom of at least previous hidden activity. We find this in the case of the kind of despair referred to as "spiritlessness", or a "spiritless sense of security" (p. 100; cf. p. 74). In the "dialectical" account offered, the deep structure of spiritlessness betrays a form of activity and interest. It is a form of self-satisfaction, a way of life *selected* because it prevents the choice of either becoming or not becoming oneself from ever coming into view. It is the apparently secure, though Kierkegaard thinks also brittle and so in the last resort vulnerable, way of life of the *petit bourgeois*. In short, although the idea of getting rid of oneself is in the first instance that of getting rid of one's actual self, the deeper sense of wanting rid of oneself is still that of not wanting the selfhood that would make you content with your humanity.

What, however, can we say positively about this true selfhood? In Kierkegaard's analysis there is a crucial transition from the first kind of authentic despair to the second. It involves becoming conscious of being a self in a special way, not yet the true self but a necessary prolegomenon to becoming that. One first becomes conscious of being something or other, though of course not some *thing* – let us call it a self – distinct *both* from others *and* from the environing world (pp. 85, 86). Once one is conscious of oneself as distinct from any other and from the world, it is impossible to want to be numerically another (see p. 86). The project of getting rid of oneself by becoming another is therefore no longer possible, and indeed is seen to have been impossible all along. Kierkegaard seems to say something else is impossible too: since death is a finite event, we can no longer conceive of it as *our* (my, your) end (p. 49). Despair now has the canonical form of the sickness unto death, in the special sense specified by the author: being unable to die (p. 48). It is from

here on that despair takes the form of wanting to be oneself, but as one's *own* self. What does that mean? I suggest we look for an answer in the notion of weakness. As noted, in Kierkegaard's analysis of despair there is no consciousness (or "conception" [p. 13]) of self until the transition just mentioned occurs. It is consciousness of a self that makes the application of the formula for basic Kierkegaardian despair possible. For there to be such a conception a person must be conscious of something "eternal" in the self, a specification which first occurs in an abstract way when one despairs of the earthly – of Caesar-projects – and yet realizes that it is not really the earthly or something earthly that one despairs over. One realizes that what led one into not wanting to be oneself, far from being the failure to become Caesar, was already motivating the attempt to become Caesar. Becoming Caesar, even a little one, was part of the (impossible) project of being rid of the eternal.

The transition to the second (for Kierkegaard fundamental) form of despair then goes something like this – and this is the only place I claim to be deliberately doing anything that might deserve being called "reconstructing" Kierkegaard's analysis of despair. Where, in the earlier form, despair takes the form of wanting to be rid of a self that is too weak to become whatever it sets its sights on becoming, at the transitional stage it takes the form of wanting to be rid of a self not because it proves incapable of becoming that, but because it is only capable of placing its hopes in projects of a worldly nature. The object of despair is now not one's self *qua* incapable of becoming Caesar, but oneself as a self caught up in the pursuit of earthly goals and unable to grasp hold of the eternal. What consciousness is now conscious of (to speak in an elliptically Hegelian manner) is its own weakness in this respect, the actual self's weakness, its being too weak to turn for support to the eternal. One resort is the way of accommodation, going along with the new found weakness but turning it to advantage by making it look like a strength. A passive fear of turning to the eternal itself for support becomes an active spurning of any help from that quarter (pp. 124-5; cf. p. 101); and then it becomes a holding fast to some suffering of which the eternal could relieve one, if only one were willing to see the suffering as just a contingent feature of oneself and not, as now, the misery which gives you your life-time's role as a piece of living "evidence against all existence" (p. 105). By treating it as an essential feature one manufactures an excuse not to *have* to call on the eternal, such help being

“humiliation” (p. 102). Here we have the dynamics of the making of one’s *own* self, the despair Kierkegaard calls defiance.

The other resort is to accept one’s weakness, in the same way that in the former case one accepts one’s suffering, that is as an essential feature of being human. Accepting that one is too weak to face the eternal on one’s own, one “humbles oneself before God under [one’s] weakness” (p. 92; cf. p. 93), and that is Kierkegaard’s proposed way – what he or Anti-Climacus would say is the Christian way – out of despair. It is to humble oneself in a way that in despair, but *only* then, would count as humiliation. Where the defiant, self-positing despairer specifies what Kierkegaard calls the infinite form of the self in Caesar-like terms, the non-despairer gives this infinite self the form of the eternal by fully giving himself up to the idea that such projects are inimical to true selfhood.

In short, then, instead of seeing that weakness is a positive characteristic of the self in respect of the eternal in consciousness, or instead of seeing that the notion of selfhood conceived in Caesar-like terms must be “deconstructed” in order to take advantage of the form of the infinite self to find consolation and health, the person grabs hold of the opportunity provided by the idea of an infinite form of the self, still abstract (p. 99) and “negative” (p. 122: “the most abstract possibility of the self”; p. 124, “the negative self, the infinite form of the self”), to “posit” its own selfhood in ways that compensate for this weakness, or in other ways obscure it. Despair now takes the (inherently unstable) form of creating the person’s own version of selfhood within the new-found or newly constituted category of the infinite self.

3.

So far I have tried to show how Kierkegaard’s theological premiss gives him a special reason for wanting to count as basic this latter form of despair, which he calls “wanting to be oneself”. It is basic if despair as defiance does indeed cast light on what deep, dark, and dim motivations are at work in cases of despair where there is as yet no clearly sensed notion of being an “infinite” self, of “being distinct” in the senses mentioned above. It is basic if not wanting to be oneself is more revealingly construed in terms of the true rather than the pre-

given self, reluctance to be the latter being understood then as a surface symptom of the more pervasive reluctance to be the former.

But there is a rejoinder to this. Surely, if the formula “not wanting to be oneself” is understood in the sense I have adopted of not wanting to be one’s true self, there is no reason why this rather than “wanting to be oneself” should not still be the formula expressing what is basic in Kierkegaardian despair. So Theunissen’s proposal about the *Grundsatz* can hold except that we replace the “pre-given” with the “God-established” self as the self we do not want to be, even immediately. That is correct so far as it goes. But there is another consideration to introduce, a reason why Kierkegaard should still want to regard “wanting to be oneself” as the basic form. To see what this consideration is let me cite and comment on an argument of Theunissen’s for calling the first form of (authentic) despair basic; that is, for taking the *Grundsatz* in Kierkegaard’s analysis to be that we don’t immediately want to be what we pre-givenly are.

Theunissen notes a mutual motivational dependence between the two main forms of despair. The fact that we want to be other selves than we are is due to our not wanting to be the selves we are, and the fact that we do not want to be the selves we are is due to our wanting to be selves we are not. But, points out Theunissen, while the former is always true, the latter is only sometimes true. Thus, on his own reading of the formulas, identifying the self we don’t want to be as the pre-given self, I can very well want not to be myself even without having some alternative in mind. So not wanting to be the selves we are is always the reason behind Kierkegaardian despair, while wanting to be the selves we are is only sometimes the reason.

Certainly it is true that whenever we want to be another it is because we don’t want to be what we are, while it is false that, whenever we don’t want to be the selves we are, the reason is that we want to be another. We can think of cases where we are dissatisfied with our selves in specific ways in which we can be better by improving ourselves and not by becoming another. And we can, on Kierkegaard’s analysis, be dissatisfied with ourselves and at the same time refuse to accept that any way of becoming another, or even of an upgraded version of what we are, will remove the dissatisfaction. But if, as I propose, we read the “self” which we don’t want to be as the “ideal self”, or “true self”, it is surely *never* because we want to be selves we are not that we want not to be *these* selves. That is, it is

never the case that the *reason* for my not wanting to be my true self is that I want to be another. One does not say, I do not want to be my true self because I want to be Caesar; one says (if the situation of one's saying so is conceivable) I want to become Caesar because in that way I avoid becoming my true self. Perhaps I might say, if asked by someone why I don't want to be myself, that it's because I want to be Caesar, since where these are the options my answer accurately states my preference. Still, this answer does not give a reason *for* the preference. If asked why I choose to become Caesar, the reason might be – though it may not be one that I myself am either in a position or, if I was in that position, would care to give – that I don't want to be my true self. But then the case clearly belongs at least to the letter of Theunissen's first category: wanting to be what we are not because not wanting to be what we are. According to Theunissen this should indicate, even more strongly than his own argument does, that “not wanting to be oneself” is the basic form. That it nonetheless doesn't belong to the spirit of Theunissen's first category is because his argument depends on the self we don't want to be being our pre-given *Dasein* and not our God-established self.

I would argue, then, that far from the fact that not every instance of not wanting to be ourselves is due to our wanting to be someone we are not, showing that not wanting to be oneself is basic (because not wanting to be oneself is *always* the reason for wanting to what we are not), to identify what is basic to Kierkegaardian despair we should look for the procedures people adopt when they do not want to be their true selves. Even if my wanting to be another is not always a reason for not wanting to be myself, it is nevertheless always the *way* I try not to be myself. And the procedure is best captured in the formula “wanting to be selves they are not”, that is, the form most transparently manifested in defiance, in being defiantly one's own self, though it is also manifested in any form of persona adopted as an escape from the rigours of infinite selfhood and the need to choose for or against the eternal. Kierkegaard wants to say, as I have argued above, that *all* despair partakes of the structure of defiance. He would say that this form – wanting to be a self we are not – is basic because it captures the basic structure of the self fated to face the prospect of its true selfhood. Wanting to be oneself is the basic form of despair both because defiance – wanting to be one's own self – can be retro-analytically read into less conscious forms of despair as a defence strategy, and because taking on roles, whether

to disguise a lack of true selfhood or as a vehicle for an untrue alternative, is the typical form of refuge people take from the rigours of selfhood.

4.

Suppose we grant, then, that the fact that the despair of wanting to be oneself has the form of defiance gives it a special status, representing as it does the refusal to face up to the rigours of God-established selfhood. There is still a further argument that can be levelled against Kierkegaard's analysis, an argument which may still seem to support Theunissen's deferral of the theology. It can be argued that, if the observations Kierkegaard refers to as phenomenological evidence or confirmation of his analysis can be used equally and without remainder to support an analysis that takes pre-given Dasein to be the self we do not want to be, then the theology is a gratuitous addition also on Kierkegaard's part. So even though Kierkegaard begins with it, the analysing reader can afford to ignore it and bring it in at the end, perhaps explaining it away in terms of Kierkegaard's cultural time and place, or as introduced by Kierkegaard for any number of possible but extraneous reasons including polemical ones.

We might therefore think of two levels or "stages" of difficulty in connection with selfhood. The first can be described in terms of the now classical existentialist notion of "existence", as a structure peculiar to being human, the being able, but also in a way compelled, to frame answers to questions of what we are. What am I to make of myself in particular, and what am I to make of being human in general? Or, perhaps closer to the mainstream existentialist idea, the position in which we are compelled to frame answers to the latter question by taking upon ourselves responsibility for the *de facto* answers our own activities, our manifest selves, give to the former question. Here it is the opening up of the sphere of personal freedom and responsibility that is so forbidding, as well, it is important to add, as the corresponding process of de-identification that occurs as the individual progressively "deconstructs" its own inherited pictures of its nature and forms of belongingness and is left to put the pieces together as he will and on his own. One takes comfort in accepted roles and manners, one becomes Heidegger's *das Man*. The earlier,

pre-defiance forms of despair can then be reconstructed as defence-mechanisms in the face of this prospect of total deconstruction. That they can be so reconstructed, without strain, is I think a plausible view.

The second level adds a notion of spiritual completeness, answering to what Hegel calls the satisfaction of spirit, of the need that motivates philosophy, the need, as Hegel says, for the mind "to gratify its highest and most inward life".⁴ In Kierkegaard the satisfaction is not intellectual; it is a satisfaction of the existential needs of the practical subject or agent, something it might be fruitful to see in the Kantian terms of a quest for "happiness" through virtue. In any case, the continuity with the philosophical tradition can be emphasized here by saying that the scope of the activity defined by the "void" that opens up before the increasingly self-conscious individual is defined in terms appropriate to the notion of a *summum bonum*, a state of "blessedness" in which one is deservedly integrated into the scheme of things through one's good actions. Otherwise one is left out, a misfit, or even a dead loss, a worthless being. The strenuousness of the project of avoiding being a misfit and worthless is the requirement that the given self be deconstructed in order "to get to the self" (see p. 120; cf. p. 96) or "win itself". Along with the self as it initially grasps itself, the standards of goodness which it assumes qualify it for integration and blessedness must also be broken down and revised. One prefers the familiar picture.

Now it might be claimed that it is only once the existential situation feared in the earlier forms of despair is too clearly recognized to be ignored that the second level comes into view. It comes into view, and play, as offering the option of a solution to the problem of the isolated individual, or what Kierkegaard calls the "infinite, negative self" (pp. 101, etc.). This is what the argument we are considering proposes. The account allows us to lift off the whole theological dimension in Kierkegaard's account while still leaving the essentials of the analysis of despair intact. The idea of a God-established self can be left to the end as an option facing the despairer. The cost of this interpretation is that we must revise Kierkegaard's own claim about what form of despair is basic. Theunissen is willing to bear that cost. And indeed perhaps it is not an unbearable cost, especially if the descriptions Kierkegaard gives of preconscious despair, and of despair in (rather than over) weakness, can be accepted without hav-

ing to bring in the second-level scenario at all; for then they can be seen simply as descriptions of defences against having to see oneself as an infinite, negative self.

There are, however, two obvious objections. One is that we lose the whole point of Kierkegaard's analysis. We should recall the circumstances of Kierkegaard's writing *The Sickness unto Death*. As a late work, stemming from the time when the either/or was widening so far as to leave no middle position between aestheticism on the one hand and pure faith on the other, it is the work of an author for whom all institutionalized ethics and institutionalized religion were anathema. The roles people took on, as wife, husband, functionary, or whatever, particularly the roles of bishop, priest or parson, were spiritually empty. Kierkegaard's polemical concern was to reveal this feature of society and to diagnose it in the terms he had chosen. These were Christian terms directed against Christendom, that is, against the form that Christianity (no longer the properly Christian life) had taken in his native Denmark, the more self-consciously so in the political and cultural aftermath of 1848, the year in which the work was written. Kierkegaard captured the fundamental cultural malaise of his time in the notion of the finitizing of the infinite. Institutionalizing the spirit is one main way of doing this, the most prevalent in Kierkegaard's society perhaps. And the institutionalizing of spirit is precisely the adoption of forms, of external forms, of ways of life, ways of being oneself in which one wants to be that self. Being such a self willingly was the main public target of Kierkegaard's analysis of despair. Of course, not all despairs exploit existing institutional roles. There are Caesars too, who look for glory and conquest, and libertines and seducers who fail to place themselves within any ethical reality at all, along with religious fanatics. In his typology of despair Kierkegaard tries to find a place for all of these. The key is the idea of a loss of, and a reluctance to go forward to, what he calls the "eternal" in one's consciousness, as an "unconditional" basis for the establishment of a genuinely interpersonal life. It is this reluctance and all its forms that Kierkegaard attempts to press into the "synthesis" framework of *The Sickness unto Death*. What is striking about Kierkegaard's typology is how many of the despairs which fall under the headings provided are able to masquerade as the real thing, whether in hollow rendering to God in the form of institutionalized religion or in noisy renderings to Caesar which can easily be taken to be examples of humanity at its greatest, "externalities" behind which no one

would dream of looking for the despair which, in its “spiritual” forms, has no typical behavioural counterpart or expression (p. 104). Or for that matter in forms of religious fanaticism that take no account of the ethical workplace, the area of close contact in which alone goodness can be manifested; and also in “locked-up” ways of living in which the eternal in oneself is not allowed to find expression. Provided with suitable external forms, human beings can deceive not only others but themselves, and deceive themselves the more effectively by deceiving those others upon whose recognition their own identities depend. They can deceive themselves not only about how well they qualify for happiness but also about what really counts for happiness. Where these channels and disguises are lacking one may perhaps expect to find conspicuous madness. But there is a continuity all the same. Kierkegaardian despair is a general phenomenon, and it includes Heidegger. It is the failure to let the inward development take place that leads to the consciousness of the “eternal” in the self which would disclose the true nature of these roles, and allow them to be replaced or at least renewed or re-evaluated. This, I think, expresses the intention we may well attribute to Kierkegaard, who said of *The Sickness unto Death*, that here he had been able to “illuminate” Christianity “on a greater scale” than “he had ever dared to hope”, so that “crucial categories are brought plainly to light”.⁵ Presumably he means the categories of self, sin, despair, and standing before God. Kierkegaard tries to convince us that any form of behaviour that falls short of standing humbly before the source of all selfhood is an attempt not to do that. This I think is the picture that captures best the dialectic of Kierkegaard’s analysis of despair.

The second objection to deferring the theology is that doing so begs the question of whether the first of our two scenarios does better justice to the measure of human aspiration, and therefore correspondingly of despair, than the second. Here one must bear in mind Kierkegaard’s stress on the unconditionality of the basis for the establishment of a genuinely interpersonal life, and the fact that in his account Heideggerian authenticity is still a state of despair. These are questions far beyond the scope of this essay, so I will end instead on a matter of detail. As far as reconstructing Kierkegaard’s own thought is concerned, the fact that Theunissen’s version of the analysis of despair represents Kierkegaard as making several serious errors in his thinking does at least predispose us to any alternative version in which the errors disappear. And in at least two cases they

do just that if we revert to the reading which takes Kierkegaard at his word.

First, on Theunissen's reading there appears to be a kind of conceptual hiatus in the transition from not wanting to be an unspecified ("abstract or negative") self to not wanting to appropriate the specified ("concrete") self. Theunissen charges Kierkegaard with failure to do justice to both a temporal and a motivational distinction. The project of wanting to be rid of the self only arises once the appropriate stage of self-consciousness has been reached, and it is motivated by a sense of confinement (to the specifications of the pre-given self), while the earlier unwillingness to be the abstract self is motivated by an anxiety at the prospect of having no specification. The hiatus disappears, however, once we allow the abstract self to be the preliminary form of the true self, and let the concrete self provide the specifications the abstract self must give *itself* in order to be the true self. In this respect it is interesting that on Theunissen's reading the only difference between wanting to be oneself in despair and wanting to be one's true self is that in the former case one is only able to accept an edited version of the pre-given self. But that leaves us with no adequate explanation of why someone should not be quite happy with the self they are, as pre-given and *unedited*. It also leaves it something of a mystery why the notion of a God-established self should make all the difference. Again, if it is the true self and not the pre-given self that we fail to appropriate, accepting the pre-given self in its unedited version is still a case of willing in despair to be what one is *as against* being what one is truly.

Second, Theunissen sees Kierkegaard as providing an ineffectual argument for the distinctiveness (and basicness) of the second form of authentic despair. He attributes to Kierkegaard the claim that only in the despair of wanting to be what we are can we be said to be willing something we know to be impossible. The crux here is Kierkegaard's claim that we cannot be rid of our true selves – this is the real core of the notion of a sickness unto death – or that at least we cannot be rid of the preliminary form of the true self. The point is roughly that, however much we try to create forms of selfhood that obscure the true self, it is only as what we implicitly know to be the true self that we are engaged in that activity. The impossibility here is something like a mirror-image of that of Descartes's doubter doubting that he doubts; you cannot help being what you try not to be when

what you are trying to be has to be doing the trying; except that in our case the despairer is trying despairingly to vacate a position which, in Descartes's case, the doubter is desperately trying to inhabit. It is true that on Theunissen's reading, where the self is the pre-given self, the "factual" self, the impossibility will not be specific to the second form of despair, for trying to be rid of what you factually are is also impossible. So the argument fails. But if the self we cannot be rid of is (at least) the preliminary form of the true self – the infinite but negative self – then not only is the argument not Kierkegaard's, it will indeed be the case that defying possibility is exclusively characteristic of the despair of wanting to be oneself. The defiance in question cannot arise until the self has been constituted (or "posited") in that form, for only then can it become the topic of the conscious intention not to be it. Theunissen says that to give the notion of defiance some purchase in the case of the "weak" despair of not wanting to be oneself, Kierkegaard has to give some kind of a constructivist interpretation to wanting to be oneself. Only then can it be said that a defiant wanting to be what one is can already be discerned in that form of despair – so that one can be defiantly wanting to be one's own version of the pre-given self. But once again, if the "one-self" that one does not want to be is the true self, then there is already a touch of defiance in staying with the pre-given self, and no constructivism is needed. The pre-given self is being used "defiantly" as a protection, either by whatever there is of a true self lurking undeveloped behind the closed door of which Kierkegaard speaks, or by something less than the true self when, because nothing can develop unless the door is opened, there is just a "kind of false door, in the background of [the] soul, with nothing behind it" (p. 86).

Notes

- 1 This translation (see *The Sickness unto Death*, Harmondsworth, 1989, p. 43) is as natural as the more traditional rendering: "not willing to be one's self", and "willing to be oneself". Unprefixed page references are to the Penguin translation.
- 2 M. Theunissen, "Die Existenzdialektische Grundvoraussetzung der Verzweiflungsanalyse Kierkegaards", given at a conference on the later Kierkegaard in the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters, in October 1992. The paper is now published, as the first of two "studies", in Michael Theunissen, *Der Begriff Verzweiflung: Korrekturen an Kierkegaard*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt-aM, 1993.

- 3 M. Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, trans. T. Kiesel. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985, p. 317.
- 4 G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopaedia*, Intro., trans. W. Wallace, rev. M. J. Inwood, Macmillan 1989, sec. 11.
- 5 *Papirer* X 1 A 147.