

The Sickness Unto Death

A Christian Psychological Exposition For Upbuilding and Awakening

An Explanation of Søren Kierkegaard's Book

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Preface

Christian, or “Church” history, has had its theological giants—St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, Benjamin Warfield, and many others. However, none has been as important and yet as obscure as Søren Kierkegaard. Most Christians today have never heard of Kierkegaard. His importance is obviously my personal opinion and may never be shared by too many people. Therefore, this book is as much a challenge to the Christian community as it is an encouragement to them to become better acquainted with this 19th-century Danish theologian and philosopher. While very few in the theological world know of Kierkegaard, the philosophical world considers him to be the father of existentialism and, therefore, the forerunner of Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Sartre, and Camus. We should not let this latter fact cloud our judgment of Kierkegaard, nor let it hinder us from enthusiastically interacting with his writings, as though the atheism of some of the above existentialists tarnishes Kierkegaard with guilt by association. Indeed, it is the other way around. Atheistic existentialists tarnish themselves by not continuing with Kierkegaard’s *theistic* existentialism and by removing God from the equation of life—as though it could ever be true that God is dead. Why would philosophers who follow in the footsteps of this man stray from his focus on God, the one true God, the God of the Bible, who has done the unthinkable, become a man, Jesus Christ, and suffered and died a criminal’s death on our behalf? The answer must be, only because they were content to live in despair—the central idea of Kierkegaard’s relatively short work *The Sickness Unto Death*.

One of the central questions in both philosophy and theology is, “What does it mean to be a *human being*?” In addition, what does it mean for *me* to be *this particular, individual* human being? These questions are also another way of stating the objective of Kierkegaard’s book. He begins answering them in the preface:

Many may find the form of this “exposition” strange; it may seem to them too rigorous to be upbuilding and too upbuilding to be rigorously scholarly. [5]

The first thing Kierkegaard is concerned about is how readers will perceive his book. Will the average person think that it is too scholarly for him to be able to benefit from it? Or will the scholar consider it too plebeian—written for the popular market and, therefore, too superficial and simplistic? Certainly, we can identify with Kierkegaard’s concern. If we peruse the available volumes in a university bookstore, we will find books written by very academic authors whose language is so difficult to understand that most of us would not even attempt to read them. If we go to one of our local bookstores, we will find books written mostly for popular consumption and some, in fact, that seem to target readers with barely a high school education, especially (and unfortunately) in the “Christianity” section of the store. Therefore, how does Kierkegaard himself view *The Sickness Unto Death*? Is it too academic to be helpful or too “helpful” to be worth reading in the academic community?

As far as the latter is concerned, I have no opinion. As to the former, I beg to differ; if it were true that it is too rigorous to be upbuilding, I would consider it a fault. It is, of course, one thing if it cannot be upbuilding for everyone, because

not everyone is qualified to do its bidding; that it has the character of the upbuilding is something else again. [5]

Kierkegaard does not care if it is helpful to the point that it seems to lack scholarship and academic respectability. He does care, though, that it be helpful. Consequently, he does not want the book to be so lofty academically that it is worthless to the average reader. Nevertheless, he realizes that even if everyone can easily read it, not all may see it as helpful, because they lack what it takes to benefit from it. He does not yet specify exactly what they lack. However, we can guess that it would be a willingness to escape from the “sickness unto death.” Nevertheless, in spite of how people view the book’s spiritual value, Kierkegaard is convinced that the value is high.

From the Christian point of view, everything, indeed everything, ought to serve for upbuilding. The kind of scholarliness and scientificity that ultimately does not build up is precisely thereby unchristian. Everything essentially Christian must have in its presentation a resemblance to the way a physician speaks at the sickbed; even if only medical experts understand it, it must never be forgotten that the situation is the bedside of a sick person. [5]

As the apostle Paul states in Romans 8:38, God causes all things to work together for good for the Christian—that is, for the sake of eternal life and salvation. Therefore, any book, even if it is of the highest scholarship and thorough scientific thoughtfulness, that does not help a Christian to persevere in his faith in God for the sake of eternal life and salvation, cannot be considered a Christian book. The mark of a “Christian” book is that it will address in helpful terms the problem that keeps a person from getting well, spiritually speaking. It will help the Christian the same way that a good doctor speaks of curing a patient’s illness while standing beside the sickbed—even if only the medical experts can understand what he means. Regardless of how well people understand the doctor, he is standing at the bedside of someone ill, and his intent is to provide a cure. Thus, Christianity’s purpose, and books that describe this purpose as Kierkegaard will do so in *The Sickness Unto Death*, is not only to provide an objective and intellectual description of human beings who are sick before God, but also to describe the very cure that God himself provides.

It is precisely Christianity’s relation to life (in contrast to a scholarly distance from life) or the ethical aspect of Christianity that is upbuilding, and the mode of presentation, however rigorous it may be otherwise, is completely different, qualitatively different, from the kind of scientificity and scholarliness that is “indifferent,” whose lofty heroism is so far, Christianly, from being heroism that, Christianly, it is a kind of inhuman curiosity. It is Christian heroism—a rarity, to be sure—to venture wholly to become oneself, an individual human being, this specific individual human being, alone before God, alone in this prodigiousness and this prodigious responsibility; but it is not Christian heroism to be taken in by the idea of man in the abstract or to play the wonder game with world history. [5]

Scholars in any discipline want to be objective, to be scientific, and to view their area of study with a certain indifference precisely because they do not want their emotions and their preconceived notions to interfere in their research and exploration of their subject. Such objectivity and apparent dispassion leads scholars and scientists to believe that they are genuinely engaging in an “heroic” approach to studying life’s realities. In addition, the world considers scholars and scientists to be heroes, because they are observing reality without allowing themselves to get in the way of their analyses. However, Kierkegaard claims that such scholarship is a less than human approach to the study of reality, especially if we are talking about the study of Christianity. The reason is because Christianity’s concern is not for human beings to gain an accurate understanding of the world out there, as legitimate as this pursuit is because the world is simply part of the reality in which we live, but for human beings to learn about themselves as individuals. As wonderful as it may be for people to learn all they can about everything that exists outside themselves, Christianity’s interest is in each human being learning and embracing what it means to be a real human being who stands alone before God with complete honesty and openness.

Such intimate knowledge of oneself and one’s humanity is “precisely Christianity’s relation to life.” Kierkegaard uses the word “relation” the same way we would talk about “getting our hands dirty.” It means to dive into something with all one’s being, in order to understand it and deal with it while leaving nothing out. Christianity calls for people to investigate their lives, indeed their own inner beings, in the only way that it is worth investigating them, while taking into account the smallest of details, because all the details are important. Thus, to relate to life is to relate to oneself, the closest and most intimate being in one’s life (other than God, who, of course, is of concern also to Christianity). Therefore, Christianity’s purpose is for a person to get his hands dirty by digging into his innermost being, by observing carefully what is actually there within him, the stuff of which he is made, and then by standing before God with all that he has discovered about himself, while being completely open and honest with both God and himself. This, then is “Christian heroism.” In *Postscript*, Kierkegaard states it this way, that “Christianity...wants the [person] to be infinitely concerned about himself.”¹

Nevertheless, such personal self-research is a mighty task, indeed a huge responsibility, that people tend to avoid, because it requires an honest look at one’s moral deficiencies that is supposed to lead to a somewhat embarrassing encounter with God. Therefore, remaining philosophical, so-to-speak, and simply studying or talking about humanity as merely an *object* of study is to miss the whole point of Christianity. Instead, the student of life must “relate to life” by getting so close to it that he is staring at himself and no further, and to do so in God’s presence. We notice that Kierkegaard uses the phrases “individual human being” and “alone before God.” These phrases are at the heart of what he believes it means to be a human being and, therefore, a Christian.

Kierkegaard also mentions the “wonder game,” which was a game where one person sits on a stool in the middle of a circle of people while another person quietly goes around the circle and asks the others what they wonder about the person in the middle. Upon being told what the others wonder about him, the person who is “it” tries to guess the source of each wonder [174]. Kierkegaard is saying that the “wonder game” is like a Christian’s gathering information about himself from outside himself instead of from deep within himself. Thus, in order to understand human existence properly, a person must look deep within himself—for himself, by himself, and before God.

Kierkegaard also uses the phrase “world history,” which comes from writings of the German philosopher, G.F. Hegel. For example, the Preface to Hegel’s *The Philosophy of*

¹ CUP, pg. 130

History states, "...in the history of the World, the *Individuals* we have to do with are *Peoples*; Totalities that are States" [174]. We see that Hegel is concerned about groups of people and finds ultimate meaning for humanity in them collectively. In contrast, Kierkegaard is concerned about individual persons and finds the real meaning for both humanity and Christianity in each one individually.

We even may want to ask, "Which is more important in Christianity—the community, i.e., the Church, or the individual?" Kierkegaard sounds as though he would answer, "The individual." However, even though his emphasis is on the individual, it is not at the expense of the community. In his writings, Kierkegaard acknowledges that Christianity involves a collection of people of belief.² Nevertheless, he is saying that it is impossible for a human being to be in community *effectively* if he does not *understand himself accurately as an individual*. In other words, true Christian community requires accurate *self-knowledge* by the individuals in that community, or all that exists is a nice social club that labels itself as Christian. Therefore, each "individual human being" must be more interested in coming to terms with himself than with anyone or anything else in this world—besides God.

All Christian knowing, however rigorous its form, ought to be concerned, but this concern is precisely the upbuilding. Concern constitutes the relation to life, to the actuality of the personality, and therefore earnestness from the Christian point of view; the loftiness of indifferent knowledge is, from the Christian point of view, a long way from being more earnest—Christianly, it is a witticism, an affectation. Earnestness, on the other hand, is the upbuilding.

Therefore, in one sense, this little book is such that a college student could write it, in another sense, perhaps such that not every professor could write it.

But that the form of the treatise is what it is has at least been considered carefully, and seems to be psychologically correct as well. There is a more formal style that is so formal that it is not very significant and, once it is all too familiar, readily becomes meaningless. [5,6]

Earnest concern for what it means to be an individual human being and encouragement toward passionate introspection are exactly what is required for a book such as *The Sickness Unto Death* to be of benefit to the reader. Highfalutin thinking and objectivity may sound erudite and learned, but they are worthless to the Christian if they do not penetrate to the very core of a human being and focus on his moral condition before God. Therefore, a lowly college student could write *The Sickness Unto Death* (or comment on it, as I, an old college graduate, am attempting to do), because every human being has the God-given ability to look inward and examine the very moral, psychological, and spiritual fabric of his being. In contrast, college professors may be put off by the book's simplicity and lack of scientific rigor and objectivity. Be that as it may, Kierkegaard believes he has written the book appropriately and without a formal style that would merely deter people from reading it instead of drawing them into the book in order that they may benefit from it psychologically and spiritually.

² For example, in *Practice in Christianity*, Kierkegaard is critical of Christian groups that become dominated by traditions instead of biblical truth that is pursued by individuals. Yet, he acknowledges that every "established order," as he calls a Christian institution mired in its traditions, began with good intentions of respecting individuals and their private pursuit of God. It is just that eventually the institution feels the need to perpetuate itself—with the power of doctrines and traditions and at the expense of respect for individuals.

Just one more comment, no doubt unnecessary, but nevertheless I will make it: once and for all may I point out that in the whole book, as the title indeed declares, despair is interpreted as a sickness, not as a cure. Despair is indeed that dialectical. Thus, also in Christian terminology death is indeed the expression for the state of deepest spiritual wretchedness, and yet the cure is simply to die, to die to the world. [6]

The sickness unto death, of which the title of this book speaks, is despair. We will see that despair is a hopelessness that all human beings experience in regard to eternity and eternal life—whether they admit it or not. Plus, Kierkegaard says that despair is dialectical, which is another reference to Hegelian thought. Hegel proposed that two opposite ideas that coexist at any moment within world history and are driving world history always find their resolution in being combined, so that they produce an idea that is even greater than each one of them individually. The combination of the two opposite ideas is their “synthesis,” another Hegelian term that Kierkegaard will use later in the book. Despair is “dialectical” by virtue of the fact that it must be combined with its opposite, hope, in order for it to be resolved. Likewise, hope finds its resolution by being combined with despair. In other words, despair ultimately makes no sense unless there is hope. In turn, hope does not make any sense unless it is combined with despair. Ironically, the resolution of despair and hope is hope itself. Thus, a human being must face into the despair of human existence along with its hope and thereby find hope, the cure for the despair. Consequently, despair is certainly a sickness and not a cure, but one cannot obtain the cure without going through despair, thus making it part of the cure—when it is synthesized with hope. Kierkegaard will state this more explicitly in the chapter entitled “Despair Is the Sickness Unto Death.”

We are also going to find that despair is “dialectical” in the sense that it requires discussion and reasoning to understand it completely. Thus, despair or hopelessness is not something that is easy to grasp. Its understanding requires serious, deliberate, and extended thought with open and honest discussion with especially oneself. However, anyone who is allergic to thinking will probably not reach a proper understanding of not only his despair, but also of the proper meaning of human existence.

Kierkegaard also alludes to the fact that hopelessness and despair feel like death. Indeed, despair is a kind of death. He uses the words death and die with two different meanings. On the one hand, death is bad—the death of feeling eternally hopeless before God. It is the “state of the deepest spiritual wretchedness.” On the other hand, death is good—when a person chooses to give up his hopelessness by diving into examining his inward moral condition and appropriately bringing it before God. As a result, a person must die to any attempt to cure his despair with the things of the present world and instead find it elsewhere—in God, the Author of life, who has created us and who alone can give us hope. Thus, “the cure [for the death of despair] is simply to die, to die to the world” by choosing to bring oneself before God with complete honesty and openness, especially in regard to that which is happening within him morally in the fabric of his being.

In 1841, 8 years before the publishing of *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard, who was a youthful 28 years old, gave a sermon in a church in Copenhagen. Part of the sermon presented the progression of his thought in this book on the subject of despair. Let me paraphrase what Kierkegaard said:

Was there not a time...in your mind, my listener, when cheerfully and without care you rejoiced with those who rejoiced, when you wept with those who wept, when the thought of God combined with the other thoughts in your mind but did not really affect them significantly so that you were happy but not really joyful, you were sad but not really comforted?

And later was there not a time when your freedom from feeling guilty in this life vanished? Did there not come a time when your mind became blank, your will became incapable of doing any good, your emotions became cold and weak, when hope died in your breast, when your mind focused painfully on a few solitary memories of happiness which soon became unappealing to you, and you tried to comfort yourself with the things of this life only to make you feel even worse so that you impatiently and bitterly turned away from even these things?

Was there not a time when you found no one to whom you could turn for help, when the darkness of quiet despair and hopelessness hovered over your soul, and you did not have the courage to let the darkness go but rather hung onto it and dropped even further into despair?

Was there not a time when God seemed not to listen to your prayers, or you even shrieked at God and demanded He account for His lack of concern, and you sometimes found within you a longing to find meaning where there was none because you realized that you were a nothing and your soul was lost in infinite space?

Was there not a time when you felt that the world did not understand your grief, could not heal it, could not give you any peace because you could find it only in heaven—if heaven were only to be found? But the distance between heaven and earth was infinite, and just as you lost yourself in contemplating the immeasurable grief and pain in this world, just so God had forgotten you and did not care about you?

And in spite of all this, was there not a defiance in you that forbade you to humble yourself under God's mighty hand? Was this not so? And what would you call this condition if you did not call it death, and how would you describe it except as darkness? But then when hope entered into your soul... [x,xi]

After a brief introduction, Kierkegaard will take us through these same steps of despair—from a despair of a kind of ignorant and blissful indifference toward the things of God to that of a more conscious despair and hopelessness, then to a clinging to this despair, because it seems that God is too distant even to hear one's cries for help, and, finally, on to a defiance that would refuse God's help even if He were to offer it. Yet, while each step could lead to greater and greater intensity of despair, it could also lead to genuine faith and becoming an "individual human being, alone before God" with eternal hope. Then, and only then, is a person cured of *The Sickness Unto Death*.

Introduction

“This sickness is not unto death” (John 11:4). And yet Lazarus did die; when the disciples misunderstood what Christ added later, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him out of sleep” (11:11), he told them flatly “Lazarus is dead” (11:14). [7]

Kierkegaard borrows these words of Jesus for the title of his book. In chapter 11 of the gospel of John, Jesus was made aware that Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary in the village of Bethany near Jerusalem, was so sick that he may die. But Jesus states that he would not die—that his sickness was “not unto death.” We would normally understand Jesus to mean that Lazarus was not going to die physically. Therefore, his “sickness” was not so serious that it would result in his physical death. It was perhaps merely a cold or a bad flu.

Yet, Lazarus did die—physically. Does this mean that Jesus was wrong? No. He just meant something else by both “sickness” and “death.” For example, he could have meant that Lazarus’ *physical* illness was not what was causing the most important kind of death to occur in him *now*. What is this most important kind of death that occurs *now* in human beings? As Kierkegaard states earlier in his book, it is “the state of deepest spiritual wretchedness,” i.e., being in despair with eternal hopelessness before God. In addition, we could ask, what is the sickness that causes this kind of death? Ironically, it, too, is despair, which is to say that the sickness of despair and hopelessness causes the death of despair, that is, the death that is characterized by hopelessness. Therefore, Jesus could have meant that Lazarus’ sickness unto death was not despair that causes a death-like experience in a human being. What reason would Jesus have given for why Lazarus was not experiencing despair, so that, consequently, his “sickness” was “not unto death?” The reason would have been, because Lazarus had become a genuine believer in Jesus as the Messiah who rescues despairing human beings from their

eternal hopelessness. Therefore, Lazarus was not experiencing despair, either the sickness of despair or the death of despair. He was only physically ill.

In contrast, Jesus could have meant that Lazarus' physical sickness would not result in the most important kind of death *later*. What is the most important kind of death that will occur *later* for human beings? It is *eternal* death after the judgment of God. What is the sickness that will cause this kind of death? It, too, is despair, if it is allowed to persist throughout a human being's entire life here on earth. Therefore, Jesus could have meant that the Lazarus *physical* sickness was not a sickness unto death, i.e., eternal death later, and that Lazarus was not experiencing the illness, i.e., eternal hopelessness that incurs eternal deaths. We could also ask, why was Lazarus not experiencing eternal hopelessness, and why, therefore, would he not suffer eternal death? The reason would be the same as above, because Lazarus had become or would eventually become—before he died physically—a genuine believer in Jesus as the Messiah, who rescues despairing human beings from their eternal hopelessness. Therefore, again, Lazarus was experiencing neither the sickness of despair nor the death of despair either now or later. He was only physically ill, so that even if he died physically, he would not die eternally.

In either case, Jesus would have been referring to the same thing as far as the sickness is concerned. Lazarus was *physically* sick, but he was not experiencing *the sickness unto death*, which is despair, which is sin, which is unbelief. Kierkegaard will deal with this aspect of despair in Part Two, A.—Despair is Sin. Jesus could also have meant that the death of which he was speaking could exist either now (“spiritual wretchedness”) or later (eternal judgment).

But even if Christ had not said [“Lazarus, come out”], does not the mere fact that He who is “the resurrection and the life” (11:25) approaches the grave signify that this sickness is not unto death... [It] may be said that *this* sickness is not unto death, not because Lazarus was raised from the dead, but because [Christ] exists... Humanly speaking, death is the last of all, and, humanly

speaking, there is hope only as long as there is life. Christianly understood, however, death is by no means the last of all; in fact, it is only a minor event within that which is all, an eternal life, and, Christianly understood, there is infinitely much more hope in death than there is in life... [7,8]

The mere fact that the one who walks towards Lazarus' grave is Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, the Messiah of the Jews, the King of the eternal Kingdom of God, the very basis of resurrection from the dead and of eternal life for all human beings who would believe in Him as their Lord and Savior, indicates that physical death is not an end but only a transition to something greater than this life. In addition, the greater life, eternal life, is possible for any human being, no matter how wealthy or poor, healthy or ill, powerful or weak, popular or obscure a person is. Kierkegaard emphasizes that Christ is the hope of eternal life, and eternal life is greater than this life. Therefore, while people may fear death as the end of human existence and, as a result, cling to life in the present realm, Christians view death as one more small step toward an eternal existence. Thus, as Kierkegaard states, in a sense, there is more hope, indeed an unlimited hope, in physical death than in physical life. As long as we are alive in the present realm, we are not experiencing eternal life. Therefore, death, i.e., physical death, moves us that much closer, chronologically and even experientially, to eternal life. Consequently, since physical illness is not "the sickness unto death," neither is anything else that we might consider to be undesirable in this life—except eternal despair and hopelessness.

Christianly understood, then, not even death is "the sickness unto death"; even less so is everything that goes under the name of earthly and temporal suffering: need, illness, misery, hardship, adversities, torments, mental sufferings, cares, grief. And if such things were so hard and painful that we human beings or at least the sufferer, would declare, "This is worse than death"—all those things, which, although not sickness, can be compared with a sickness, are still, Christianly understood, not the sickness unto death. [8]

A person can be financially destitute, ill with a terminal disease, suffering the greatest hardships imaginable, plagued with acute mental illness, in the depths of despondency

and grief over the loss of something or someone in this world and still be well-off biblically speaking—because he has the hope of forgiveness and eternal life through Christ. Even potential physical death, however close it may be, does not diminish how wonderful life already is, if a person is not in despair, that is, despairing of eternal life.

That is how sublimely Christianity has taught the Christian to think about earthly and worldly matters, death included... What the natural man catalogs as appalling..., this to the Christian is like a jest. Such is the relation between the natural man and the Christian; it is like the relation between a child and an adult: what makes the child shudder and shrink, the adult regards as nothing. [8]

The unbeliever, the non-Christian, looks at life and shudders at its negative possibilities—illness, destitution, grief, loss, hardship, etc. The Christian looks at the same things and thinks nothing of them in comparison to what really ought to cause a person to shudder.

The child does not know what the horrifying is; the adult knows and shrinks from it... So it is with the natural man: he is ignorant of what is truly horrifying, yet is not thereby liberated from shuddering and shrinking—no, he shrinks from that which is not horrifying. [8]

The non-Christian misunderstands life. He fails to grasp adequately that it is not the things of this life that are frightening. The truly frightening things are beyond the present world, if a person dies without eternal hope. As the author of the letter called Hebrews in the New Testament says, “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31, NASB). So the non-Christian tries to avoid, with every fiber of his being, what he supposes to be alarming in this life, illness, financial loss, hardship, grief, and suffering, but he is trying to avoid that which is not really alarming in comparison to the horror beyond this life—if he were to die without true, biblical hope.

Only the Christian knows what is meant by the sickness unto death. As a Christian, he gained a courage that the natural man does not know, and he gained this courage by learning to fear something even more horrifying. This is the way a person always gains courage; when he fears a greater danger, he always has the courage to face a lesser one; when he is exceedingly afraid of one danger, it is as if the others did not exist at all. But the most appalling danger that the Christian has learned to know is “the sickness unto death.” [8,9]

While the unbeliever is ignorant, at least consciously, of eternal despair, the Christian has come to know it in such a way that he wants to avoid only it, even at the possible expense of not being able to avoid other painful experiences in his life. However, latching on to the fear of the greater danger that exists after life in the present realm gives the Christian the courage to encounter whatever this world might throw at him. He faces into the problems of this world with what we can call eternal courage, precisely because he has learned that nothing that the world can throw at him is anywhere near as frightening as what God would cause him to experience in the next age—if he dies without clasping eternal hope through Christ. Eternal despair and hopelessness are the greatest dangers that a human being faces. The Christian has faced into them and run for dear life, eternal life, into the arms of God through Jesus, the Christ, who is “the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25).

Part One THE SICKNESS UNTO DEATH IS DESPAIR

A *Despair is the Sickness unto Death*

A.

DESPAIR IS A SICKNESS OF THE SPIRIT, OF THE SELF, AND ACCORDINGLY CAN TAKE THREE FORMS: IN DESPAIR NOT TO BE CONSCIOUS OF HAVING A SELF; IN DESPAIR NOT TO WILL TO BE ONESELF; IN DESPAIR TO WILL TO BE ONESELF

A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. [13]

What sounds like mumbo jumbo to us is Kierkegaard's precisely defining a human being as a person, not a thing or an animal, who connects his awareness of himself as a person to what is involved in his being a person (and not a thing or an animal). What is involved in being a person is both morality and rationality. According to Genesis 1:26,27, God made human beings "in [His] image." The inference we can derive from the entire Bible is that God is a personable being who thinks rationally and makes moral choices. Therefore, a human being as a person has the ability to think both rationally and morally, and to think these ways specifically in regard to himself. For example, a human being can think about the fact that $1+1=2$, which involves his rationality. Plus, he can think about this in relation to himself. For example, does he want to buy one hamburger or two in order to satisfy his hunger. A human being can also think about the fact that stealing is wrong and evil, which involves his moral judgment. Plus, he can think about this in relation to himself. For example, does he want to steal or buy the apple that is in the grocery display? However, such concrete, practical, rational, and moral thinking is not all that makes us human beings.

A human being also can and should truly relate to himself in regard to the *abstract* truth of eternity. In other words, he should relate to himself in such a way that he judges the eternal value of rationality and morality, because not only are rationality and morality important pragmatically, but they are also important eternally. Thus, rationality and its correlative, truth, are at the very heart of what it means to be a human being who is made in the image of God. God is eternal and thinks only true thoughts. In the same way, morality is at the heart of what it means to be a human being who is made in the image of God. God is eternal and makes only moral choices. Therefore, simply to think *about* mathematical equations and stealing is to think *abstractly*, which places truth and morality in our minds. Thus, for the moment, they are only in our minds.

However, if we take these thoughts *about* rationality and morality and act on them, then we are employing our thoughts on a very *pragmatic* level where we move from *being* people of truth and morality to *practicing* truth and morality. Now, we are relating to ourselves in such a way that each one of us is truly a self. This, as I described in the preface, is a human being's getting his hands dirty as he probes into the very depths of himself and what it means for him to exist.

The mere fact that a human being *can* relate to *who he is* and *what he does* is one thing. However, being and doing rationality and morality are not what makes a person *fully* human. In other words, the *possibility* of getting our hands dirty and honestly dealing with who we are as rational and moral beings made in the image of God is great. Nevertheless, the *actuality* of doing so in the present realm is much greater. Yet, even doing rationality and morality do not make a person fully human. Ultimately, being human means to evaluate one's rational and moral condition before God, who is eternal. He is rationally and morally perfect. Therefore, while thinking and doing what is rational and moral is great, bringing one's mind, heart, and choices before God is eternally and infinitely higher. We demonstrate our humanity in the most profound way when we dig

down deep within ourselves and come to grips as honestly and sincerely as possible with who we really are—rationally and morally—especially (and really *only*) when we do this before God, which is a messy business if we are truly honest with ourselves and Him. Yet, such honest evaluation is also what makes us fully human and makes each one of us a “self” who is “spirit.”

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. [13]

As mentioned in the preface, the German philosopher Hegel defined a synthesis as the result of combining two opposites. Here Kierkegaard defines human beings with a series of opposite and contrasting characteristics. First, not only has God made us so that we are finite and created, but also, since He is the one who made us, the infinite and the uncreated are involved in our existence. We cannot exist unless God, who is both infinite (as Kierkegaard thinks of the infinite) and uncreated, causes us to exist. In this way, we are a synthesis of the finite and the infinite. Second, God has made us not only for this life, but also for the next, for eternal life. Therefore, we are a combination of the temporal and the eternal. Finally, God has made us not only to choose freely, but also to carry out His sovereign plans and purposes that He devised in eternity past. As a result, we are synthesis of freewill and God’s divine determinism.

In other words, human beings are a combination of existing within the creation and having the Creator create them on an ongoing basis. Thus, human beings are also a combination of the ability to make choices in the present realm and of the fact that these choices are always under the sovereign control of God so that they occur according to His divine plans and purposes. They are also a combination of living in the present temporal realm and of having the opportunity to live eventually in the final eternal realm. However, this description of human beings still falls short, because it does not include

one more important thing—human beings’ *dealing with these three contrasts with respect to themselves before God*. Therefore, the above description does not include human beings’ “relating” to themselves in the midst of these combinations, of *dealing with God* as their constant Creator, of *dealing with* the temporal and eternal aspects of their existence, and of *dealing with* the issues of human freedom and God’s absolute sovereignty that all help define what it means to be truly human. Human beings are made by God and creatures whom God is making. Human beings exist in the present realm of time and space, while they are also designed for eternity and eternal life. Human beings have the ability to make choices that are free of other created beings, while their choices are also sovereignly governed by God. Nevertheless, the real key is for human beings to come to terms internally with what all that this means before God.

In the relation between two, the relation is the third as a negative unity, and the two relate to the relation and in the relation to the relation; thus under the qualification of the psychical the relation between the psychical and the physical is a relation. If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self.

Such a relation that relates itself to itself, a self, must either have established itself or have been established by another.

If the relation that relates itself to itself has been established by another, then the relation is indeed the third, but this relation, the third, is yet again a relation and relates itself to that which established the entire relation.

The human self is such a derived established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another. [13]

Kierkegaard has been saying that human beings are both finite and infinite, temporal and eternal, free and sovereignly governed. In a Hegelian way, each half of these pairs of human characteristics is either a “first” or a “second” of who we are. For example, we are “first” finite and “second” infinite. However, there is also a “third,” which is the relationship between the two halves of each pair, e.g., between the “first,” which is the fact that we are “finite,” and the “second,” which is the fact that we are “infinite.”

Kierkegaard is suggesting that, taken by itself, the relationship between the two halves of each pair as a non-thinking “third” does not contribute to what it means for a

human being to be a “self.” Instead, what needs to happen is the relationship itself needs to “relate itself to itself.” But the only way that this can happen is if a rational, moral human being takes the fact that, for example, he is both temporal and eternal and considers these two important characteristics and ponders seriously that he is a synthesis of these two aspects of himself.

Thus, the “positive” and helpful “third” with respect to a relationship between two things is when we relate to ourselves in such a way that we truly *deal with* each pair of opposites that makes us human beings. It is this that makes each of us a “self.” However, Kierkegaard says that there is even another important “third,” when we relate ourselves to the One who has “established” us, i.e., God. It is one thing to ponder the relationship between by being a temporal being and an eternal being. It is another thing to ponder the relationship between my Creator and me. Therefore, to be fully human and to be our true “selves,” we must realize that God has caused and established our existence. When we acknowledge properly God’s causing us to exist, we understand that it is absolutely necessary that we deal with the important issues of creation, time, eternity, and choice, and to do so also while *dealing with God*. By dealing with Him, we deal with the One who has made us and given us the ability to contemplate and ponder both ourselves and Him. Thus, it is the two “thirds,” the one being our thinking about ourselves with our different contrasting characteristics and the other being our thinking about ourselves as God’s creatures, that comprise what it means for each of us to be a “self.”

We notice from title of this section **A.** that the person who is not “conscious of having a self” like this is in despair. This is the first form of despair, which Kierkegaard says is “not despair in the strict sense.” In other words, to be in a state of hopelessness that he calls the “sickness unto death,” one must at least be aware of all that is involved in

person's being a "self." But getting back to Kierkegaard's argument, the "self" is a human being who contemplates himself in terms of his being temporal and eternal and who contemplates himself in terms of his being created by God.

This is why there are two forms of despair in the strict sense. If a human self had itself established itself, then there could be only one form: not to will to be oneself, to will to do away with oneself, but there could not be the form: in despair to will to be oneself. [14]

Kierkegaard is making a rather obscure point. If human beings were their own Creator, then the only kind of hopelessness they could experience is doing all they can to avoid being whom they have made themselves. He calls this "not to will be to oneself." Could a self-created human being be completely unaware of being a "self?" It would seem not, but, certainly self-created humans could refuse to be whom they made themselves to be. Thus, they would despair of being who they really are by refusing to be who they really are, that is, whom they have made themselves to be. Such despair would exist, because, if, in this situation of self-creation, human beings rightly chose to be who they are, then they would choose to be whom they created themselves to be.

Obviously, these are strange ideas, because Kierkegaard is speaking only theoretically. By definition, it is impossible for a created being to create himself. Nevertheless, we can see where Kierkegaard is headed. He is going to describe despair and hopelessness in terms of our unwillingness to face into what kind of people *even God has made us*—human beings who have a problematic moral condition and who need to deal with it before God and to choose to be different while seeking His mercy. In addition, the reason that he mentions this first form of despair that would be the only form of despair possible for someone who has created himself is to begin to contrast it with the second form of despair.

Kierkegaard says that, if someone else, i.e., God, has created us, then not only is the first form of despair, "not be willing to be oneself," possible, but there is another kind that

is also possible. With the first form of despair, human beings could refuse to be who they are, and to refuse to do so with hopeless despair of being changed by God into what He ultimately wants them to be in order to gain eternal life. With the second form of despair, human beings could choose to be exactly who they are but also without desiring to change into what God would have them to be in order to escape their hopelessness and to obtain eternal life.

Therefore, strictly speaking, there are only two forms or kinds of despair that are possible when it is God who has created us. In other words, as Kierkegaard says in the title of this section **A.** above, the despair of not being conscious or aware of having a self created by God is “not despair in the strict sense.”

Kierkegaard’s goal in *The Sickness Unto Death* is to define the two actual forms of despair carefully and completely. My goal is to help readers of *The Sickness Unto Death* clearly understand these two kinds of despair so that either they will become persons of hope by passing through despair or, having already become persons of hope, they can become even more hopeful by better understanding the despair through which they have passed. Clearly understanding Kierkegaard’s explanations of these two kinds of despair and their opposite, hope, will take some time and involve rather lengthy discourses, but my belief is that the journey is worth it, as it has been for me, for all those who persevere in completing it.

To reiterate, the first kind of despair as divinely created human beings is to be unwilling to change into the kind of people God wants us to be. The second kind of despair is to choose to remain who we are without changing into the kind of person God wants us to be. They sound very similar, do they not? Kierkegaard, in his unique and special way, will take us through the intricacies of both kinds of despair so that we can clearly see their differences. In the meantime, he will inform us that the second kind of despair or hopelessness is fundamental so that the first kind is simply a derivative of it.

Thus, by refusing to be human beings who must come before God and deal with our problematic moral condition in an open and honest way in order to obtain eternal life, we also are choosing to stay exactly who we are—immoral human beings without God's forgiveness.

Yes, this second form of despair (in despair to will to be oneself) is so far from designating merely a distinctive kind of despair that, on the contrary, all despair ultimately can be traced back to and be resolved in it. If the despairing person is aware of his despair, as he thinks he is, and does not speak meaninglessly of it as of something that is happening to him (somewhat as one suffering from dizziness speaks in nervous delusion of a weight on his head or of something that has fallen down on him, etc., a weight and a pressure that nevertheless are not something external but a reverse reflection of the internal) and now with all his power seeks to break the despair *by himself and by himself alone* [emphasis mine]—he is still in despair and with all his presumed effort only works himself all the deeper into deeper despair. [14]

To rely strictly on human strength to resolve the problem of eternal hopelessness is useless. Indeed, all it does is drive a person into greater and greater despair, because it does not work—as Jesus pointed out time and time again to the Pharisees who were trying to make themselves worthy of God's forgiveness and eternal life (cf. Matthew 23). The core of the definition of "legalism" and its synonym "Pharisaism" is—to seek to gain God's favor, love, and blessing through one's own efforts and by means of one's own resources. However, only God's grace can rescue a human being from hopelessness, whether that of refusing to admit that he is an immoral person who needs God's forgiveness (the first form of despair) or that of choosing to be immoral by actually thinking one can resolve the problem of immorality without God's miraculous help (the second form of despair). This second form includes a defiant attitude that stands up to God and just says, "NO, I do not want your help." Instead, to pass through these forms of despair is to engage in what is essentially Christian.

The formula that describes the state of 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. [14]

In this statement, we have Kierkegaard's definition of faith as he will also state explicitly on page 82 of his book. We will look at it more carefully then, but the essence of his definition of faith is this—in order to resolve the problem of eternal hopelessness, human beings must face into and deal with the two important issues of their immoral condition and their createdness, and to do so before God, addressing God as the One not only who has created them, even in their despair and hopelessness, but also who will forgive them through belief in the truth of all that God is and that they are. Implicit is the central truth of Christianity, that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah and “the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25).

B.
THE POSSIBILITY AND THE ACTUALITY OF DESPAIR

Is despair an excellence or a defect? Purely dialectically, it is both. If only the abstract idea of despair is considered, without any thought of someone in despair, it must be regarded as a surpassing excellence. The possibility of this sickness is man's superiority over the animal, and this superiority distinguishes him in quite another way than does his erect walk, for it indicates infinite erectness or sublimity, that he is spirit. The possibility of this sickness is man's superiority over the animal; to be aware of this sickness is the Christian's superiority over the natural man; to be cured of this sickness is the Christian's blessedness. [14,15]

Kierkegaard is saying that experiencing eternal despair and hopelessness is both good and bad. It is good in that it leads human beings to eternal life if they face into it appropriately. It is bad in that human beings miss out on eternal life if they do not face into it appropriately. Nevertheless, just our thinking about hopelessness is better than nothing, even if we do not relate it to our own situation as human beings before God. In addition, the *possibility* of being in despair is what makes human beings greater than animals, which God also has created. Thus, the mere possibility of being in despair is human beings' first step toward “blessedness”—God's hope of eternal life for the those of appropriate inwardness. Animals, unlike humans who are spiritual beings, neither think rationally nor act morally. Therefore, they cannot consider eternal life, and their

choices cannot be judged by God for their moral rectitude, which means, too, that animals cannot be in despair. They cannot have the sickness that is unique to human beings.

Kierkegaard is also saying that a Christian, being someone who has appropriately become aware of his despair or hopelessness, is, in a sense, superior to the non-Christian, because he has taken the second step toward “blessedness.” He has properly acknowledged his despairing condition before God. The opposite of taking this second step is simply either failure or refusal to acknowledge despair, a simple case of psychological denial. Certainly, to be in denial of one’s despair does not solve the problem of being in despair. It means that the person is, indeed, still in despair—Kierkegaard’s definition of a non-Christian.

Then, there is the third and final step toward “blessedness.” It is realizing that one’s awareness of despair is more than just awareness. It is choosing to deal with the hopelessness before God and thereby obtaining from Him the promise of eternal life. Taking this final step makes the Christian someone who is “blessed,” i.e., happy, because he is *eternally* happy and will be transformed by God into a morally perfect person in eternity.

Consequently, to be able to despair is an infinite advantage, and yet to be in despair is not only the worst misfortune and misery—no, it is ruination. [15]

For us human beings, having the possibility of eternal hopelessness and even being in a state of hopelessness with respect to eternity both make us superior to animals. Animals cannot despair rationally and morally. Only human beings can, which means, too, that only human beings can have true hope—the best situation for a human being. Decidedly then, actually being eternally hopeless is the worst situation a human being can find himself in, worse than having any physical or mental illness, because the outcome of this despair is eternal destruction and calamity from God. Kierkegaard, in

Works of Love [196], speaks of this situation as “a danger called eternal damnation.” We would not normally think that such a horrifying and horrendous concept would be mentioned in a book on love. However, Kierkegaard wants to make it very clear that ultimately love is meaningless unless it takes into account the possibility of God’s eternal judgment and condemnation. He is also very realistic when he states that “[t]his danger seem[s] ludicrous to the world” [196]. Yet, what seems ridiculous and crazy to non-Christians makes every bit of sense to Christians, because they have passed through the condition of their despair into a state of hope. Therefore, to go from its being *possible* for a human being to be in despair to his *actually* being in despair is eternally disastrous—if he remains in despair.

Generally this is not the case with the relation between possibility and actuality. If it is an excellence to be able to be this or that, then it is an even greater excellence to be that; in other words, to be is like an ascent when compared with being able to be. [15]

Kierkegaard points out that, usually, it is better to be something than only to have the possibility of being something. For example, when it is possible for a person to be a champion athlete, he ascends or goes up when he actually becomes a champion. Obviously, therefore, it is better for a person to be a champion than for it only to be possible to be a champion.

With respect to despair, however, to be is like a descent when compared with being able to be; the descent is as infinitely low as the excellence of possibility is high. Consequently, in relation to despair, not to be in despair is the ascending scale. But here again this category is equivocal. Not to be in despair is not the same as not being lame, blind, etc. If not being in despair signifies neither more nor less than not being in despair, then it means precisely to be in despair. Not to be in despair must signify the destroyed possibility of being able to be in despair; if a person is truly not to be in despair, he must at every moment destroy the possibility. [15]

We have here one of the more difficult excerpts from this book to understand. Let us start by observing that eternal hopelessness is not like athletics. While it is better to be a winner than only *possibly* a winner, it is *not* better to be hopeless than only *possibly*

hopeless. The reason is that being hopeless is also being eternally lost before God. This much we can understand rather easily.

However, then Kierkegaard becomes rather obscure. Imagine that a real human being is *not* hopeless. What does this mean? Kierkegaard says that it means that he is hopeless. What? Yes, not to be hopeless is to be hopeless. Why? Because we are talking about a real human being who, by definition, is hopeless apart from God's mercy and grace. Therefore, for a human being not to be hopeless (at least at this point in Kierkegaard's discussion) is for this same human being to be *in denial* of his hopelessness—and therefore still to be hopeless.

Kierkegaard also says that not to be hopeless like this is different from not being lame. If a person is not lame, there is always the possibility of his becoming lame—if, for example, he gets in a bad car accident that cripples his legs. However, if a person is not hopeless *with the possibility of becoming eternally hopeless*, he actually is hopeless because the "possibility" simply indicates that he has not properly dealt with his hopelessness yet. Thus, the possibility is really not a possibility, because the person is *actually* in despair. Kierkegaard is talking about real people, not just theoretical abstracts.

The key to understanding Kierkegaard's discussion here is to grasp the fact that once a person is *truly* no longer in despair, it is theologically impossible for him to return to his previous state of despair. In other words, when God miraculously transforms human beings, they change from people who were temporarily hopeless to people who now permanently have hope. Thus, once God works within them according to His grace, there is no longer the *possibility* of their becoming hopeless again, because God holds them in a state of faith and hope forever—thus rescuing them from eternal judgment and eventually further transforming them into morally perfect beings in eternal life.

Consequently, if there is any *possibility* of a person's returning to a condition of eternal hopelessness, it means that he never left his condition of hopelessness in the first place. This person may think that he is not in despair but, instead, he is in denial of his ongoing despair. Kierkegaard goes on to say that climbing out of denial is also the very reason why the person who has, in point of fact, escaped from his eternal hopelessness must also *himself participate* in continually destroying the possibility of his going back to a hopeless state. While it is ultimately God "who is at work in [him], both to will and to do for His good pleasure," it is also incumbent upon the person to "work out [his] salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12,13).

For example, we say that someone catches a sickness, perhaps through carelessness. The sickness sets in and from then on is in force and is an *actuality* whose origin recedes more and more into the *past*. It would be both cruel and inhuman to go on saying, "You, the sick person, are in the process of catching the sickness right now." That would be the same as perpetually wanting to dissolve the actuality of the sickness into its possibility. It is true that he was responsible for catching the sickness, but he did that only once; the continuation of the sickness is a simple result of his catching it that one time, and its progress cannot be traced at every moment to him as the cause; he brought it upon himself, but it cannot be said that he *is bringing* it upon himself. To despair, however, is a different matter. Every actual moment of despair is traceable to possibility; every moment he is in despair he *is bringing* it upon himself. It is always present tense; in relation to the actuality there is no pastness of the past: in every actual moment of despair the person in despair bears all the past as a present in possibility. The reason for this is that to despair is a qualification of spirit and relates to the eternal in man. But he cannot rid himself of the eternal—no, never in all eternity. He cannot throw it away once and for all, nothing is more impossible; at any moment that he does not have it, he must have thrown it or is throwing it away—but it comes again, that is, every moment he is in despair he is bringing his despair upon himself. [16,17]

A person walks into a room where everyone is sick with a cold, and there is the *possibility* that he catches a cold from them. But once he catches their cold and it becomes his cold, there is no longer the possibility that he brings on himself the catching of their cold. He simply has a cold, and its continuation in him as an illness is not because of anything he does. It will run its course in spite of him.

In contrast, eternal hopelessness is different. A human being experiences the *possibility* of being eternally hopeless as soon as he is born. However, he also enters

into a state of eternal hopelessness by being an immoral human being who will incur God's judgment for all of eternity, and he perpetuates this state of despair by refusing to deal with it appropriately before God. Thus, he keeps bringing despair upon himself. He keeps turning the *possibility* of his being hopeless into the *actuality* of his being hopeless—precisely because he is either unwilling (the first form of despair) or willfully refuses (the second form of despair) to accept the moral obligation to deal with his immorality and stop being hopeless by appealing to God for mercy and forgiveness. God has designed us human beings for eternity, and eternity, indeed our eternal hopelessness, is that into which we must face appropriately or we continually renew our despair within ourselves by constantly turning possibility into actuality. If only our immorality and despair were a cold that would run its course! But alas, it is our unwillingness to rid ourselves of them or our choice to hold on to them—and yet, paradoxically, even these are under God's absolute sovereignty, as Kierkegaard goes on to explain in the next section.

C. DESPAIR IS “THE SICKNESS UNTO DEATH”

(After several attempts to make this section as clear as possible, I have come to realize that it is one of the most difficult to understand, much less explain. Therefore, I encourage the reader to wait for the rest of the book to help make even my explanation clearer.)

This concept, the sickness unto death, must, however, be understood in a particular way. Literally it means a sickness of which the end and the result are death. Therefore we use the expression “fatal sickness” as synonymous with the sickness unto death. [17]

When we hear the phrase “sickness *unto* death,” our tendency is to think of a physical illness that results in physical death, as though this is what Jesus meant when

he used this phrase in John 11:4—that Lazarus' physical sickness was not going to result in physical death. While Kierkegaard does not interpret this phrase as used in the Bible to mean such, he draws upon our familiarity with the words to explain its meaning—as though Jesus used it to speak of the sickness that causes the death in which the Bible is more interested—eternal death. Kierkegaard reminds us that the phrase typically denotes some kind of illness that ceases when a person dies and, indeed, actually causes death. Therefore, he says that the “expression ‘fatal sickness’” means the same thing as “sickness unto death.” For example, cancer is often an illness that causes death. In addition, it is also a condition that ends when a person dies. Thus, Kierkegaard establishes the basic meaning of the phrase “sickness unto death.”

In that sense, despair cannot be called the sickness unto death. [17]

Kierkegaard is saying that there is something radically different between cancer and despair. Despair is not actually a “fatal sickness” like cancer. Either it does not cause “death,” or it does not cease when a person “dies.” I am enclosing the words “death” and “dies” in quotation marks to suggest that Kierkegaard has a special meaning for these words in his discussion.

Christianly understood, death itself is a passing into life. [17]

A basic truth of Christianity, according to Kierkegaard, is that death is a transition into life. For example, the biblical message indicates that God promises eternal life to Christians so that physical death is not the end of a person's existence. Instead, while it is the end of a Christian's existence in the present realm, it results in the beginning of the a Christian's existence in the future, eternal realm. Thus, Kierkegaard makes the general statement that, according to the Bible, the notion of death refers to a transition into life. As a result, Christianity understands death to be something positive, since it results in eternal life.

Thus, from a Christian point of view, no earthly, physical sickness is the sickness unto death, for death is indeed the end of the sickness, but death is not the end. [17]

This sentence will become clearer as we continue through this section, but I think that the very last statement, “but death is not the end,” is Kierkegaard’s rather cryptic way of saying that whatever he means by death here does not ultimately bring about a cessation of despair. Such a characteristic of despair is different from a physical illness that is fatal. While a fatal sickness results in death, death also ends the fatal sickness. The whole key to understanding Kierkegaard in this section is to realize that he claims that, while despair causes a kind of death, this death does not end despair—and would that it did, because despair is a horrible torment!

If there is to be any question of a sickness unto death in the strictest sense, it must be a sickness of which the end is death and death is the end. This is precisely what despair is. [17]

Now, Kierkegaard seems to be making a liar out of me. He says that despair does cause a person to die, and death does bring an end to despair. Yes, because here Kierkegaard is speaking spiritually. Biblical despair ultimately results in *eternal* death, and *eternal* death ends despair. The reason why despair results in eternal death is because, as Kierkegaard will say in a moment, despair is the ultimate immoral act against God. Despair is to reject God and His offer of mercy and eternal life. Nevertheless, eternal death does bring about an end to despair. Here, I think that Kierkegaard is presenting his understanding of the biblical concept of hell, that it is ultimately an annihilation of the human being, thus ending not only any conscious and emotional ability of the person, but also the person’s very existence and, thus, even the ability to despair.

But in another sense despair is even more definitely the sickness unto death. Literally speaking, there is not the slightest possibility that anyone will die from this sickness or that it will end in physical death. On the contrary, the torment of despair is precisely this inability to die. [17]

Kierkegaard informs us here that he is addressing “another sense” in which we should take the word “despair.” Indeed, this sense is the central subject of his book. It is the most profound aspect of despair that is the “sickness unto death” as Kierkegaard understands the Bible to be using this phrase—that despair *cannot directly* bring about any kind of death that would end the psychological and emotional torment that the poor human being is experiencing as a result of it this side of eternity. The fact that despair, unlike cancer, lacks the ability to cause a death that ends despair is a problem, mainly because despair torments its victims with the thought that it refuses to bring about its own demise through death. If despair did cause a kind of hopelessness-ending death, it would bring about its own demise and the end of the resultant torment *in the present realm*, which would be, in some respect, a comfort to those who are in despair. But alas, despair is unable to bring about directly its own end and the end of its torment, because it cannot produce a great enough death in a person’s life to end the despair.

Thus [despair] has more in common with the situation of a mortally ill person when he lies struggling with death and yet cannot die. Thus to be sick *unto* death is to be unable to die, yet not as if there were hope of life; no, the hopelessness is that there is not even the ultimate hope, death. When death is the greatest danger, we hope for life; but when we learn to know the even greater danger, we hope for death. When the danger is so great that death becomes the hope, then despair is the hopelessness of not even being able to die. [18]

Kierkegaard is being relatively straightforward here. If our lives are in danger, we hope to live. However, if we are in despair, we hope to die, i.e., to end the despair. Therefore, the greatest danger that a human being can experience is despair and hopelessness, because, then, he wants to die in order to be rid of the emotional torment of despair. However, the even greater torment that results from despair is that, while a person in despair desperately wants to die, he cannot. Despair is so hopeless, literally speaking, that it lacks the ability to do what it ultimately wants to do—produce a death that causes its own death. It torments its victims with the fact that they are stuck with living—and living in despair. Kierkegaard points out that despair is like a painful, fatal

illness that causes a person to want to rid himself of the pain by dying. Yet, he cannot die and is stuck with the pain by having to continue to live. Kierkegaard says that this is what it means to have a sickness *unto* death, i.e., to be heading toward death, indeed, to be dying bit by bit, but then not to be able to die and be rid of despair.

It is in this last sense that despair is the sickness unto death, this tormenting contradiction, this sickness of the self, perpetually to be dying, to die and yet not die, to die death. For to die signifies that it is all over, but to die death means to experience dying, and if this is experienced for one single moment, one thereby experiences it forever. If a person were to die of despair as one dies of a sickness, then the eternal in him, the self, must be able to die in the same sense as the body dies of sickness. But this is impossible; the dying of despair continually converts itself into a living. The person in despair cannot die; “no more than the dagger an slaughter thoughts”³ can despair consume the eternal, the self at the root of despair, whose worm does not die and whose fire is not quenched. 19 Nevertheless, despair is veritably a self-consuming, but an impotent self-consuming that cannot do what it wants to do. What it wants to do is to consume itself, something it cannot do, and this impotence is a new form of self-consuming, in which despair is once again unable to do what it wants to do, to consume itself; this is an intensification, or the law of intensification. This is the provocativeness or the cold fire in despair, this gnawing that burrows deeper and deeper in impotent self-consuming. The inability of despair to consume him is so remote from being any kind of comfort to the person in despair that it is the very opposite. This comfort is precisely the torment, is precisely what keeps the gnawing alive and keeps life in the gnawing, for it is precisely over this that he despairs (not as having despaired): that he cannot consume himself, cannot get rid of himself, cannot reduce himself to nothing. This is the formula for despair raised to a higher power, the rising fever in this sickness of the self. [18,19]

Kierkegaard uses a strange phrase—“to die death.” Despair causes a person “to die death,” which he identifies as “to die and yet not to die.” Despair itself is a kind of dying process. It is “to experience dying,” but the dying never actually brings about complete death. The person simply keeps dying and dying and dying—only heading toward complete death. However, he never reaches it so that his despair ends.

Kierkegaard also speaks of “the eternal” in a person, and he calls “the eternal in him” the “self.” In other words, God has made human beings to be eternal creatures, to understand that He has designed them ultimately for eternal life, if they will but stop despairing and approach Him for mercy and forgiveness. Then, Kierkegaard suggests

³ From a poem by Johannes Ewald (1743-1781) on suicide.

that we ought to be able to think of the eternal within us in the same manner in which we think of our bodies—that if our bodies can die because of a fatal illness, then the eternal within us should be able to die from the illness of despair. However, his main point in this section is that the self, the eternal, continues to live on even while despair causes a kind of dying to occur within us. Instead of despair's wiping out any consciousness of the eternal, it constantly reminds us that we are eternally accountable to God. If despair could make the eternal die within us the same way that cancer can cause us to die physically, then it would bring about its own relief. Instead, despair only causes a situation of continuing to live, of the eternal self being conscious of its eternal design.

Thus, because of despair, a person constantly reminds himself that God will deal with him with justice eternally, and Kierkegaard says that this is a kind of perpetually dying, even while living. God has made us for eternity, and, therefore, we lament our loss of eternity when we are in despair, which is a kind of death. In order for this death to go away, we would either have to stop being designed for eternity, which is impossible, or we would have to stop despairing. Obviously, the trick is to get rid of the despair through some means that allows a person to remain a self who is made for eternity. What is the means by which a person can rid himself of despair? God. But Kierkegaard is not quite yet ready to speak of God in this way.

An individual in despair despairs over *something*. So it seems for a moment, but only for a moment; in the same moment the true despair or despair in its true form shows itself. [XI 133] In despairing over *something*, he really despaired over *himself*, and now he wants to be rid of himself. For example, when the ambitious man whose slogan is "Either Caesar or nothing"⁴ does not get to be Caesar, he despairs over it. But this also means something else: precisely because he did not get to be Caesar, he now cannot bear to be himself. Consequently he does not despair because he did not get to be Caesar but despairs over himself because he did not get to be Caesar. [19]

To despair *over ourselves* is to realize that we cannot be who we want to be. For example, we might want to be King, but we cannot be King, because we are lowly

⁴ The motto of Caesar Borgia (1475-1507), an Italian nobleman, politician, and cardinal.

citizens. So we despair over not being able to be King. Thus, we despair not only over our not being able to be King, but because we have to be ourselves, people who are not King and who despair over not being able to be King. Consequently, we do not like being who we are, because we are not who we want to be. Indeed, we also want to be free from despair, to be hopeful instead of hopeless. However, Kierkegaard is saying that, humanly speaking, there is no hope of being what we want to be—either King or free from despair. Both are out of our reach if all we have to enable us to be what we want to be is ourselves. Instead, we must remain who we are, but this is exactly who we do not want to be. We loathe being who we are—hopeless—and cannot bear it.

This self, which, if it had become Caesar, would have been in seventh heaven (a state, incidentally, that in another sense is just as despairing), this self is now utterly intolerable to him. In a deeper sense, it is not his failure to become Caesar that is intolerable, but it is this self that did not become Caesar that is intolerable; or, to put it even more accurately, what is intolerable to him is that he cannot get rid of himself. If he had become Caesar, he would despairingly get rid of himself, but he did not become Caesar and cannot despairingly get rid of himself. Essentially, he is just as despairing, for he does not have his self, is not himself. He would not have become himself by becoming Caesar but would have been rid of himself, and by not becoming Caesar he despairs over not being able to get rid of himself. [19]

Kierkegaard is saying that, if we became King, we would rejoice immensely, because we would be who we really want to be. However, we are not King, and so we remain who we really are. We remain ourselves. Yet, it is exactly ourselves that we do not want to be. By wanting to be King, we want to be rid of ourselves, who are not King. Thus, we cannot get rid of who we really are, ourselves, people who are not King. It is, then, this over which we despair—that we cannot get rid of ourselves. Yet, Kierkegaard says that the real goal of becoming King is not to *become* something that we are not, but to *get rid of* what we currently are.

Really, we want to do away with who we are right now—people in despair and eternally hopeless. Therefore, becoming King is merely a distraction, a sidetrack. We hope that it would solve our problem of being in despair. But would it? No. Instead, the

problem of our still being in a state of despair would rear its ugly head again, because it would not have actually gone away. Our attention to it would have only been temporarily diverted toward our being King, but the despair would still be there.

Consequently, we primarily hate who we are—people who are in despair—and we only secondarily hate the fact that we cannot become what we want to be, i.e., King, or Queen, or rich, or a star athlete, or whatever our dream might be to distract us from being who we really are—in despair.

Thus it is superficial for someone (who probably has never seen anyone in despair, not even himself) to say of a person in despair: He is consuming himself. But this is precisely what he in his despair [wants] and this is precisely what he to his torment cannot do, since the despair has inflamed something that cannot burn or be burned up in the self.

Consequently, to despair over something is still not despair proper. It is the beginning, or, as the physician says of an illness, it has not yet declared itself. The next is declared despair, to despair over oneself. A young girl despairs of love, that is, she despairs over the loss of her beloved, over his death or his unfaithfulness to her. This is not declared despair; no, she despairs over herself. This self of hers, which she would have been rid of or would have lost in the most blissful manner had it become “his” beloved, this self becomes a torment to her if it has to be a self without “him.” This self, which would have become her treasure (although, in another sense, it would have been just as despairing), has now become to her an abominable void since “he” died, or it has become to her a nauseating reminder that she has been deceived. [XI 134] Just try it, say to such a girl, “You are consuming yourself,” and you will hear her answer, “Oh, but the torment is simply that I cannot do that.”

To despair over oneself, in despair to will to be rid of oneself—this is the formula for all despair. Therefore the other form of despair, in despair to will to be oneself, can be traced back to the first, in despair not to will to be oneself, just as we previously resolved the form, in despair not to will to be oneself, into the form, in despair to will to be oneself (see A). A person in despair despairingly wills to be himself. But if he despairingly wills to be himself, he certainly does not want to be rid of himself. Well, so it seems, but upon closer examination it is clear that the contradiction is the same. The self that he despairingly wants to be is a self that he is not (for to will to be the self that he is in truth is the very opposite of despair), that is, he wants to tear his self away from the power that established it. [19,20]

To find ourselves hopeless when it comes to trying to be who we want to be but cannot be is one kind of despair. It is to despair over *something*, i.e., some *thing*—for example, being King or rich—something that we are not. However, to find ourselves hopeless when we try to be rid of who we are and, therefore, to be rid of who we do not

want to be (e.g., people who are not King or rich) is another kind of despair. This despair is over *someone*, i.e., some *one*, and the someone is actually *ourselves*. We despair over who we are. We do not want to be who we are. We want to be someone else.

In addition, Kierkegaard points out that the first form of despair that he described in A above, the despair of willing to be ourselves, is, in the final analysis, a despair that wants to be a self that we are not. It is a despair of wanting to be different from who we are and wanting to be rid of who we are. Therefore, Kierkegaard says, both kinds of despair boil down to our wanting to break away from the very power that has made us who we are and given us the ability to be ourselves. This power is God. However, is it possible for us to cut all ties to God?

In spite of all his despair, however, he cannot manage to do it; in spite of all his despairing efforts, that power is stronger and forces him to be the self he does not want to be. [20]

Kierkegaard's answer is an unequivocal NO! God is more powerful than we are, and we cannot become that which He does not want us to be. We cannot overpower Him and solve our problem of despair by "forcing" Him to let us become what we want to be—a King, a super athlete, or even a person who is free from despair. Nor can we solve our problem by "forcing" Him to stop making us who we are. Then, Kierkegaard presents the most profound idea and the most difficult to understand that he has expressed so far—we cannot "force" God to do anything, but, instead, God "forces" us! He has made us to be who we are just as He "forces" a leopard to have its spots. The only way a leopard can change its spots is if God performs a miracle (cf. Jeremiah 13:23). Yet, this is exactly what God does for the person who is in despair whom He chooses to bring out of despair. Nevertheless, to remain in despair may be the plan of God as our Creator even though this sounds unfair to us as human beings.

The notion of God's making us to be the way we are is central to Kierkegaard's understanding of what it means to be a human being. In *Concluding Unscientific*

Postscript, he refers to each of us as “an individual existing human being” (e.g., pg. 224). What Kierkegaard means by “existing” is that God is constantly causing us to exist exactly as we are at any moment of time. God is writing a story, so that every aspect of the story at any moment is His creation. Normally, we do not think of ourselves this way. We imagine that God made us when we were conceived in our mother’s womb, and, then, from that point on, we simply have existed—almost on our own. We do not think that God has continued to make us. We think that He made us once, and, from that point on, we simply have been—or are. However, Kierkegaard uses the word “exist” literally. It means “to be out of,” and “to be out of” is to have someone else cause us to exist continually and not just when we were conceived or first made.

This concept is what theologians have called in Latin *creatio ex nihilo*, creation out of nothing. God did not make the cosmos out of material that already existed apart from His bringing it into existence. He made it out of nothing. He simply spoke it into existence, and there it was. Yet, Kierkegaard is adding the idea that the creation does not cause itself to continue to exist. God must constantly keep bringing it into existence moment by moment. Thus, even right now He causes everything to exist *ex nihilo*—out of nothing—in the sense that if He did not incessantly keep calling the creation into existence out of nothing, then it would not exist, which is also true of individual “existing” human beings. God constantly makes us and creates us as we are, or we would not exist, which is what distinguishes us from God, because no one made God, not even God. As Kierkegaard says, “God does not exist..., he is eternal. A human being...exists...” (*Postscript*, 332).

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard speaks of “the person’s bond service in relation to God, to whom every human being, not by birth but by creation from nothing belongs as a bond servant, and in such a way as no bond servant has ever belonged to an earthly master, who at least admits that thoughts and feelings are free; but he belongs to God in every thought, the most hidden; in every feeling, the most secret, in every movement,

the most inward" [115]. Thus, to "belong to God" is to be a constant "creation from nothing," i.e., to be created constantly by God out of nothing, so that, ultimately, every thought, feeling, and movement of a human being is made by God. We are free from other human beings with respect to our choices, but we are not free from our Creator, God. In fact, if He does not cause our choices to exist, then they will not exist, just as, if He does not cause us to exist, then we will not exist.

The question arises, if God is the one who is ultimately creating our choices, what about our being held accountable for them? Kierkegaard does not address this issue, but we will explore it later. In the meantime, what about the human being who is in despair because God is "forcing" him?

But this is his way of willing to get rid of himself, to rid himself of the self that he is in order to be the self that he has dreamed up. He would be in seventh heaven to be the self he wants to be (although in another sense he would be just as despairing), but to be forced to be the self he does not want to be, that is his torment—that he cannot get rid of himself.

Socrates demonstrated the immortality of the soul from the fact that sickness of the soul (sin) does not consume it as sickness of the body consumes the body.⁵ Thus, the eternal in a person can be demonstrated by the fact that despair cannot consume his self, that precisely this is the torment of contradiction in despair. If there were nothing eternal in a man, he could not despair at all; if despair could consume his self, then there would be no despair at all. [20,21]

As Kierkegaard has already intimated, God has designed us human beings for eternity—to know that eternity exists and to take into account that we are accountable to God in regard to the eternal outcome of our lives that will be decided at the final judgment. Kierkegaard draws upon Plato's Republic and Socrates to argue that human beings have an element of the eternal built into them. A bodily illness can destroy the body. However, a spiritual illness cannot destroy man's spirit. Therefore, the spirit must be vastly different from the body. The spirit has eternity built into it, while the body has only the temporary built into it.

⁵ Plato, Republic, X, 608, c-610

Thus, Kierkegaard is saying that despair is based upon our recognizing as human beings that, by ourselves and with no help from God's grace and mercy, we stand condemned before God. If eternity were not an issue, then human beings would not despair. However, God's having designed us for eternity is precisely the basis for our despair, because despair never goes away by means of our own efforts. If we could use our despair to get rid of ourselves and, particularly, the eternal within us that God has designed into us, then we could also get rid of despair itself. However, for despair to disappear within us, it requires a being who is not just designed for eternity by another, but who is Eternity personified—God!

Therefore, because God has made us as human beings, we, by ourselves, cannot change who we are. Kierkegaard is saying that if we human beings could change who we are, then we could consume ourselves and get rid of ourselves. However, this is impossible since only God can get rid of that which He has made. As created human beings, we cannot eradicate our eternal design which God has "forced" upon us, even if this eternal design includes our being in despair. Thus, only God, our Creator, can destroy either our despair or our being designed for eternity. The former He does when He so chooses and causes us (as Jesus tells Nicodemus in John 3) to become "born again" by the work of His Spirit within us. The latter, destroying our being designed for eternity, He never does in this temporary realm.

Such is the nature of despair, this sickness of the self, this sickness unto death. The despairing person is mortally ill. In a completely different sense than is the case with any illness, this sickness has attacked the most vital organs, and yet he cannot die. Death is not the end of the sickness, but death is incessantly the end. [XI 135] To be saved from this sickness by death is an impossibility, because the sickness and its torment—and the death— are precisely this inability to die.

This is the state of despair. No matter how much the despairing person avoids it, no matter how successfully he has completely lost himself (especially the case in the form of despair that is ignorance of being in despair) and lost himself in such a manner that the loss is not at all detectable—eternity nevertheless will make it manifest that his condition was despair and will nail him to himself so that his torment will still be that he cannot rid himself of his

self, and it will become obvious that he was just imagining that he had succeeded in doing so. Eternity is obliged to do this, because to have a self, to be a self, is the greatest concession, an infinite concession, given to man, but it is also eternity's claim upon him. [21]

Kierkegaard is saying that we can try to hide from and deny our being designed for eternity and the resultant eternal hopelessness as human beings who have a problematic moral condition before God. We can even feign ignorance, saying to ourselves, "Oh, I didn't know the problem was that bad, because I seemed like such a good person—certainly better than most others." Nevertheless, God will not allow us at the depth of our being to hide completely from who we are, and we will still suffer the torment of not being able to fix the problem ourselves. We will not be able to get rid of who we really are, people who are in despair, which is exactly what makes us privileged creatures, designed by God for eternity, which Kierkegaard calls "having a self." To be a human being, a human "self," is to be designed for eternity and to have eternity place the demand on one's "self" to face into the despair that comes from needing God's mercy because of one's moral depravity and, yet, not being able to obtain mercy by one's own effort.

Thus, our eternal design results in our experiencing all that comes with it, i.e., being in despair, unwilling to be ourselves before God by seeking His mercy and forgiveness, and, therefore, needing Him to rescue us from our despair and give us hope. This is the paradox, because God certainly rescues anyone who comes to Him and asks for mercy. Therefore, we should never hesitate to do so, and we should continue to do so for the rest of our lives, as those who demonstrate that we are each one a self, an eternal self, and eternally passionate about escaping from our despair.

If my explanation of this difficult section has not been clear enough, may the reader not despair. There is much more of this book to explain and make it clear as we forge ahead.

B ***The Universality of This Sickness (Despair)***

Just as a physician might say that there very likely is not one single human being who is completely healthy, so anyone who really knows mankind might say that there is not one single living human being who does not despair a little, who does not secretly harbor an unrest, an inner strife, a disharmony, an anxiety about an unknown something, or a something he does not even dare to try to know, an anxiety about some possibility in existence or an anxiety about himself, so that, just as the physician speaks of going around with an illness in the body, he walks around with a sickness, carries around a sickness of the spirit that signals its presence at rare intervals in and through an anxiety he cannot explain. [22]

Spiritual health is like physical health. No one on earth is perfectly healthy—*physically* speaking. Each one of us has some physical ailment he can point to—even if it is only a wart on the arm or some other physical flaw. Similarly, every human being experiences some level of angst about life that can be described with words such as anxiety, unrest, internal disharmony, etc., which is the telltale sign, the dead giveaway, that each human being is *spiritually* ill.

In any case, no human being ever lived and no one lives outside of Christendom who has not despaired, and no one in Christendom, if he is not a true Christian, and insofar as he is not wholly that, he still is to some extent in despair. [22]

First, Kierkegaard intimates that all human beings start outside Christianity and, therefore, experience despair. Then, some have entered into Christendom, and they appear to have rid themselves of at least some of their despair. However, just because a person is “in Christendom” does not mean that he is a Christian. In other words, for Kierkegaard, Christendom is not necessarily a good thing. It is a community that calls itself Christian, but it may not actually be Christian. Certainly, authentic Christians participate in it, but its focus on externalities such as rituals, doctrines, traditions, and spiritual disciplines reveal its ignorance in regard to biblical Christianity. Thus, Christendom has only the appearance of Christianity and, therefore, from a spiritual

standpoint is the same as the world—in rebellion against God. Christendom is where people use the terminology of Christianity (Jesus, salvation, obedience to God, faith, prayer, etc.) and the main tool of Christianity (the Bible), but these are simply instruments of their worldliness, because they lack authentic inwardness. However, Kierkegaard's point here is that every human being has despaired (even Christians) or is in despair (even those who are in Christendom who are not genuine Christians). Therefore, only a true Christian is not *in despair* the way that Kierkegaard is ultimately defining this phrase. Everyone else, whether in the world or in Christendom, started life *in despair* and is still *in despair*.

No doubt this observation will strike many people as a paradox, an overstatement, and also a somber and depressing point of view. But it is none of these things. It is not somber, for, on the contrary, it tries to shed light on what generally is left somewhat obscure; it is not depressing but instead is elevating, inasmuch as it views every human being under the destiny of the highest claim upon him, to be spirit; nor is it a paradox but, on the contrary, a consistently developed basic view, and therefore neither is it an overstatement. [22]

To be “in Christendom” and to be “in despair” seems contradictory. Kierkegaard is referring to his own Danish society where everyone was believed to be a Christian because everyone attended the Danish State Church. Therefore, most people would consider Kierkegaard's claim that some people within the state church were not Christians to be contradictory. Then, if they were willing to accept it, it would be somber and depressing, because how could one know that he is a Christian if going to church does not define him as a Christian? Nevertheless, Kierkegaard claims that his statement is neither contradictory nor depressing. It is just the sober truth, and the truth is always uplifting, even when it is bad news. Kierkegaard makes this claim because he has learned to be completely realistic about human existence. Certainly, it may seem more attractive to people to hide from the reality of life and truth, especially if the news is bad. Such is the reason why people employ drugs, alcohol, and any distraction to keep from having to face into their pain. However, if they are going to embrace the hope of the

gracious promises of God, then they first must recognize the difficult news about their spiritual condition, that they are *in despair*—especially if they erroneously think that they are Christians simply because they are “in Christendom.”

Kierkegaard also says that the fact that only Christians are not hopeless while everyone else is in eternal despair may sound like a radical statement. However, it soberly reveals the truth about the human condition that most people would prefer to ignore. It also should bring joy, because it points to the need for every human to face into the spiritual possibility of eternal life. In addition, it certainly is not contradictory, because it is consistent with the biblical truth about human depravity and our need for God’s mercy and grace. Therefore, while it sounds radical, it is nevertheless consistent with reality and true. As a result, it is the proper motivation for all human beings so that they consider their spiritual and moral condition before God.

However, the customary view of despair does not go beyond appearances, and thus it is a superficial view, that is, no view at all. It assumes that every man must himself know best whether he is in despair or not. Anyone who says he is in despair is regarded as being in despair, and anyone who thinks he is not is therefore regarded as not. As a result, the phenomenon of despair is infrequent rather than quite common. That one is in despair is not a rarity; no, it is rare, very rare, that one is in truth not in despair. [22,23]

Should we always trust people to know if they themselves are in despair or not?

Kierkegaard says that if we do, then we are not taking the issue of despair seriously. We are looking at it only superficially and relying on appearances, on what we see outside a person, rather than following the biblical message that tells us what is true internally in regard to every human being—except Jesus, of course. When we adopt a shallow view of reality in the midst of people claiming that they are hopeless, we believe them.

Likewise, when they claim that they have hope, we believe them. The result, according to Kierkegaard, is that real despair is rarely demonstrated by people. In other words, they hide it. In addition, few people really know themselves well enough so that they actually have genuine hope are not in despair.

The common view has a very poor understanding of despair. Among other things, it completely overlooks (to name only this, which, properly understood, places thousands and thousands and millions in the category of despair), it completely overlooks that not being in despair, not being conscious of being in despair, is precisely a form of despair. [23]

Kierkegaard comments that most people do not accurately understand the concept of despair—at least the biblical concept of despair. Someone will say that he is not in despair, but more than likely he is simply not conscious of his despair, i.e., he is unwilling to be conscious of his despair. In addition, this person who refuses to be conscious of his despair is fundamentally without hope. He is in despair.

Such is also the relation of the physician of the soul to despair. He knows what despair is; he recognizes it and therefore is satisfied neither with a person's declaration that he is not in despair nor with his declaration that he is. [23,24]

Thus, Kierkegaard, with his understanding of the Bible, is like a medical doctor, who, in treating a patient, will see more than the patient sees. The patient claims to be healthy, but the doctor disagrees, because his diagnostic machine, the Bible, detects something wrong internally, even as the patient is consciously ignorant of the problem. Someone like Kierkegaard who understands the spiritual realities of human beings, a spiritual “physician” who has a firm grasp on the biblical message, will not necessarily believe people when they make statements about their spiritual condition. He understands that despair is fundamentally a spiritual illness and not simply a superficial and shallow emotional problem.

Therefore, when people say that they are Christians and proclaim vociferously that they are not in despair, Kierkegaard knows better than to believe them immediately, because it is entirely possible that they are misdiagnosing and mislabelling their own spiritual situation. Also, when people say that they are not Christians precisely because they *think* that they have no hope, he knows better than to believe them immediately, because it is entirely possible that they, too, are misdiagnosing and mislabelling their own condition. Thus, Kierkegaard is saying that it is important not to confuse spiritual

and eternal realities with emotional and temporal realities. In other words, we must not mistake emotional and temporal dejection for spiritual and eternal hopelessness and despair. In the same way, we should not mistake emotional and temporal depression as a lack of spiritual and eternal hope. Emotional depression is not necessarily Christian despair, and emotional joy is not necessarily Christian hope.

The common view also overlooks that despair is dialectically different from what is usually termed a sickness, because it is a sickness of the spirit. Properly understood, this dialectic again brings thousands under the definition of despair. If at a given time a physician has made sure that someone is well, and that person later becomes ill, then the physician may legitimately say that this person at one time was healthy but now is sick. Not so with despair. As soon as despair becomes apparent, it is manifest that the individual was in despair. Hence, at no moment is it possible to decide anything about a person who has not been saved by having been in despair, for whenever that which triggers his despair occurs, it is immediately apparent that he has been in despair his whole life. On the other hand, when someone gets a fever, it can by no means be said that it is now apparent that he has had a fever all his life. Despair is a qualification of the spirit, is related to the eternal, and thus has something of the eternal in its dialectic. [24]

By thinking of despair only as an emotional and temporal problem, we miss the fact that it more importantly is a spiritual and eternal problem. Certainly, there is a kind of despair that is just an emotional and temporal problem. However, the most fundamental despair that human beings experience is a spiritual and eternal one. In addition, Kierkegaard is saying that this most basic hopelessness is not like a common cold. It cannot be caught at some point along the path of a person's life on earth, so that the person could be said to have been well earlier in his life. Instead, his despair is part of who he has been from his conception. It is built into the very fabric of his being by God as his Creator. This fundamental and basic nature of despair, by necessity, connects it with eternity and a person's eternal destiny.

Despair is not only dialectically different from a sickness, but all its symptoms are also dialectical, and therefore the superficial view is very easily deceived in determining whether or not despair is present. Not to be in despair can in fact signify precisely to be in despair, and it can signify having been rescued from being in despair; precisely this sense of security and tranquility can be the despair, and yet it can signify having conquered despair and having won peace. Not being in despair is not similar to not being sick, for not being sick cannot be the same as being sick, whereas not being in despair can be the very

same as being in despair. It is not with despair as with a sickness, where feeling indisposed is the sickness. By no means. Here again the indisposition is dialectical. [XI 139] Never to have sensed this indisposition is precisely to be in despair. [24,25]

Adopting a shallow view of despair is to risk being deceived as to whether or not a person is actually in despair. People can appear to have hope by exuding a certain peace and tranquility, and, yet, they are eternally hopeless. People can also appear to have hope by exuding peace and tranquility, and, yes, they do have authentic, biblical hope. The former are hiding from their eternal despair, while the latter have properly dealt with it. Kierkegaard is saying that this, a willingness to see the wily and yet deep-seated nature of our spiritual condition, is the correct and profound view of both hope and despair.

In this regard, not being in despair is not like being not sick. In other words, not being in despair is not like being physically well. I can feel good, as though I have no physical ailment, and, indeed, I am well. However, I can feel hopeful, as though I have no spiritual ailment such as despair, and, indeed, I am absolutely hopeless and in despair. Therefore, my physical health is not deceiving, even self-deceiving, while my spiritual health can be very deceiving, because my spiritually immoral condition, by definition, leads me to be entirely *self*-deceiving.

This means and has its basis in the fact that the condition of man, regarded as spirit (and if there is to be any question of despair, man must be regarded as defined by spirit), is always critical. We speak of a crisis in relation to sickness but not in relation to health. Why not? Because physical health is an immediate qualification that first becomes dialectical in the condition of sickness, in which the question of a crisis arises. Spiritually, or when man is regarded as spirit, both health and sickness are critical; there is no immediate health of the spirit.

As soon as man ceases to be regarded as defined by spirit (and in that case there can be no mention of despair, either) but only as psychological-physical synthesis, health is an immediate qualification, and mental or physical sickness is the only dialectical qualification. But to be unaware of being defined as spirit is precisely what despair is. Even that which, humanly speaking, is utterly beautiful and lovable—a womanly youthfulness that is perfect peace and harmony and joy—is nevertheless despair. To be sure, it is happiness, but happiness is not a qualification of spirit, and deep, deep within the most secret hiding place of happiness there dwells also anxiety, which is despair; it very

much wishes to be allowed to remain there, because for despair the most cherished and desirable place to live is in the heart of happiness. [25]

Kierkegaard died four years before Charles Darwin published his theory on evolution in *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, but he rightly stated that, if we think of ourselves as products of mere physical processes such as atheistic evolution, then we have chosen to ignore the most important aspect of our nature, that we are creatures of God who must reckon with our eternal destiny. With an evolutionary mindset, we have also chosen to remain in despair. Similarly, if we deal with only those things that are immediate problems, the problems of this life that include our physical health and emotional happiness, then we are dealing with only two-thirds of who we are as human beings. We are dealing with only our mental/emotional and physical state. We are not dealing with our spiritual condition. Indeed, it is this last third of our human experience that indicates to us that we have a future and eternal problem of which despair is the tell-tale sign.

We may even be happy, because we are experiencing the beauty and love that is possible in this life, but our happiness does not mean that we have escaped hopelessness. In fact, behind the door of common, human happiness in the most secret place of our humanness, our deepest inwardness, is eternal despair. Plus, despair's ingenious strategy is to hide itself in a heart of happiness. Therefore, for the "physician of the soul" to treat a person's illness of disappointment or anxiety that stems from loss, ugliness, or unloveableness is to treat only the *immediate* issues of *this present* life but not the *future* issues of the *next* life. We must look beyond the mental/emotional and physical issues, that are merely temporary, to the spiritual issues that are eternal, if we are going to deal with the entirety of our God-given, not evolution-producing, humanity.

Despite its illusory security and tranquillity, all immediacy is anxiety and thus, quite consistently, is most anxious about nothing. The most gruesome description of something most terrible does not make immediacy as anxious as a subtle, almost carelessly, and yet deliberately and calculatingly dropped allusion

to some indefinite something—in fact, immediacy is made most anxious by a subtle implication that it knows very well what is being talked about. Immediacy probably does not know it, but reflection never snares so unfailingly as when it fashions its snare out of nothing, and reflection is never so much itself as when it is—nothing. It requires extraordinary reflection, or, more correctly, it requires great faith to be able to endure reflection upon nothing—that is, infinite reflection. Consequently, even that which is utterly beautiful and lovable, womanly youthfulness, is still despair, is happiness. For that reason, it is impossible to slip through life on this immediacy. And if this happiness does succeed in slipping through, well, it is of little use, for it is despair. [XI 140] Precisely because the sickness of despair is totally dialectical, it is the worst misfortune never to have had that sickness: it is a true godsend to get it, even if it is the most dangerous of illnesses, if one does not want to be cured of it. Generally it is regarded as fortunate to be cured of a sickness; the sickness itself is the misfortune. [25,26]

When a human being feels good about himself and life, probably because he feels good physically and is not suffering some dread disease, and this human being concludes that he actually is doing well as an existing human being, then he is missing the fact or hiding from the fact that he is tremendously anxious. Indeed, his anxiety is about “nothing,” because he fails to acknowledge that that about which he is anxious and in despair is more than “nothing.” Indeed, it is everything and the most important thing for which he ought to be concerned—his eternal destiny.

Kierkegaard claims that it requires superhuman effort to be able to reflect upon the “nothing” that is actually an “infinite” nothing so that a person’s reflection itself is an “infinite reflection.” To reflect infinitely on oneself is to reflect properly on one’s inner, eternal despair and, thus, come to grips with God’s design of us human beings as eternal creatures, made for eternal life.

Thus, when a person thinks deeply about all that is truly beautiful and good within the present created reality, i.e., when a person is apparently happy because he is engaging in the obvious beauty and goodness of this life, then he is still missing the point—the point of his eternal and inward despair and hopelessness that can be rectified only by God’s graciousness and mercy. Consequently, the best thing that can happen to the self-deceiving human being is to fall headlong into the sickness of despair, the spiritual

disease that is innate in all of us, our eternal hopelessness that exists within us because of our moral depravity. When we properly face into this, the ultimate despair, we allow ourselves to be sick beyond cure and to be hopeless beyond hope. Even if, initially, we do not want to be cured of our eternal despair because we lack the humility to approach God for His mercy, it is still only by catching this sickness, i.e., to acknowledge our despair from which we have been attempting to hide, that we can begin to move toward its cure—the kindness and mercy of God.

Therefore, the common view that despair is a rarity is entirely wrong; on the contrary, it is universal. The common view, which assumes that everyone who does not think or feel he is in despair is not or that only he who says he is in despair is, is totally false. On the contrary, the person who without affectation says that he is in despair is still a little closer, is dialectically closer, to being cured than all those who are not regarded as such and who do not regard themselves as being in despair. The physician of souls will certainly agree with me that, on the whole, most men live without ever becoming conscious of being destined as spirit—hence all the so-called security, contentment with life, etc., which is simply despair. On the other hand, those who say they are in despair are usually either those who have so deep a nature that they are bound to become conscious as spirit or those whom bitter experiences and dreadful decisions have assisted in becoming conscious as spirit: it is either the one or the other; the person who is really devoid of despair is very rare indeed.

There is so much talk about human distress and wretchedness—I try to understand it and have also had some intimate acquaintance with it—there is so much talk about wasting a life, but only that person's life was wasted who went on living so deceived by life's joys or its sorrows that he never became decisively and eternally conscious as spirit, as self, or, what amounts to the same thing, never became aware and in the deepest sense never gained the impression that there is a God and that "he," he himself, his self, exists before God—an infinite benefaction that is never gained except through despair. [26,27]

Kierkegaard finally states explicitly the thesis of this chapter, that all human beings suffer from eternal, biblical despair. Yet, how Kierkegaard would be vilified if he made the next statements today when so many people, organizations, and governments consider our highest goal to be the reduction of hunger, disease, poverty, oppression, and injustice throughout the world! Meliorism is the doctrine of our times—that we can make our world truly better by our human efforts, in fact, that we can and must eliminate disease, poverty, injustice, violence, and despair by applying ourselves with a concerted, group endeavor to all the world's problems. Indeed, we have become convinced that

people are wasting their lives if they labor under the yoke of hunger, disease, poverty, and injustice, and that it is our responsibility and highest calling and goal as human beings to work to eliminate these horrific conditions on this earth.

However, Kierkegaard is saying that the only significant human misery is eternal despair that every human being experiences. It is not as though he would be against mitigating human suffering that comes through these other earthly causes. Yet, he is saying that if the misery and wretchedness of eternal despair is not eliminated, then, no matter how full people's bellies are, no matter how physically healthy they are, no matter how many years they live, and no matter how many amenities they can afford and have acquired, no matter how hard they have worked to eliminate injustice in this world and prevent such things as climate change, etc., they have wasted their lives, because they have focused on temporary happiness instead of eternal happiness.

Kierkegaard goes on to say that the most important commodity that a human being can acquire is to recognize that he is a potentially eternal self before God and that he must appeal to God in order to escape despair. Thus, only through walking through the trenches of genuine, biblical hopelessness can a person become properly aware of his need for God's mercy, which is "an infinite benefaction." In other words, only through not hiding from his spiritual despair and facing into it to the depth that it exists can a person escape his eternal hopelessness and keep from truly wasting his life—even after all his efforts to eradicate physical, emotional, and psychological suffering within the present world.

Therefore, all human beings are hopeless—eternally speaking—until they break through the superficial and shallow barrier of their felt need for both gaining earthly happiness and avoiding earthly sorrow in regard to the things of *this* life so that they despair before God over the things of the *next* life. In this way, they will enjoy the

benefits of God's having brought to their attention their hopeless condition and His merciful solution. However, if this does not happen...

What wretchedness that so many go on living this way, cheated of this most blessed of thoughts! What wretchedness that we are engrossed in or encourage the human throng to be engrossed in everything else, using them to supply the energy for the drama of life but never reminding them of this blessedness. What wretchedness that they are lumped together and deceived instead of being split apart so that each individual may gain the highest, the only thing worth living for and enough to live in for an eternity. [27]

On the one hand, we encounter so many voices in our world through various media that call for us to pay attention collectively to the things of this world—politics, economics, athletics, social issues of justice, poverty, oppression, violence, disease, religion, and even consumer products, etc. However, if we are sensitive, we should feel used by all these voices for their own shallow selfishness, self-aggrandizement, and propensity to steer us away from the most important issue for each individual, human being. All of these voices do not have our best interests in mind. They want us only to join their causes in support of them in the present world.

On the other hand, is there anyone out there who is calling us to break away from the crowds and pay strict attention to only ourselves as individuals who are despairing because of our immoral condition and who need to come before God and find His mercy and forgiveness? Even modern Christianity, which ought to be the one, authentic voice that constantly points us toward the eternal, has chosen to focus on the temporary with its institutions, programs, spiritual disciplines, traditions, and other distractions. Thus, people are everywhere, even in churches, cheated out of grappling with the most important issue in life—their despair as it relates to eternity. How we have become enamored of and spellbound by the collective drama of the crowds of people throughout the earth in their various physical, emotional, political, societal, economic, and judicial conditions and fail to break away as individuals and deal with our despair alone before God.

And to me an even more horrible expression of this most terrible sickness and misery is that it is hidden—not only that the person suffering from it may wish to hide it and may succeed, not only that it can so live in a man that no one, no one detects it, no, but also that it can be so hidden in a man that he himself is not aware of it! [27]

We attempt and succeed at hiding our eternal despair and hopelessness from others. To them we appear so happy and carefree. However, Kierkegaard says that we also succeed at hiding our hopelessness from ourselves. Deceiving others is bad enough; but self-deception, especially self-deception in regard to our eternal despair, is the most horrible demonstration of this sickness unto death—when we refuse to acknowledge it to ourselves to our own eternal detriment.

And when the hourglass has run out, the hourglass of temporality, when the noise of secular life has grown silent and its restless or ineffectual activism has come to an end, when everything around you is still, as it is in eternity, then—whether you were man or woman, rich or poor, dependent or independent, fortunate or unfortunate, whether you ranked with royalty and wore a glittering crown or in humble obscurity bore the toil and heat of the day, whether your name will be remembered as long as the world stands and consequently as long as it stood or you are nameless and run nameless in the innumerable multitude, whether the magnificence encompassing you surpassed all human description or the most severe and ignominious human judgment befell you—eternity asks you and every individual in these millions and millions about only one thing: whether you have lived in despair or not, whether you have despaired in such a way that you did not realize that you were in despair, or in such a way that you covertly carried this sickness inside of you as your gnawing secret, as a fruit of sinful love under your heart, or in such a way that you, a terror to others, raged in despair. And if so, if you have lived in despair, then, regardless of whatever else you won or lost, everything is lost for you, eternity does not acknowledge you, it never knew you—or, still more terrible, it knows you as you are known and it binds you to yourself in despair. [27,28]

Need I add to this?

C

The Forms of This Sickness (Despair)

This section of Kierkegaard's book is the longest and involves the core of what he communicates about the concept of biblical despair and hopelessness and the ways in which this despair manifests itself.

The forms of despair may be arrived at abstractly by reflecting upon the constituents of which the self as a synthesis is composed. The self is composed of infinitude and finitude. However, this synthesis is a relation, and a relation that, even though it is derived, relates itself to itself, which is freedom. The self is freedom. But freedom is the dialectical aspect of the categories of possibility and necessity.

However, despair must be considered primarily within the category of consciousness; whether despair is conscious or not constitutes the qualitative distinction between despair and despair. Granted, all despair regarded in terms of the concept is conscious, but this does not mean that the person who, according to the concept, may appropriately be said to be in despair is conscious of it himself. Thus, consciousness is decisive. Generally speaking, consciousness—that is, self-consciousness—is decisive with regard to the self. The more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness, the more will; the more will, the more self. A person who has no will at all is not a self; but the more will he has, the more self-consciousness he has also. [29]

Kierkegaard begins by saying that the different ways that biblical despair will manifest itself can be discovered simply by contemplating what actually makes up a human being. A human being is “composed of infinitude and finitude.” This is to say that a human being is a finite being who is created by the infinite, i.e., transcendent, God. The combination of these two aspects of a human being constitutes the most important relationship for a human being to consider. When he does consider this relationship, then he is relating himself properly to himself, because he is in the process of taking into account the two most important elements of who and what he is—that he is constantly being created by God, and he is constantly a creation and no more. He is not God and cannot transcend either his own humanity or the creation.

Nevertheless, this blend of God's creating him and his being a creature is what provides the human being with the freedom, philosophically and theologically speaking,

of choosing to do the right thing of pursuing an understanding of himself in a true and accurate manner. Kierkegaard puts this freedom in terms of both that which is necessary and that which is possible. A human being is necessarily created by God. He cannot be otherwise. However, in the midst of constantly being created, the human being also has the possibility of looking into himself and discovering what it truly means to be an existing creature and person.

Kierkegaard goes on to say that, while all human beings are in despair from a biblical perspective, not all human beings are consciously aware of their despair. Therefore, to become aware of one's despair at a conscious and not simply a sub-conscious level is what makes the difference between a human being who has attained a degree of authenticity that is truly substantial and meaningful and a human being that lacks authenticity and substance.

In our day, we hear a lot of talk about living a meaningful and purposeful life, and this kind of life is usually associated in people's conversations with doing good for others and leaving this world in a better condition than when we entered it or, at least, when we acquired the strength and maturity as adults to do something about the problems that constantly face us on a societal and global level. However, Kierkegaard has already been claiming in the last section of his book and continues to do so now that the only eternally meaningful and purposeful life is the one whereby a person properly considers his own immoral condition before God and its ramifications of human despair and the need for God's eternal mercy and forgiveness.

Therefore, the more aware of one's eternal hopelessness that a person becomes, the more he is using his will and choice-making mechanism properly, and the more he is gaining both authenticity as a human being and a sense of his true self. It is tempting for us human beings to become what other people want us to be, because then we gain their approval and affirmation, which we crave. However, our pursuit of other people's

approval never leads us to the true self of who we actually are. The true self as a human being is the self that properly and as completely as possible takes into account what it means to be a creature of God and in despair, and to consider both these two important aspects in relation to one another and for eternity's sake. While Kierkegaard is saying that this thought process takes great willpower and a sober self-awareness, he is also claiming that only this profound self-knowledge leads to genuine humanness. In other words, while we talk about the need for great willpower not to eat a chocolate chip cookie when we are on a diet or the willpower necessary for a soldier to put himself in harm's way in order to accomplish his duty, neither of these examples of willpower compares with the greatness and significance of the willpower involved in deep self-examination of a biblical kind. Indeed, Kierkegaard is claiming that the other two examples demonstrate no willpower in comparison to a proper self-evaluation of the causes of a person's eternal hopelessness.

A.

DESPAIR CONSIDERED WITHOUT REGARD TO ITS BEING CONSCIOUS OR NOT, CONSEQUENTLY ONLY WITH REGARD TO THE CONSTITUENTS OF THE SYNTHESIS

a. Despair as Defined by Finitude/Infinitude

The self is the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude that relates itself to itself, whose task is to become itself, which can be done only through the relationship to God. To become oneself is to become concrete. But to become concrete is neither to become finite nor to become infinite, for that which is to become concrete is indeed a synthesis. [29,30]

Kierkegaard begins this sub-section by reminding the reader that we are a combination of "infinitude," God's activities of creating us within the present reality, and "finitude," our living within the creation that He has created and is creating. Kierkegaard goes on to say that we must consciously dig into ourselves and discover who we really

are as human beings in the presence of a transcendent God. In this way, and only in this way, do we truly become what it means to be authentic persons and, therefore, “concrete” and substantive human beings. When, through our study of the Bible and life, we have acquired and believed the true facts about our existences as creatures of God and, thereby, are in a healthy relationship with God, there is no question as to what it means for us to be human beings—persons who are created by the very personal God. On the other hand, we should never think that focusing on only God is the correct approach to living life, while focusing on only ourselves is never the correct approach either.

Consequently, the progress of becoming must be an infinite moving away from itself in the infinitizing of the self, and an infinite coming back to itself in the finitizing process. But if the self does not become itself, it is in despair, whether it knows it or not. Yet every moment that a self exists, it is in a process of becoming, for the self *κατὰ δύναμιν* [in potentiality] does not actually exist, is simply that which ought to come into existence. Insofar, then, as the self does not become itself, it is not itself; but not to be itself is precisely despair. [30]

These statements take us back to the Introduction where we learned about Kierkegaard’s view of us as created beings. We “exist,” which means that God is constantly creating us *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, so to speak. Therefore, God is always in the process of making us, and we are always in the process both of being created and of living our lives as the very products of God’s activity of creating, which means that we are never simply stagnate beings. We never just “are.” Instead, we are dynamic beings and are always “becoming,” indeed in a “process of becoming,” a process that cannot be halted by anyone but God. Yet, He continues to cause us to exist until the day of our deaths. Therefore, we are “simply that which ought to [i.e., must] come into existence.”

Consequently, in order to be fully human, we must always be moving away from ourselves toward God in the sense that we are aware of the fact and understand that God is constantly making us. In addition, we should always be moving back toward ourselves from God for exactly the same reason, because we are conscious of God’s

making us and of our obligation to live realistically as created beings by understanding exactly what is going on inside us as morally depraved human beings. By performing both of these movements, the first toward God and the second toward ourselves, we each as a self become itself. In other words, we fill out our intended existences as human beings. We do what we are ultimately supposed to do as God's creatures, which is to escape our despair. However, if one of these movements does not happen, if we fail to move toward God or we fail to move inwardly toward ourselves, then we are in a state of eternal hopelessness. If we move toward only God and become what we believe to be ultra-spiritual beings while never moving back toward and into ourselves, then we are in despair. If we move toward ourselves and become what we likewise believe to be ultra-spiritual, even feeling our despair, while never moving toward the one true God in order to acquire fully His eternal mercy, then we are also in despair. Kierkegaard will now describe these two states of despair in more detail.

α. Infinitude's Despair Is to Lack Finitude

That this is so is due to the dialectic inherent in the self as a synthesis, and therefore each constituent is its opposite. No form of despair can be defined directly (that is, undialectically), but only by reflecting upon its opposite. The condition of the person in despair can be described directly, as the poet in fact does by giving him lines to speak. But the despair can be defined only by way of its opposite, and if the lines are to have any poetic value, the coloring of the expression must contain the reflection of the dialectical opposite. Consequently, every human existence that presumably has become or simply wants to be infinite, in fact, every moment in which a human existence has become or simply wants to be infinite, is despair. [XI 144] For the self is the synthesis of which the finite is the limiting and the infinite the extending constituent. Infinitude's despair, therefore, is the fantastic, the unlimited, for the self is healthy and free from despair only when, precisely by having despaired, it rests transparently in God. [30]

In this section *α*, Kierkegaard addresses the despair that results from our focusing strictly on the infinite aspect of our existence as created beings, i.e., on acknowledging that God has made us. In this despair, we, in a sense, want to become infinite by reaching for the infinite God, to commune with Him and, in effect, lose ourselves in Him.

We acknowledge that He pays attention to us as small, finite creatures in His large universe. Yet, if this is all we do, then we lead ourselves into despair, because we are a combination of both the infinite (God's creating us) and the finite (our living in the created realm), the latter of which we need to take into account just as much as the former.

Kierkegaard mentions once again this notion of the dialectic. For him, the dialectic denotes two things that are opposite one another. In this case, they are our "infinite" and our "finitude," which *both* must be taken into account *equally* if we are to be true to what it means to be human. Therefore, he is saying that to focus strictly on one of these aspects of our existence to the exclusion of the other is to disobey God and be in a state of eternal hopelessness. Thus, when we concentrate on our infinitude and forget our finitude, when we focus strictly on God and the attention He gives us, Kierkegaard calls this the "fantastic" and a lack of "rest[ing] transparently in God." In other words, we are not being honest with God (or with ourselves) about our real situation of what it means to be created beings. Instead, we are living in a kind of fantasy world, because we are not being completely realistic about who we really are. In our infinitude, we may feel very spiritual and close to God, but, in fact, we are as far away from Him as if we were willfully rebelling against Him, which may be exactly what we are doing.

The fantastic, of course, is most closely related to the imagination [*Phantasie*], but the imagination in turn is related to feeling, knowing, and willing; therefore a person can have imaginary feeling, knowing, and willing. As a rule, imagination is the medium for the process of infinitizing; it is not a capacity, as are the others—if one wishes to speak in those terms, it is the capacity *instar omnium* [for all capacities]. When all is said and done, whatever of feeling, knowing, and willing a person has depends upon what imagination he has, upon how that person reflects himself—that is, upon imagination. Imagination is infinitizing reflection, and therefore the elder Fichte quite correctly assumed that even in relation to knowledge the categories derive from the imagination. The self is reflection, and the imagination is reflection, is the rendition of the self as the self's possibility. The imagination is the possibility of any and all reflection, and the intensity of this medium is the possibility of the intensity of the self.

The fantastic is generally that which leads a person out into the infinite in such a way that it only leads him away from himself and thereby prevents him from coming back to himself. [30,31]

Kierkegaard naturally connects fantasy to the imagination, the human faculty with the ability to form thoughts and images in the human mind apart from any physical sensation. For example, unicorns do not actually exist, but we can conjure them up in our imaginations even without seeing one. We simply “see” them in our mind. In the same way, because we cannot see the transcendent God with our physical eyes, we can only think about Him in our imaginations.

In addition, Kierkegaard is saying that there is a strong connection between the imagination and a person’s feelings, knowledge, and choices. For example, as children, we might have imagined that there was a monster under our bed, which made us *feel* fearful, because we just *knew* that he was there. In turn, we might have *chosen* either to look under the bed and verify the monster’s presence or run out of our room to find protection and comfort from our parents. Therefore, our imaginations can have a powerful effect upon us at an emotional, intellectual, and behavioral level. This is true even when think about ourselves. In other words, the important part of the process of being individual existing human beings, i.e., reflecting upon ourselves and our immoral condition before God, is accomplished also by the imagination. The self thinks of itself as an existing human being by reflecting upon itself within the imagination. Kierkegaard is saying that we are indeed more intensely ourselves when we think more intensely about ourselves within our imaginations.

Unfortunately, with our imaginations, we also are capable of conjuring up ideas about God with which we become so fascinated that we remain thinking about only Him. We never move the attention of our minds and imaginations back to ourselves for the second part of the important process of becoming truly human.

When feeling becomes fantastic in this way, the self becomes only more and more volatilized and finally comes to be a kind of abstract sentimentality that inhumanly belongs to no human being but inhumanly combines sentimentally, as it were, with some abstract fate—for example, humanity *in abstracto*. Just as the rheumatic is not master of his physical sensations, which are so subject to the

wind and weather that he involuntarily detects any change in the weather etc., so also the person whose feeling has become fantastic is in a way in-finitized, but not in such a manner that he becomes more and more himself, for he loses himself more and more. [31]

When a person is so spiritual that he becomes lost in God and in his feelings about God, he himself evaporates into thin air and ceases to be a self. He is so caught up in his feelings and thoughts about God that he, in effect, becomes an abstract being instead of a concrete being. He is no longer a finite creature (at least in his imagination). He considers himself as having taken on an existence that is as lofty as God's. Indeed, this was his goal and intention. Why be merely a creature when I can become one with God and actually feel His presence all the time (or so the fantastizing human being thinks)? However, this person does not become more of a self in the biblical sense. He becomes less and less a self as he loses himself to strictly his imagination and feelings.

So also with knowing, when it becomes fantastic. [XI 145] The law for the development of the self with respect to knowing, insofar as it is the case that the self becomes itself, is that the increase of knowledge corresponds to the increase of self-knowledge, that the more the self knows, the more it knows itself. If this does not happen, the more knowledge increases, the more it becomes a kind of inhuman knowledge, in the obtaining of which a person's self is squandered, much the way men were squandered on building pyramids, or the way men in Russian brass bands are squandered on playing just one note, no more, no less. [31]

In this paragraph, Kierkegaard moves from the imagination to what we could call the intellect of the mind, not that the imagination involves an aspect of our personhood other than the mind. However, we can think of it this way. If we imagine a unicorn, this does not mean that we have knowledge of a unicorn, because unicorns do not exist. In other words, the ideas of our imaginations can involve things that either exist or do not exist, while knowledge always involves ideas of things that exist. Therefore, if we are thinking about God without thinking of ourselves, then our knowledge is actually "fantastic." This is to say that we are thinking about a fantasy, something that is not a part of reality. In order for our knowledge of God to be actual knowledge, we must include accurate self-

knowledge. Each of us must include knowledge of his “self” in the midst of knowledge of God.

Kierkegaard is saying that the more we think about anything without including true and precise knowledge of ourselves, the more our knowledge is not really human. It is “inhuman.” This is to say that it lacks authentic humanness and is therefore like thinking about only a unicorn. Such knowledge wastes the wonderful capability that God has given us to think, imagine, and know the reality that He has created, especially the reality of the “self” that each one of us is and of the self’s relationship to God.

The self is likewise gradually volatilized when willing becomes fantastic. Willing, then, does not continually become proportionately as concrete as it is abstract, so that the more infinite it becomes in purpose and determination, the more personally present and contemporary it becomes in the small part of the task that can be carried out at once, so that in being infinitized it comes back to itself in the most rigorous sense, so that when furthest away from itself (when it is most infinite in purpose and determination), it is simultaneously and personally closest to carrying out the infinitely small part of the work that can be accomplished this very day, this very hour, this very moment. [31,32]

Now Kierkegaard moves from the intellect and knowledge to our choice-making mechanism, our will. Just as with the other two, our will disappears in a sense when our purpose is to choose to do things that are actually impossible, such as elevating ourselves intellectually and emotionally out of our mundane existences in this world and communing only with God. While this endeavor may sound noble and spiritual, it actually is completely inappropriate, because it fails to take into account the reality of our very finite, earthy, and created existences. We might as well choose the course of our life according to the number of unicorns that we can imagine in our minds. Our promises even to God and our decisions for His sake amount to nothing, because they are based on nothing. Therefore, rather than making any progress toward becoming what it really means to be human, we advance toward becoming what is less than human, indeed toward becoming nothing. Nevertheless, when our purposes are the greatest, humanly

speaking, they also bring us to the point where we could choose to accomplish even the smallest and shortest tasks that are merely a part of being a human being.

When feeling or knowing or willing has become fantastic, the entire self can eventually become that, whether in the more active form of plunging headlong into fantasy or in the more passive form of being carried away, but in both cases the person is responsible. The self, then, leads a fantasized existence in abstract infinitizing or in abstract isolation, continually lacking its self, from which it only moves further and further away. [32]

The natural conclusion of the examinations of the last three aspects of a human being, our feeling, knowing, and choosing, is that the more dependent these are on imagining only that which is beyond being simply human, the more a person is less a real person. This is true whether the person willfully pursues a life of fantasy and imagination that is not based upon reality, or whether he simply permits himself to be coaxed into it, even reluctantly. Therefore, whether a person is actively and boldly pursuing a life of fantasy or passively and submissively letting others lead him down this path, the person is responsible for the choices that are making him less than human. In either case, the person moves farther and farther away from being his true self—an authentic human being.

Take the religious sphere, for example. The God-relationship is an infinitizing, but in fantasy this infinitizing can so sweep a man off his feet that his state is simply an intoxication. To exist before God may seem unendurable to a man because he cannot come back to himself, become himself. Such a fantasized religious person would say (to characterize him by means of some lines): "That a sparrow can live is comprehensible; it does not know that it exists before God. But to know that one exists before God, and then not instantly go mad or sink into nothingness!" [32]

When the imagination wanders into the arena of the religious, it can really get itself in trouble, even while it thinks it is being so noble and is honoring God. Certainly it is true that there is an "infinitizing" aspect to having a relationship with God. There must be, because the infinite God is the one who is creating us. However, on the one hand, if we imagine that God is so grand and majestic that He wants nothing to do with us measly human beings, and, therefore, it would be completely inappropriate for us to present

ourselves before Him after realizing how infinite He is and finite we are, we are using the infinitizing aspect of our relationship with God in a completely inappropriate way. We become lost in the intoxication of feeling so overwhelmed by God's greatness and goodness, which, in turn, makes us feel so spiritual and noble. We conclude that there is no way that such a majestic God could be interested in insignificant us! But we are wrong. Our thoughts of God's greatness and transcendence have made us drunk with a lie as we stagger down life's path. Instead, God truly wants us as His creatures to bring ourselves before Him in all honesty. In this way, the infinite and the finite properly take account of each other as God considers Himself and us, and we consider God and us.

In addition, Kierkegaard's words fit another example of "infinitizing" that takes us in the opposite direction. Down through history, many Christians have imagined that God's manner of communicating with us is such that we do not have to use our minds to reason through life's problems and issues. To put it another way, we just mystically put ourselves into a state whereby we unite our minds with God's and hear His voice speaking to us. Thus, we infinitize our relationship with God by imagining that He communicates with us directly. However, this is just another form of not having to deal with ourselves as finite beings. We erroneously believe that if we just sit alone in a small, quiet room, then we will be able to hear when God is speaking to us directly and is telling us what He wants us to do.

The irony is that, because God is creating us on an ongoing basis, we might conclude that He does communicate directly to us through our thoughts and feelings about what choices we should make. But then we have to ask, why do we have minds? Are they only so that we can listen to the voice of God in them? Or are they so that we can think about truth and reality and draw conclusions from our understanding of God and ourselves that we gain from the Bible? And why has God provided us with the inerrant and authoritative documents of the Bible? Do they exist merely to instruct us to

listen to the voice of God in our minds? Or do they exist to instruct us in the nature of reality so that we can reason ourselves through the events and circumstances of life, in order that we can pursue being wise and understanding people as God through Moses even exhorted the Israelites in Deuteronomy 4:6 in regard to God's commandments in the Mosaic Covenant –

Deut. 4:6 “So keep and do [the commandments], for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’” (NAS95)

Nevertheless, we tend to ignore what God says in the Bible and imagine a relationship with Him that is unrealistic. In other words, why go through the arduous task of rationally considering what would be wise in a situation when we can move ourselves into a mystical state of hearing God's voice, which will direct us without our even having to think? Thus, we conclude that we should ignore ourselves as much as possible and focus on God and His voice in the stillness of our minds. As noble as this sounds, it is a fantasy, the art of imagining that which is not true—like thinking of unicorns. While we believe that we are listening to God, Kierkegaard is saying that we are actually listening to only our own feelings and inventing ideas that are based upon them. Thus, we think that we know what God has told us, and we choose a particular course of action based upon this knowledge that has resulted from our feelings. In this way, the fantasy continues. We work ourselves up into an emotional and mental state whereby we believe that our minds are directly connected to God and He is speaking to just us. However, we have only become intoxicated with our imaginations, lost in a fantasy, and have reduced ourselves to what is less than human, indeed, to what is inhuman.

Have we forgotten who we really are—creatures of both infinitude and finitude, i.e., creatures caused to exist at every moment by God and called to live in this finite realm

by genuinely thinking about reality, especially the reality of God and ourselves from the instruction of the Bible?

But to become fantastic in this way [of infinitizing], and thus to be in despair, does not mean, although it usually becomes apparent, that a person cannot go on living fairly well, seem to be a man, be occupied with temporal matters, marry, have children, be honored and esteemed—and it may not be detected that in a deeper sense he lacks a self. Such things do not create much of a stir in the world, for a self is the last thing the world cares about and the most dangerous thing of all for a person to show signs of having. The greatest hazard of all, losing the self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly; any other loss—an arm, a leg, five dollars, etc.—is sure to be noticed. [32,33]

Even people who live in a world of fantasy, in fact religious fantasy, can otherwise carry on relatively normal lives in the present realm. They can be just like a non-Christian, even an atheist, because this is exactly what they are. Their imaginations have launched them into the fantasy world of thinking that they are acknowledging God, but they might as well be overtly rejecting Him. In addition, they are still in eternal despair. Consequently, they have lost themselves. They have no true self.

Does anyone else really care that these people are living in such falsehood? No. The world is certainly not concerned. It, too, is in a state of rebellion against God, so that the last thing it wants is for people to escape their antagonism toward God and gain a true self.

Through the means of fantasy, people lose the self, and no one notices. There may be the appearance of having a self, especially a religious self. But this self is really no self at all. It is a false self, but no one can even tell that this person's self has been lost. However, if anyone loses a loved one, an arm, his wealth, or his own health, we all feel sorry for him, and we immediately express our condolences. Such is the superficial perspective of the world that lacks true finitude.

β. Finitude's Despair Is to Lack Infinitude

That this is so is due, as pointed out under *a*, to the dialectic inherent in the self as a synthesis, and therefore each constituent is its opposite.

A human being is a combination of that which touches on infinity and that which exists in the finite. God, the only “infinite” being, has created man for the possibility of living eternally, another “infinite” concept. In contrast, each living human being exists within the finite, created reality. It is these two aspects of man that are constantly at play with one another as each human being lives from moment to moment during each day.

Now that Kierkegaard has described in the previous section the eternal hopelessness that comes from focusing on the “infinite,” i.e., God, to the extent that a person invents a God in his mind who actually does not exist, he moves on to describe its opposite in true dialectic fashion, a person who so focuses on his finite human existence that he ignores the “infinite” God.

To lack infinitude is despairing reductionism, narrowness. Of course, what is meant here is only ethical narrowness and limitation. As a matter of fact, in the world there is interest only in intellectual or esthetic limitation or in the indifferent (in which there is the greatest interest in the world), for the secular mentality is nothing more or less than the attribution of infinite worth to the indifferent. The secular view always clings tightly to the difference between man and man and naturally does not have any understanding of the one thing needful (for to have it is spirituality), and thus has no understanding of the reductionism and narrowness involved in having lost oneself, not by being volatilized in the infinite, but by being completely finitized, by becoming a number instead of a self, just one more man, just one more repetition of this everlasting *Einerlei* [one and the same]. [33]

If infinitude’s despair is to lose oneself in God so to speak, which a person can do through fantasy that results in ignoring the reality of the things of this world, especially one’s self, then finitude’s despair is to lose oneself in this world that results in ignoring the reality of God. However, this is to reduce life to a narrow set of interests, just the interests of the present realm that surround us with people, places, and things. Such is the strictly secular view of life that ignores God. In the secular view, the measure of man becomes how similar to or different from he can be in comparison to other men—being of the same ethnic group, practicing the same religion, working on the same goals, etc.,

or having greater wealth, greater health, greater power, accomplishing greater good in the world, accomplishing greater evil in the world, etc. But this way of measuring people is completely different from the biblical view. Instead, it is a secular view, and to buy into the secular view is to lose oneself in the same way as buying into the fantasy world of God through strictly one's own imagination. Both these errors lead a person to become less than human. The fantasy world of a God who does not exist confines the world to the category of those things that a person considers irrelevant. Likewise, the secular world of focusing on the concerns of only the present realm confines God to the category of the irrelevant. Indeed, both fantasy and secularity result in a person's being inhuman. When we focus on God to the exclusion of the present world, our humanity disappears into the thin air of our imaginations. When we focus on the present world to the exclusion of our relationship with God, we each cause ourselves to become just a number, that is, one more person trying to be like others or trying to outdo everyone else in this dog-eat-dog environment. Consequently, we likewise disappear into the thin air of forgetting our origin—God!

Despairing narrowness is to lack primitivity or to have robbed oneself of one's primitivity, to have emasculated oneself in a spiritual sense. Every human being is primitively intended to be a self, destined to become himself, and as such every self certainly is angular, but that only means that it is to be ground into shape, not that it is to be ground down smooth, not that it is utterly to abandon being itself out of fear of men, or even simply out of fear of men not to dare to be itself in its more essential contingency (which definitely is not to be ground down smooth), in which a person is still himself for himself. [XI 147] [33]

Kierkegaard is saying that eternal despair that comes from focusing exclusively on the things of this world misunderstands our origin as spiritual beings created by God. Indeed, God has intended us first and foremost to consider who we *are* spiritually in order to become a genuine "self." Thus, the only way properly to take advantage of our spirituality is to pursue *both* the infinite and the finite *equally*—God and how we should live in this world as His creatures.

We are “angular” beings—having a lot of sharp angles and rough edges that could use some smoothing. However, no smoothing of our angles and edges should cause us to lose entirely our distinctiveness among other people so that we would all become alike. Each of us is a unique individual and should retain his uniqueness and individuality. However, our temptation is to find a group with whom we can all become alike. But this would be to lose our individuality. For example, when people get together under the banner of a common cause or concern, they certainly possess some similar characteristic. They may look alike and adopt the same culture (ethnic groups). They may think, talk, dress, and worship God alike (religious groups). They may perform alike at only certain moments (athletic teams). They may commit themselves to a common cause (humanitarian organizations).

In addition, they all, for the most part, are afraid of the group’s disapproval and being ostracized by them. We human beings naturally want to be accepted and admired by others, especially by those in our group and even by those outside our group. We like finding a group where we can feel accepted and an important contributor to the group. Yet, Kierkegaard is pointing out that in order to participate in this kind of mutual admiration club, we will have to lose ourselves to the requirements of the group. But if we do, we will lose our individuality and ignore the essential component of what it means to be a human being—to be both infinite and finite, to care about both God and this world, especially ourselves, in appropriate ways.

But whereas one kind of despair plunges wildly into the infinite and loses itself, another kind of despair seems to permit itself to be tricked out of its self by “the others.” Surrounded by hordes of men, absorbed in all sorts of secular matters, more and more shrewd about the ways of the world—such a person forgets himself, forgets his name divinely understood, does not dare to believe in himself, 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. [33,34]

The world is a kind of magic show, and it specializes in one trick—causing people to disappear, spiritually speaking, and never return, with the result that they become

eternally hopeless. When we, with the world, become absorbed in all the things of the present world, its physical, emotional, political, social, and economic problems, we certainly become wise in the ways of the world. However, by doing so, we forget God, and we forget who we really are—God’s existing creatures who are designed potentially for one most important thing and one most important thing only, obtaining God’s eternal mercy and acquiring life in the eternal Kingdom of God.

While we should believe in God as the infinite aspect of our humanity, we should also believe in ourselves, created by God, as the finite aspect. Instead, we blend into the teeming masses on this earth or even just the “masses” of our group with all its requirements of how to be a *bona fide* member of the group, and we become simply another one of them—no different from them, which is a safe place to be because then no one criticizes us for being different, for being ourselves before God, a true self.

Now this form of despair goes practically unnoticed in the world. Just by losing himself this way, such a man has gained an increasing capacity for going along superbly in business and social life, indeed, for making a great success in the world. Here there is no delay, no difficulty with his self and its infinitizing; he is as smooth as a rolling stone, as courant [passable] as a circulating coin. He is so far from being regarded as a person in despair that he is just what a human being is supposed to be. [34]

By committing oneself to being like everyone else in the world or in one’s group, a person can easily hide his eternal hopelessness. As a result, he can focus on becoming successful in business, society, politics, athletics, etc. The world is all for helping and being a part of the world—in the present realm! The more that a person comes across as committed to people’s well-being in the present world, the more that the world applauds him for his being a great person. Therefore, it goes without saying that as long as person demonstrates grave concern for the issues of the present world (people’s health, financial well-being, freedom, personal safety, political and social stability, etc.), he is considered to be good and successful by the world. In a sense, this person has infinitized himself by making himself a useful citizen of the world. There are no angles to

his self. He simply rolls along in life like a smooth stone down a sloping walkway. He is as accepted by the world as the coinage of his society. He has become the kind of person that the world expects him to become— a person of the world!

Also, no one views him as being hopeless and in despair, because he is pursuing success and achieved a level of success in the same way as everyone else has agreed that success is achieved. Thus, he always has hope of becoming even more influential in the world and helpful to the world—and thus more successful in the eyes of the world.

As is natural, the world generally has no understanding of what is truly appalling. The despair that not only does not cause one any inconvenience in life but makes life cozy and comfortable is in no way, of course, regarded as despair. That this is the world's view is borne out, for example, by practically all the proverbs, which are nothing more than rules of prudence. For example, we say that one regrets ten times for having spoken to once for having kept silent—and why? Because the external fact of having spoken can involve one in difficulties, since it is an actuality. But to have kept silent! And yet this is the most dangerous of all. For by maintaining silence, a person is thrown wholly upon himself; here actuality does not come to his aid by punishing him, by heaping the consequences of his speaking upon him. No, in this respect it is easy to keep silent.

Because the world fundamentally rejects God and is hostile toward God, people hide from the most grievous problem in their lives—their need for God's eternal mercy. To despair of food, clothing, health, safety, and stability makes life very inconvenient and uncomfortable. But to despair of eternal mercy in the midst of working boldly and energetically to end world hunger, world poverty, world oppression, world illnesses, etc. is to settle into a manner of living in the present realm that makes one's life "cozy and comfortable." The world is so appreciative of people who help the world to solve its finite problems, while the world ignores the real problem—the infinite problem of people's eternal hopelessness.

Kierkegaard demonstrates that this is the world's perspective on reality by commenting on one of the many proverbs that man has invented to help people live life wisely and prudently in the present realm. For example, there was in Kierkegaard's time

the saying that it is ten times worse to speak in a situation than to remain silent. The reason is that speaking will typically result in a person's becoming more involved in a situation, and more involved in its difficulties, while remaining silent can allow a person to avoid becoming more embroiled in any problem that has arisen.

However, Kierkegaard points out that remaining silent is actually worse from the world's perspective—if the world were willing to recognize this fact. Remaining silent throws a person back on himself, so that, rather than having to deal with the actual, practical consequences of his speaking, he can remain somewhat alone and consider who he is—before God. The world knows but does not admit that, from its perspective, this is a more dangerous place to be, because it could potentially involve rejecting the world's understanding of and stance on reality and embracing God's understanding and stance. Therefore, the so-called proverb, whose purpose is to communicate good worldly wisdom, is an actual indictment of the world and its foolishness.

But the person who knows what is genuinely appalling fears most of all any mistake, any sin that takes an inward turn and leaves no outward trace. The world considers it dangerous to venture in this way—and why? Because it is possible to lose. Not to venture is prudent. And yet, precisely by not venturing it is so terribly easy to lose what would be hard to lose, however much one lost by risking, and in any case never this way, so easily, so completely, as if it were nothing at all—namely, oneself. If I have ventured wrongly, well, then life helps me by punishing me. [XI 148] But if I have not ventured at all, who helps me then? Moreover, what if by not venturing at all in the highest sense (and to venture in the highest sense is precisely to become aware of oneself) I cowardly gain all earthly advantages—and lose myself! [34,35]

People who are committed to rejecting God in this world and always being accepted by their group will interpret business, financial, political, religious, athletic, and social success as the very opposite of despair and hopelessness. Indeed, those in the world who are of the world in this way hope for exactly these kinds of success, because they firmly believe that as long as they lack any or all of them, they are in despair. Instead, these people are wrong—horribly and appallingly wrong. Those who lack these kinds of success are not in despair because of them. They are in despair because they are

ignoring God. In the same way, those who have gained these kinds of success are not out of despair. Their overwhelming need to be accepted and admired by the world and their group is keeping them in despair. They do not realize that, even if they gained all the comforts and applause of this world, they would still lose their selves. They would not be a self but a mere shadow of who they ought to be—someone who accurately takes into account both the infinite and finite aspects of being an existing individual before God.

The goal of the present life, according to God, is to gain oneself. But this is achieved only by “venturing” inwardly, inside oneself, with complete courage and awareness. The world warns against doing such a thing, because then the problems of the world that it is so committed to solving are seen to pale in comparison to the problem of the individual—his need for eternal mercy from God. The world does not want to lose one individual to its goal of gaining all possible advantages in the present realm—wealth, health, fame, power, and success. But what if a person gains all these advantages and loses himself, i.e., a proper and sober understanding of his immoral condition before God that leads to appealing to Him for His eternal mercy and forgiveness? This is despair, properly speaking.

As I have been intimating, Kierkegaard’s description of finitude’s despair fits another example that he mentions in his books *Works of Love* and *Practice in Christianity*, where he speaks of Christendom in contrast to Christianity [194, WOL; 85-121, PIC]. Christendom is a group of people who call themselves Christians, but they are Christians only in name, that is, only externally. They look like Christians outwardly, but they lack the authentic inwardness of Christianity that Kierkegaard has already defined in this book as honestly coming before God with the problem of their inward, moral depravity in order to obtain His mercy and the promise of eternal life. Therefore, in the final analysis, Christendom is no different from the world. It is simply another manifestation of

worldliness. While the participants in Christendom talk about the concepts found in the Bible, such as God, Jesus as the Christ, forgiveness, and eternal life, they are actually interested only in the things of this life. Just as the world desires to look like, act like, and talk like everyone else in a group, the people of Christendom also want to look like, act like, and talk like everyone else in their religious group in order to obtain people's acceptance and admiration. Often, very subtly they even compare themselves and compete with others in Christendom, hoping to display their noble spirituality through their religious performance.

The problem is that this perspective on Christianity, which is one of finitude and not both finitude and infinitude, makes people wonderful successes in Christendom but horrible failures in Christianity. While appearing to have taken seriously the infinitude of their existence that calls for their worshipping God from a position of authentic inwardness, they have rejected this aspect and focused strictly on the things of the present realm, albeit the religious things of this realm. In addition, they often choose to combine religious things with secular things so that they measure their religious success by their worldly success—how much money “God has blessed them with,” how healthy “God has made them,” and how popular (read powerful) “God has made them,” how many people attend their church, etc. Nevertheless, Christendom, like the world, is a place of eternal hopelessness and despair.

So it is with finitude's despair. Because a man is in this kind of despair, he can very well live on in temporality, indeed, actually all the better, can appear to be a man, be publicly acclaimed, honored, and esteemed, be absorbed in all the temporal goals. In fact, what is called the secular mentality consists simply of such men who, so to speak, mortgage themselves in the world. They use their capacities, amass money, carry on secular enterprises, calculate shrewdly, etc., perhaps make a name in history, but themselves they are not; spiritually speaking, they have no self, no self for whose sake they could venture everything, no self before God—however self-seeking they are otherwise. [35]

Finitude's despair is the eternal hopelessness of those who are committed to finding success and acclaim in the eyes of others in this world—even perhaps as they make a

show of worshiping the Christian God. They have sold their selves to the world. They say, “Here, world, take me and honor me and affirm me as one of yours—a person of success and power and wealth—and yes, even religiousness.” They put all their efforts into achieving a temporal and earthly goal, and perhaps history books long afterwards will mention their names as great men and women. However, if their fame has come from a wholehearted commitment to achieving success in the present realm and receiving other people’s applause, then they have never truly discovered what it means to be a human being—a synthesis of both the infinite and the finite. They have pursued being themselves, but not before God. They lack infinitude. Therefore, they never were a self, a true self, who rests honestly and transparently before God.

b. Despair as Defined by Possibility/Necessity

Possibility and necessity are equally essential to becoming (and the self has the task of becoming itself in freedom). Possibility and necessity belong to the self just as do infinitude and finitude (*ἄπειρον/πέρας* [the unlimited/limited]). A self that has no possibility is in despair, and likewise a self that has no necessity. [35]

Kierkegaard moves on to another dialectical pair of opposites, both of which need to be taken into account if we are to become authentic human beings and escape our eternal hopelessness. This pair he labels as “possibility” and “necessity” and will concentrate on the former in α below and the latter in β afterwards. Typical of Kierkegaard’s indirect and roundabout way of communicating, he does not define either one very explicitly until the second subsection β . There we learn that “possibility” refers to the opportunity we have as human beings to escape our condition of eternal hopelessness by coming before God with our moral depravity and receiving not only His forgiveness but also the promise of eternal life. Kierkegaard also describes “necessity” as our being stuck in our immoral condition, so that we refuse to come before God for

His mercy. This necessity is what the apostle Paul describes in Romans 6:17,18 as our being “enslaved to sin” prior to becoming Christians:

But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. [NAS95]

When we deal equally with the *necessity* of our being enslaved to our moral depravity now and the *possibility* of God’s freeing us from it eternally, we are a self who is no longer in despair. To ignore either one places us squarely in an eternally hopeless position. Kierkegaard will describe what it looks like to focus strictly on *possibility* to the exclusion of *necessity* in α , and then vice versa in β .

α . Possibility’s Despair Is to Lack Necessity

That this is so is due, as pointed out previously, to the dialectic [inherent in the self as synthesis].

Just as finitude is the limiting aspect in relation to infinitude, so also necessity is the constraint in relation to possibility. Inasmuch as the self as a synthesis of finitude and infinitude is established, is *kata dunamin* [potential], in order to become itself it reflects itself in the medium of imagination, and thereby the infinite possibility becomes manifest. The self is *kata dunamin* [potentially] just as possible as it is necessary, for it is indeed itself, but it has the task of becoming itself. Insofar as it is itself, it is the necessary, and insofar as it has the task of becoming itself, it is a possibility. [35]

Kierkegaard is saying that we human beings are limited by our finiteness. We cannot become more than what God creates us. For example, we cannot become transcendent and exist outside the creation the way God does. In a similar way, necessity limits our possibility. For example, God, by virtue of His being our Creator at every moment of our lives and causing us to be enslaved to our immoral condition, prevents us from embracing His salvation and continually progressing toward eternal life. God ultimately governs us, and, existentially, we are caught in the trap of our immorality, so that only God can rescue us from it. Kierkegaard goes on to say that we must use our imagination (a bad thing, as mentioned above, in the infinitizing of ourselves, because we invent false ideas of God, but now a good thing) to think of the infinite possibility of God’s being

our Savior from our immorality and its consequences of eternal judgment and hopelessness. Thus, when we use our imagination *properly*, we *are* ourselves, enslaved to moral depravity (our *necessity*), but we also are engaged in the process of *becoming* ourselves as we commit ourselves to God's rescuing us (our *possibility*).

But if possibility outruns necessity so that the self runs away from itself in possibility, it has no necessity to which it is to return; this is possibility's despair. This self becomes an abstract possibility; it flounders in possibility until exhausted but neither moves from the place where it is nor arrives anywhere, for necessity is literally that place; to become oneself is literally a movement in that place. To become is a movement away from that place, but to become oneself is a movement in that place. [35,36]

Kierkegaard is making all this quite abstract, but here is what he is saying. If we focus only on what we can become as human beings *in the present realm*—a king, a great athlete, a famous Hollywood star, the wealthiest person in the world, etc. (various possibilities), then we never deal substantially and concretely with the central problem of who we are—human beings created by God and enslaved to immorality (our necessity). We are like rudderless ships in the middle of the ocean that never arrive at port. We keep drifting this way and that way in the sea of temporary and worldly possibilities for our lives. In the midst of our drifting, we never come to terms with the fact that we are actually already in port, that we are God's creatures and enslaved to moral depravity, with the result that we need to remain in this port and to move within it by means of God's promise of salvation from our rebellion against God and its eternal consequences. This is how we *become ourselves* and not just *become*. If we are constantly seeking only a worldly goal, then we are only *becoming*, but, if we are primarily seeking the one and only eternal goal, then we are *becoming ourselves*, i.e., our true selves.

What a strange way to describe our moral and spiritual predicament. It seems more natural to think that we should move out of the port of enslavement to immorality and travel to another port, God's promise of eternal salvation, which ought to describe the transition from being a non-Christian to being a Christian. However, Kierkegaard

perceptively describes this transition as *a movement within the same port!* We can either keep drifting in the ocean of life's temporal and secular possibilities where we are in no port and which is a kind of "becoming" but is not our becoming *ourselves*. Or we can realize that we are already in the correct port by facing squarely and honestly into our being God's creatures who are enslaved to immorality, so that we make the movement within it toward God's mercy and eternal salvation. If we do the latter, then we *become ourselves*. Kierkegaard is therefore stating that we never really get rid of our necessity, God's creative activity and our enslavement to moral depravity, this side of eternity—even after becoming Christians. We cannot move out of the port of this necessity, even if we take advantage of the possibility of being rescued from our moral depravity and God's condemnation.

Thus possibility seems greater and greater to the self; more and more it becomes possible because nothing becomes actual. Eventually everything seems possible, but this is exactly the point at which the abyss swallows up the self. It takes time for each little possibility to become actuality. Eventually, however, the time that should be used for actuality grows shorter and shorter; everything becomes more and more momentary. Possibility becomes more and more intensive—but in the sense of possibility, not in the sense of actuality, for the intensive in the sense of actuality means to actualize some of what is possible. The instant something appears to be possible, a new possibility appears, and finally these phantasmagoria follow one another in such rapid succession that it seems as if everything were possible, and this is exactly the final moment, the point at which the individual himself becomes a mirage. [36]

When we dream of what we could do in the present world and what we could be become, and the more we dream, the less any of our dreams become completely true, "because nothing becomes actual." This last word, actual, that means real, definite, or concrete, is very important, because we should fundamentally desire to escape the circle of worldly possibilities and, eventually, have eternal life become actual. Yet, when all we care about are temporal and secular possibilities, our true self gets swallowed up by them. Even though some of our dreams in this world may seem to come true, we are still compelled to dream up more temporal possibilities and to move toward fulfilling them,

because we are never satisfied with what our lives are *now*. We may dream of finishing college, getting a good job, marrying a great mate, accomplishing a successful career, even winning the Super Bowl, but because each of these is only a goal within this world that has been reached, none can be defined as an “actual” goal, because none is eternal.

The real problem, though, is that we consider the eternal to be less than attractive. So we ignore it and fly toward all the temporal and worldly possibilities of which we have dreamed. And then, as life moves along, the dreams come faster and faster, filling our imaginations until it is as though we become one majestic optical illusion, because we have moved farther and farther from what it means to be a real human being, i.e., someone whose fundamental dream is to obtain God’s mercy and eternal life, even if he sees no other dream fulfilled in his existence as a human being!

What the self now lacks is indeed actuality, and in ordinary language, too, we say that an individual has become unreal. However, closer scrutiny reveals that what he actually lacks is necessity. The philosophers are mistaken when they explain necessity as a unity of possibility and actuality—no, actuality is the unity of possibility and necessity. [36]

To dwell in the fantasyland of our dreams of what we might become in the present realm, even if some of our dreams actually come true, is to miss out on the actuality of the most important reality that is possible even now. We may feel as though there is a concrete realness to the fulfillment of our dreams, but Kierkegaard is saying that, as long as we are not fundamentally pursuing the actuality of eternal mercy and life, we are instead becoming unreal. Why? Because we lack facing into the *necessity* of our being God’s creatures who are enslaved to moral depravity. We may have taken everything else into account in this world, but we have ignored the reality of God and our eternally important immoral condition.

The German philosopher Hegel believed that possibility and actuality are dialectical opposites and that the synthesis or combination of them results in necessity. In other

words, that which is necessary flows out of the possible and the actual. For example, if it is *possible* that I become a king and I *actually* become a king, then it is *necessary* for me to be a king, which seems reasonable and correct. In other words, Hegel was saying,

Possibility + Actuality → Necessity

However, Kierkegaard is saying that, in matters most important, i.e., becoming a Christian, such thinking is wrong. If we face into the *necessity* of our being God's creatures who are enslaved to immorality and we look to God for the *possibility* of eternally escaping our moral depravity, then we have moved into the *actuality* of the hope of eternal life and our salvation. In other words, Kierkegaard is saying in contrast to Hegel,

Possibility + Necessity → Actuality

Therefore, to remain only in the possibilities of this world is to remain lost with respect to eternal salvation.

When a self becomes lost in possibility in this way, it is not merely because of a lack of energy; at least it is not to be interpreted in the usual way. What is missing is essentially the power to obey, to submit to the necessity in one's life, to what may be called one's limitations. [36]

We normally consider "energy" and "power" as synonyms. However, Kierkegaard uses them with different definitions. To get stuck in the possibilities of what we could become in the present world is not merely because we do not have what it takes to fulfill our temporal dreams. More importantly, we lack the power to be willing to face into our being God's creatures who are enslaved to rebellion against Him and to submit to the proper inference that we should draw from this that would lead us to come humbly before Him and seek His mercy. The *necessity* of God's creating us as morally depraved human beings is holding us back, limiting us, from becoming what it truly means to be a human being.

Therefore, the tragedy is not that such a self did not amount to something in the world; no, the tragedy is that he did not become aware of himself, aware that

the self he is is a very definite something and thus the necessary. Instead, he lost himself, because this self fantastically reflected itself in possibility. [36,37]

The world tries to convince us that being wealthy, powerful, famous, busy, etc. are essential and valuable attributes of human beings who are successful. However, Kierkegaard is pointing out that real failure is neglecting to become aware of who we are, indeed who we must necessarily be, even if we never become successful in the world's eyes. The *necessity* of our existences as created beings and enslaved to immorality should lead us to embrace our need for God's infinite mercy. This, ultimately, is success for a human being. If we fail at this, then we fail to become aware of ourselves and to become our true selves. We have gotten lost in the dreams of every *possibility* that our imaginations can contrive the same way that we could get lost in the false ideas of God if we infinitize ourselves in Him (see above in **A**, **a**, *α*).

Even in seeing *oneself* in a mirror it is necessary to recognize oneself, for if one does not, one does not see *oneself* but only a human being. The mirror of possibility is no ordinary mirror; it must be used with extreme caution, for, in the highest sense, this mirror does not tell the truth. That a self appears to be such and such in the possibility of itself is only a half-truth, for in the possibility of itself the self is still far from or is only half of itself. Therefore the question is how the necessity of this particular self defines it more specifically. Possibility is like a child's invitation to a party; the child is willing at once, but the question now is whether the parents will give permission—and as it is with the parents, so it is with necessity. [37]

When we dream of what we could be, it is like looking in a mirror. We see ourselves as we could be and would like to be—even on the basis of the natural talents and capabilities that we possess as human beings. However, the question is, do we really see *ourself* in the mirror of possibilities? We may see ourselves, but we do not see *ourself*. Notice the emphasis in the latter *ourself*. The italics make a huge difference. To see ourselves (no italics) is to see a distorted image whereby the mirror is not telling us the truth about ourselves. It certainly is true that we have certain natural talents and maybe even could become a king, or wealthy, or powerful. Nevertheless, such actualization of our dreams still leaves us far short of what God wants us to

become. Therefore, we need the *necessity* of our existence as God's creatures with the problem of our moral depravity to intrude upon our reflection in the mirror and render the distorted image clearer and more distinct. In other words, we need to get beyond our natural talents and capabilities to our actual immoral and spiritual condition. Yet, we need necessity's permission to do so, and it is a strict parent who does not necessarily allow his children to attend parties—regardless of who sends the invitation.

In possibility everything is possible. For this reason, it is possible to become lost in possibility in all sorts of ways, but primarily in two. The one takes the form of desiring, craving; the other takes the form of the melancholy-imaginary (hope/fear or anxiety). Legends and fairy tales tell of the knight who suddenly sees a rare bird and chases after it, because it seems at first to be very close, but it flies again, and when night comes, he finds himself separated from his companions and lost in the wilderness where he now is. So it is also with desire's possibility. Instead of taking the possibility back into necessity, he chases after possibility—and at last cannot find his way back to himself. [37]

Kierkegaard is saying that dreams do not suggest whether or not they may be fulfilled. On the surface, they may all look equally possible. Thus, perhaps, we become lost in our dreams and far away from the reality of our existence and immoral condition in primarily two ways. Either we become so obsessed with every desire and craving that we feel for the things of the present realm, or we become so obsessed with fear and anxiety because of the dangers and possible disappointments of this world. If the former, we are like people chasing after something that they think they can catch, but they never do. If the latter, we are like people who are paralyzed by the thought of failing in this world. In addition, in the case of the former, the more we chase after our dreams or not, the more lost we become in eternal hopelessness and despair, for nothing in this world satisfies enough to fulfill us.

—In melancholy the opposite takes place in much the same way. Melancholically enamored, the individual pursues one of anxiety's possibilities, which finally leads him away from himself so that he is a victim of anxiety or a victim of that about which he was anxious lest he be overcome. [37]

On the other hand, if we become gripped with fear and anxiety because of the dangers and disappointments of the current life, then we spend our time fleeing from those things that we fear could hurt us, lest we become overwhelmed by them. Nevertheless, we remain stuck in eternal hopelessness and despair, because we can never get rid of *all* of life's dangers and disappointments. Therefore, the key is to look beyond the temporal *possibility* of either pleasure or pain and allow the *necessity* of our existence as morally depraved, created beings to push us into coming before God in order to obtain the *possibility* of His mercy and eternal life so that *possibility* and *necessity* form the unity of *actuality*, i.e., in order that we may expect on the basis of God's faithfulness the *actuality* of His mercy and eternal life. Thus,

Possibility + Necessity → Actuality

β. Necessity's Despair Is to Lack Possibility

If losing oneself in possibility may be compared with a child's utterance of vowel sounds, then lacking possibility would be the same as being dumb. The necessary is like pure consonants, but to express them there must be possibility. If this is lacking, if a human existence is brought to the point where it lacks possibility, then it is in despair and is in despair every moment it lacks possibility. [37]

Kierkegaard begins this section by saying that focusing on our earthly dreams of possibility is choosing to live in fantasyland, like a child's making only vowel sounds such as "ah" or "eh." The child is not uttering intelligible speech, and the person is experiencing the hopelessness of being obsessed with the things of the present world. Similarly, a lack of awareness or acceptance of the eternal possibilities that God has made available to us is like a child who is unable to speak at all. In addition, focusing on God's absolute control of the present realm, which includes our being stuck in our moral depravity apart from His grace, without taking advantage of the existential opportunity to choose to embrace the eternal possibility of forgiveness and life from God, is like a child who makes only consonant sounds such as "buh" or "tuh." Just as a child needs to

speak with both vowel sounds and consonant sounds to be understood, so do human beings need to combine the possible with the necessary, choosing to appeal to God for His eternal mercy along with having an understanding that God is causing us to exist and is in control of all reality. It is the combination of the possible and the necessary that allows us to escape despair.

Generally it is thought that there is a certain age that is especially rich in hope, or we say that at a certain time, at a particular moment of life, one is or was so rich in hope and possibility. All this, however, is merely a human manner of speaking that does not get at the truth; all this hope and all this despair are as yet neither authentic hope nor authentic despair. [38]

We tend to think that life's circumstances are capable of bringing us a genuine sense of hope. If we have grown up and matured, received a proper education, obtained a good job, and are in excellent health, then, supposedly, the possibilities for accomplishing great things seem endless, and there is great hope for the future in the present life. However, Kierkegaard is saying that such hope is not genuine hope. Likewise, to despair of getting a proper education, obtaining a good job, and being in good health is not genuine despair. Such thinking does not get at "the truth" that is more profound.

What is decisive is that with God everything is possible. This is eternally true and consequently true at every moment. This is indeed a generally recognized truth, which is commonly expressed in this way, but the critical decision does not come until a person is brought to his extremity, when, humanly speaking, there is no possibility. Then the question is whether he will believe that for God everything is possible, that is, whether he will *believe*. But this is the very formula for losing the understanding; to believe is indeed to lose the understanding in order to gain God. [38]

For Kierkegaard, the "decisive" is to choose to be a human being who comes to grips with the ultimate meaning of human existence, to be a human being who faces into the fact that God causes him to exist at every moment, who comes to the realization that he is stuck in moral depravity and requires God's eternal mercy to escape it, and who acts on this more *complete* understanding of reality. At the same time, this human being has

realized that God, if He so chooses, could bring about any possibility in his life. God, because He is the Creator of all reality, could make him rich, or healthy, or handsome, or brilliant in this temporal realm. God could also grant him mercy and life for all of eternity. All of these are possible with God.

Kierkegaard also states that most people would acknowledge that God is certainly capable of turning all these possibilities into realities. However, people typically do not choose to trust God completely for what will happen in their lives, including obtaining His eternal mercy, until they are brought to the end of their ropes and have no other place to turn. Still, there is another important question. Will a person *genuinely believe*, not only that God *could* potentially bring about any possibility in his life, but also that God *will* bring about whatever possibilities He so chooses, leaving the person in a position of utter dependence upon God for his entire temporal and eternal existence? In other words, will a person move into a state of *true, biblical belief*, casting all his concerns, hopes, and desires on God for what He will eventually create in his life, or will he half-heartedly believe, make a show of obedience to and worship of God, and then remain in despair?

In addition, true belief requires that a human being lose his understanding. This is a typical Kierkegaardian statement. In the midst of saying that authentic belief requires an *accurate* understanding of God and ourselves, Kierkegaard claims that authentic belief also requires “losing the understanding.” He does not mean, as it seems that some people have interpreted him, that biblical faith is a leap into the irrational. Observe how carefully and *rationally* Kierkegaard is explaining the biblical truth. Instead, he means that we have to change how we think about reality, so that we do not limit our understanding and fail to take into account all that we should know about God and ourselves as His creatures. Such limited knowledge leaves us reliant on ourselves and the things that we try to accomplish in the present world in order to bring us hope and

fulfillment. But we must “lose” this particular, limited understanding of reality and gain a fuller and more accurate understanding. Thus, when we forego depending on only a limited grasp of reality and incorporate the biblical information about God, it may feel as though we are losing something important, because our limited perspective has become so familiar and precious to us, as well as having served us to an extent that we thought was sufficient. Nevertheless, in the midst of loss, there is also tremendous gain, because we gain God, His mercy, and a true understanding of human existence.

Take this analogy. Imagine that someone with a capacity to imagine terrifying nightmares has pictured to himself some horror or other that is absolutely unbearable. Then it happens to him, this very horror happens to him. Humanly speaking, his collapse is altogether certain—and in despair his soul’s despair fights to be permitted to despair, to attain, if you please, the composure to despair, to obtain the total personality’s consent to despair and be in despair; consequently, there is nothing or no one he would curse more than an attempt or the person making an attempt to hinder him from despairing, as the poet’s poet so splendidly and incomparably expresses it (Richard II, III, 3):

Verwünscht sei Vetter, der mich abgelenkt Von dem bequemen Wege zur Verzweiflung.

[Beshrew thee, cousin, which didst lead me forth Of that sweet way I was in to despair!] [38]

Now Kierkegaard points out the twisted thinking of which we human beings are so capable. Imagine someone who has thought about the most horrifying experience that could possibly occur in his life, indeed, so horrifying that he admits to himself that he would emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually collapse in the midst of it. Therefore, he spends every waking moment dreading the day that his nightmare comes true. Then, it suddenly, but not unexpectedly, bursts upon the scene and envelops him. What does he do? Just exactly what he feared and predicted. He comes completely unspooled, all the while knowing that he is coming completely unspooled and hating every moment of it.

However, the twisted aspect of this whole affair is that his soul desperately fights within him to convince the rest of his psyche to go ahead and let him despair. He now wants nothing more than to despair, because his worse nightmare has come true, and at

the moment, agonizing in despair feels like the best thing to do. He even despairs of obtaining eternal life, because he is holding on so dearly to the present life. His despair rushes in and on, even though from the moment that he imagined the possibility of this horrible incident, he has dreaded having to despair when and if it were actually to happen. Now it has happened, and, ironically, in this terrifying experience of facing into his worst nightmare, his greatest enemy is the one who offers him succor and comfort, i.e., the one who tries to help him out of his despair. Instead of acceptance anyone's help, he keeps insisting to himself that he must despair, because the most horrible experience has come upon him. In other words, nothing feels so good to him now as despair.

Does not this kind of thinking and obsession with the agony of despair sound pathological? Is Kierkegaard really intimating that human beings are so sick and evil that they choose to remain in the horror of their worst nightmare, subjecting themselves willfully and intentionally to even eternal hopelessness? Yes. But this human condition, as he has already indicated, is an "extremity," to which a person may have to be pushed by his enslavement to moral depravity in order to gain God's mercy and salvation.

At this point, then, salvation is, humanly speaking, utterly impossible; but for God everything is possible! This is the battle of *faith*, battling, madly, if you will, for possibility, because possibility is the only salvation. When someone faints, we call for water, eau de Cologne, smelling salts; but when someone wants to despair, then the word is: Get possibility, get possibility, possibility is the only salvation. A possibility—then the person in despair breathes again, he revives again, for without possibility a person seems unable to breathe. At times the ingeniousness of the human imagination can extend to the point of creating possibility, but at last—that is, when it depends upon *faith*—then only this helps: that for God everything is possible. [38,39]

When, by their enslavement to moral depravity, human beings are driven to choose to despair eternally in the midst of their worst nightmare, then there is absolutely nothing *they* can do to save themselves from it. This situation adequately illustrates and defines the most extreme problem of humanity—our being stuck in our depraved moral

condition, a condition that compels us to choose to despair even when others lovingly try to help us out of our despair. In such a situation, are we completely impervious to any and all help? No. But only God, our Creator, can help us. Only He can break down the wall that we have erected to protect us from others' helping us. And yet, in spite of God's powerful work within us, the process of accepting even His help is still going to feel to us like a battle. It is going to feel like a true, existential crisis, and one in which we could possibly falter.

Kierkegaard calls this the "battle of *faith*," where we are fighting for the "possibility" to believe God and escape from our despair, especially our eternal despair, even while God is fighting for us and in us, because this "possibility" is the one possibility that can bring us salvation from the necessity of our being stuck in our moral depravity. Possibility simply means that, existentially speaking, we have a choice. Will we choose to continue in our despair, or will we believe God and the good news of eternal salvation through Jesus the Messiah—because only God makes salvation possible for us? This is to say that only God can combine the possibility of choosing to have *faith* with the necessity of His causing a person to have *faith* in order to bring about the actuality of salvation (Possibility + Necessity → Actuality).

Kierkegaard uses the example of someone's fainting to illustrate this truth. When a person faints, we call for something with a sharp and pungent smell to revive him. Similarly, in the midst of a person's worst nightmare happening to him, when he willfully chooses eternal hopelessness because of his enslavement to moral depravity, we call for the pungent smell of possibility. We remind him that, as a human being, he really does have a choice, either to despair or not. This possibility offers the person some breathing room. He has become unconscious to the point of suffocating in his despair and unwillingness to escape it. Now, he can wake up and begin to breathe freely once again. His imagination grasps that an alternative to remaining in despair is actually possible.

However, in the final analysis, there really is only one source of help that can bring him completely out of his despair—God! Yet, this is the arena of *faith*, so that he must fight to escape his fainting spell and believe “that for God everything is possible,” even choosing not to despair in the midst of his worst nightmare’s having become a reality.

Therefore, with God all things are possible, including the possibility of eternal hope and salvation. And when God works a miracle within us, we are truly revived from our fainting spell of hopelessness as we breathe in His grace and mercy. We may have tried everything within our grasp as human beings—religion, psychotherapy, exercise, busyness, etc.—to escape our despair or even to move God to love and save us. However, in the final analysis, God independently moves us to faith—to believe that He makes salvation not only possible but also actual, so that, with His necessity He turns our possibility into actuality.

And so the struggle goes on. Whether or not the embattled one collapses depends solely upon whether he obtains possibility, that is, whether he will believe. And yet he understands that, humanly speaking, his collapse is altogether certain. This is the dialectic of believing. As a rule, a person knows only that this and that probably, most likely, etc. will not happen to him. If it does happen, it will be his downfall. The foolhardy person rushes headlong into a danger with this or that possibility, and if it happens, he despairs and collapses. [39]

Kierkegaard is saying that a life of struggle is inevitable for those hoping to escape their despair and that the only way to avoid complete spiritual, emotional, and psychological collapse is to move into the realm of possibility, which he defines as the realm of faith. A person must believe in God and all that this belief involves in order to escape utter hopelessness and despair. Yet, this is exactly what the human being of faith understands, that, without God, he will fall apart, despair, and choose to continue to despair despite the best efforts his best friends to comfort and help him. In fact, he realizes that his friends will become his worst enemies, because he will choose to

despise their help *in order to continue to despair*, if it were not for God's transcendent and miraculous help.

Kierkegaard calls this state of understanding the "dialectic of believing," whereby a person soberly and honestly faces into his need to be saved from his hopelessness in the midst of realizing his total human incapability of escaping it, thus leaving him with no choice but to have God save him. In other words, authentic belief is both a choice that a human being makes and a miracle that God causes. And it seems that, more often than not, the miracle occurs when the person is pushed to the extreme of his despair, even wanting to despair while also wanting to escape his despair.

Kierkegaard also says that, in general, people realize that the worst case scenario will probably not happen to them. Yet, the wise person knows that, apart from God's transcendent help, he will fail at retaining his equanimity in the midst of life's most difficult circumstances. On the other hand, as Alexander Pope wrote in *An Essay On Criticism* (1709), "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread." The fool thinks that he can handle any circumstance by himself. Yet, when the one circumstance occurs that he dreads the most, he finds out that he is too weak to endure it, and he collapses—emotionally, psychologically, and even spiritually. It then becomes obvious that he is a fool when his facing into the danger only causes him greater despair and he completely gives up—forever! Consequently, it is quite important to remain circumspect about our human capabilities.

The believer *sees* and understands his downfall, humanly speaking (in what has happened to him, or in what he has ventured), but he believes. For this reason he does not collapse. He leaves it entirely to God how he is to be helped, but he believes that for God everything is possible. To *believe* his downfall is impossible. To understand that humanly it is his downfall and nevertheless to believe in possibility is to believe. So God helps him—perhaps by allowing him to avoid the horror, perhaps through the horror itself—and here, unexpectedly, miraculously, divinely, help does come. Miraculously, for it is a peculiar kind of pedantry to maintain that only 1,800 years ago did it happen that a person was aided miraculously. [39]

In contrast to the person who thinks he can handle any circumstance on his own, even, perhaps, save himself from eternal hopelessness and his enslavement to his depraved moral condition, the believer actually considers his human downfall in the midst of dire circumstances as a good thing. He sees his complete moral, emotional, psychological, and spiritual helplessness as the best place for a true believer to be. But, of course, he also considers God's miraculously rescuing him from his downfall as the best part of the best place for him to be.

In other words, both the worst that a person can do, collapse under pressure, and the best that a person can do, genuinely believe God for the possibility and then certainty of eternal life, happen for the biblical believer. On the one hand, he gives up and despairs of his ability either to rescue himself from his dire circumstances or cause himself to continue to believe God for His grace and mercy. On the other hand, he continues to believe God—miraculously. This person acknowledges that, without God's miraculous help, he will succumb to utter unbelief. He will reject even God's offer of eternal mercy and comfort. He will rebel against God. Yet, God takes this particular negative possibility and makes it impossible, so that, instead, the person authentically believes God for the eventual result of his eternal salvation and eternal life.

Thus, in contrast to the person who, for example, joins Christendom in his attempts to make God love him through his religious practices and belief in certain doctrines, the believer believes in only the miraculous work of God's grace apart from his religious practices and doctrines and in spite of his religious practices and doctrines. The believer adopts such a perspective because he accurately and wholeheartedly understands that, while he is helplessly alone in the midst of his worst nightmare's having forced itself upon him, and even in his moral depravity that has trapped him in his rebellion against God, "for God everything is possible." Plus, God's possibilities include His rescuing him from despair. Thus, the believer's humanity collapses because of his depraved moral

condition that permeates the very fabric of his being, but his humanity also revives because of God's performing a miracle in his heart. Therefore, this dialectic is exactly what he believes, with the result that God is now his salvation, and, to his great joy, his giving up on God is what is impossible, *because God will not give up on him*. Thus, the believer understands that he has gone through a *human* downfall only to experience a *divine* salvation. He believes both his human frailty with his need for God's miraculous salvation and God's divine help that meets his human need.

On the basis of His independent and gracious choice, God truly does help this person escape his eternal despair, either while God eliminates the difficult circumstances of his life, or while He takes him through them. Thus, the goodness of God is not in His taking away the pain of our suffering, even though He is perfectly capable of doing so. The goodness of God is in His causing a person to *believe* with a longing for eternal life and salvation, even if he has to endure the pain of suffering. Consequently, a miracle takes place every time someone becomes a true believer or continues in genuine belief, just as miracles occurred through Jesus and His apostles over 2,000 years ago.

We should also note that, typically, Christians are most impressed with and, indeed, seek after God's miraculous healings of physical diseases and ailments. However, Kierkegaard is implying that the greatest miracles take place when either unbelievers become believers or when believers *persevere in belief* through life's horrific and difficult experiences—all by means of God's transcendent help.

Whether a person is helped miraculously depends essentially upon the passion of the understanding whereby he has understood that help was impossible and depends next on how honest he was toward the power that nevertheless did help him. As a rule, however, men do neither the one nor the other; they cry out that help is impossible without once straining their understanding to find help, and afterward they ungratefully lie. [39]

Here Kierkegaard describes the two characteristics that mark a genuine Christian—passionate understanding and honesty. If a person desires to understand with every fiber of his being that he, by himself, cannot escape his enslavement to moral depravity and that only God's grace and mercy can save him, and, then, if he is completely honest and transparent about this before God, who is the only one who can provide him with salvation and eternal life, then, and only then, is he a genuine believer.

Notice that Kierkegaard does not mention adherence to creeds, to traditions, or to other Christian doctrines, or membership in a particular church or denomination, or other stipulations that we usually place upon people to demonstrate that they are authentic Christians. For him, the biblical explanation of Christianity is about a person's doing authentic belief with God's gracious help in his inner being in the midst of his moral helplessness. A person's theology may be inaccurate. He may even not understand that Jesus is God. He may find objectionable the irrationality of the trinity and believe that the Bible teaches a different explanation of God. He may not attend church regularly or subscribe to any denomination with its peculiarities. But, if his fundamental desire is to know God, believing that he is incapable of escaping his moral depravity and its consequences apart from God's miraculous work within him, causing him to believe God with genuine and biblical faith, Kierkegaard is saying that he will obtain God's eternal mercy at the judgment.

It is possible to understand Kierkegaard as meaning that a person's *self-induced* passionate understanding of God's being a miracle worker along with his *self-induced* honesty about his immoral condition before God is what *moves God to perform the miracle of salvation*. However, it is more consistent with what Kierkegaard says about God's being the ongoing Creator of our existence to interpret him as saying that these two characteristics are part of, indeed the most important part of, the very results of God's miracle. It is God, ultimately, who brings about within a human being both this

passionate understanding of immorality's need for God's help and this honesty of his depraved moral condition before God.

Nevertheless, Kierkegaard believes that we human beings are responsible for "straining [our] understanding to find help." While this may sound inconsistent with the notion that only God can cause us to strain our understanding, nevertheless it fits rationally into the biblical perspective on the nature of reality. God is telling a story by means of the creation, His story about Himself through the Jewish Messiah Jesus of Nazareth, who is God within the story. However, just as we grant a sense of responsibility and accountability to characters in any human novel that we read, so should we naturally grant a sense of responsibility and accountability to all the characters in God's story that have a moral obligation to obey God, e.g., angels and human beings. Consequently, it makes perfect, rational sense for Kierkegaard to say that we human beings should strain to understand God, even though it is God who must cause us to strain to understand Him.

Kierkegaard also says, though, that we shirk this obligation and then lie afterwards that we did not know that we even had the moral obligation to understand God. Thus, those who do not seek out God's help "ungratefully lie" about there being no help and will be held accountable for their lies at God's judgment.

The believer has the ever infallible antidote for despair—possibility—because for God everything is possible at every moment. This is the good health of faith, that resolves contradictions. The contradiction here is that, humanly speaking, downfall is certain, but that there is possibility nonetheless. Good health generally means the ability to resolve contradictions. For example, in the realm of the bodily or physical, a draft is a contradiction, for a draft is disparately or undialectically cold and warm, but a good healthy body resolves this contradiction and does not notice the draft. So also with faith. [39,40]

Having faith, believing that God can, at every moment, graciously forgive us and save us from our humanly inevitable eternal hopelessness, is like having a healthy body that can withstand a draft that blows on a person, regardless of whether it feels hot or

cold to him. Thus, it is as though the draft is not there, because it does not bother him. The same is true for a believer who experiences the “draft” of both his inability to extricate himself from his despair and the possibility that God will do so for him.

Kierkegaard calls these two aspects of a person’s experience a “contradiction.” On the one hand, we seem stuck in our depraved moral condition that has brought about despair. On the other hand, there is One who can get us unstuck, so that we escape despair. Thus, genuine belief does not allow the certainty of our being completely unable to save ourselves from our enslavement to moral depravity to keep us from finding hope, because our faith has discovered God’s willingness to bring about salvation for us miraculously. For God everything is possible, even eternal salvation, at every moment of a morally depraved human being’s existence. And faith understands and embraces God’s help at every moment, while it also faces into the person’s complete inability to do anything positive toward salvation—even after becoming a Christian.

So often we hear that now that we have become Christians, we can conquer our immorality through certain religious techniques and practices. If we just pray enough, meditate enough, fast enough, perform certain spiritual disciplines, etc., we can live obediently to God by transcending our immorality and becoming good people. We can conquer our “flesh,” our natural born immoral humanity, by means of the Spirit of God. However, Kierkegaard is stating that, even though we remain morally depraved human beings and even succumb on occasion to the temptations of our immorality, true faith realizes that such moral failures do not hinder God from being merciful and gracious toward us. The *necessity* of our continued moral depravity does not prevent us from enjoying divine *possibility*. Indeed, possibility must remain possibility, simply because, in and of ourselves, we remain unable to shake the grip that our immoral condition has on us. Yes, God has performed His miracle within us by giving us faith, but we continue to

experience the “necessity” of our immorality even while enjoying the “possibility” *and* “necessity” of His grace and promise of eternal salvation.

To lack possibility means either that everything has become necessary for a person or that everything has become trivial. [40]

Now, Kierkegaard begins to wrap up this section by explaining that a person’s perspective on the things of his life leads him to consider it all as a “necessity” or as simply being “trivial” and of little importance. Kierkegaard will put a slightly different spin on the word “necessity” from the way that he has been using it, while “trivial” has a much more subtle meaning. We will look carefully at what he has to say about both these words.

The determinist, the fatalist, is in despair and as one in despair has lost his self, because for him everything has become necessity. He is like that king who starved to death because all his food was changed to gold. [40]

Here we see a different kind of “necessity.” Before, Kierkegaard used the word to refer to the certainty of human beings’ eternally despairing without hope of escape on their own. Now, he associates it with determinism or fatalism. If we consider the word “determinism,” we might think of God’s absolute sovereignty, that God “determines” all that happens in the created realm. I mentioned in Part One, A, A. that I think Kierkegaard *does* believe in a kind of determinism, that God is always creating the existence of every part of the creation on an ongoing basis—even human beings and their choices. Is, therefore, Kierkegaard contradicting himself? No, because notice that he uses “fatalist” as synonymous with “determinist.” A fatalist is someone who believes not only that everything that happens is ultimately determined by someone or something, but also that human choices are use/less, because we cannot stop fate. In other words, the word “determinist” can have either a positive or negative connotation, while “fatalist” has only a negative connotation. Thus, we know that Kierkegaard is ascribing a negative connotation to both words, so that the fatalist considers his choices to be ultimately

useless, because he cannot stop them from resulting in his being in eternal despair. However, Kierkegaard believes in the usefulness of human choices, even though they are divinely determined by God, because He holds us accountable for our choices and can, if He chooses, grant us the miracle of believing Him for the possibility of eternal life. When this happens, eternal life and our choices toward it then become a necessity and not just a possibility for us on account of God's faithfulness to those whom grants this miracle.

We recall that Kierkegaard is the father of existentialism, the philosophical approach to reality that adheres to the *ultimate* value of human choices (if one is an atheist), or to the *penultimate* value of human choices (if one is a theist, indeed, a *Christian* theist). Thus, in no way would Kierkegaard want to reject the truth of God's absolute sovereignty nor the truth of man's moral accountability for his choices. BOTH are true. The "determinist," or "fatalist," as Kierkegaard is defining these terms, has abandoned the idea that his choices are meaningful and that he is morally accountable for them. In contrast, the believer and Christian recognizes and embraces the ultimate necessity and possibility of God's choices, for whom everything is possible, as well as the penultimate necessity and possibility of his choices, for whom eternal life is possible—if God so chooses to grant him the miracle of genuine, biblical faith.

Personhood is a synthesis of possibility and necessity. Its continued existence is like breathing (*respiration*), which is an inhaling and exhaling. The self of the determinist cannot breathe, for it is impossible to breathe necessity exclusively, because that would utterly suffocate a person's self. The fatalist is in despair, has lost God and thus his self, for he who does not have a God does not have a self, either. But the fatalist has no God, or, what amounts to the same thing, his God is necessity; since everything is possible for God, the God is this—that everything is possible. Therefore the fatalist's worship of God is at most an interjection, and essentially it is a muteness, a mute capitulation: he is unable to pray. [40]

Kierkegaard is describing the meaning of human existence. It is to acknowledge both God's absolute sovereignty over all the created reality and our enslavement to moral depravity that makes it humanly impossible to escape God's eternal condemnation,

while also believing that God can and will sovereignly rescue us from our moral depravity and its eternal consequences. This continual acknowledgement for a human being is like breathing. It is to inhale the air of *necessity* and to exhale the breath of *possibility*. It is living the “contradiction” (apparent contradiction or paradox) of the necessity of sovereignty/moral depravity and the possibility of human choices affected by God’s sovereignty that permits a person to escape his depravity in eternity. The cure for eternal hopelessness is for us to face into not only our enslavement to moral depravity, but also God’s willingness to save us from it. Also, as already mentioned, facing into both is like inhaling and exhaling. Just as we cannot breathe and live if we only inhale, and similarly, just as we cannot breathe and live if we only exhale, neither can we escape despair if we look at only God’s determinism within the creation and His willingness to save us from our moral depravity. Likewise, we cannot escape despair if we look at only our enslavement to immorality, thinking that fate has determined that we remain stuck in it. We must inhale God’s sovereignty, because with God everything is possible, including our choosing to escape our moral depravity. And we must exhale our recognition and appreciation for our problematic condition of being humanly stuck in our moral depravity, thus acknowledging the necessity of our remaining in such a condition, unless God grants us the certain possibility of escaping it. This breathing out then results in embracing the possibility of eternal life, thus making it a necessity as we again breathe in God’s sovereign grace.

What if we stare at our immorality and lament, “All is lost; I will never be rescued from my moral depravity?” Then we have succumbed to fatalism that is blind to God’s possibility for us. We are suffocating in the “necessity” of fatalism, for we have forgotten to inhale the “possibility” of God’s mercy. Thus, the fatalist is in despair. Kierkegaard says that he has lost not only God, but also his self, that is, his true *self* or what it means to be a true human being. He either fails to understand the meaning of human existence,

or he wants to avoid coming to grips with it so that he can intentionally and willfully avoid finding relief and comfort. He is lost in his despair at being stuck in his immoral condition, maybe even realizing that it is God who keeps him there, because God is absolutely sovereign over all the created realm.

And what about the fatalist's worship of God, if it even exists? It is basically a silent acceptance of his hopeless situation. He goes through the motions of worship of God—attending church, singing hymns, participating in Bible studies, eloquently praying out loud in assembled groups of Christians, serving on the elder board, running church programs, leading and going on missions trips, etc.—but his heart is not genuinely in it. Indeed, he cannot even pray the way that a humble and repentant heart naturally will—in private and in silence, knowing that God cares more about his heart than he does about his appearance of obedience among his fellow “Christians.”

To pray is also to breathe, and possibility is for the self what oxygen is for breathing. Nevertheless, possibility alone or necessity alone can no more be the condition for the breathing of prayer than oxygen alone or nitrogen alone can be that for breathing. For prayer there must be a God, a self—and possibility—or a self and possibility in a pregnant sense, because the being of God means that everything is possible, or that everything is possible means the being of God; only he whose being has been so shaken that he has become spirit by understanding that everything is possible, only he has anything to do with God. That God's will is the possible makes me able to pray; if there is nothing but necessity, man is essentially as inarticulate as the animals. [40,41]

We need both oxygen and nitrogen to breathe and stay alive. We need both possibility and necessity for prayer to be authentic. If all we have is the necessity of fatalism, so that we are stuck in our moral depravity, then we are unable to pray authentically, with the result that we are in despair. We may put on a good show of prayer in front of our Christian friends, but we need the truth of God as our transcendent Creator, who, by His grace, mercy, and forgiveness, can make salvation possible through His miraculous work within us. Then we can pray with both a genuine humility and a confident appeal to God, who will answer with an eternal “Yes!” However,

Kierkegaard claims that such understanding and prayer require that we be shaken to our core with the profound realization that our immorality imprisons us, and nothing and no one but God can rescue us from it. He says that then we have become spirit, a true self, who has grasped the meaning of human existence, because now everything is possible, including eternal salvation through God and His grace.

It is quite different with the philistine-bourgeois mentality, that is, triviality, which also essentially lacks possibility. [41]

All of a sudden, Kierkegaard sounds like Karl Marx—philistine-*bourgeois* mentality! What is this? Well, philistine refers to a person obsessed with materialism, who is indifferent to art and intellectual pursuits. Bourgeois is basically synonymous with philistine, and Marx used the word a year earlier than the writing of *The Sickness Unto Death* to refer to those who not only are wealthy materialists but who also exploit the working class. Kierkegaard may have both aspects in mind, materialism and exploitation, but, certainly, the first is sufficient to define the mentality to which he refers. Strictly speaking, materialism is a mentality that avoids embracing God as our transcendent Creator and, therefore, is focused on only the things of the present world, as if they are worthy of the same attention that we should give God. However, Kierkegaard points out that the things of the current realm are trivial, small, inconsequential, and insignificant in comparison to God. The materialist is also caught in the web of necessity, because he rejects the possibility of escaping his obsession through God, with whom everything is possible. Instead, he has focused on only the necessity that exists within the creation, whether the necessity of sustaining himself physically, emotionally, and psychologically in the present realm, or the necessity of his moral depravity. However, by doing so, he is avoiding and lacking the possibility of God's granting him eternal life.

The philistine-bourgeois mentality is spiritlessness; determinism and fatalism are despair of spirit, but spiritlessness is also despair. [41]

Kierkegaard now says that this materialistic perspective on life is spiritless. It makes people less than human. It turns them into animals, interested only in satisfying their appetites and physical cravings for food, happiness, sex, entertainment, and personal performance that brings them a sense of accomplishment. While fatalism despairs of becoming spirit, of becoming truly human by being rescued from moral depravity, at least it recognizes the existence of the spiritual. In contrast, philistine materialism turns people into spiritless, inhuman animals, which of course means that they, too, are stuck in eternal hopelessness and despair, just like the fatalist.

The philistine-bourgeois mentality lacks every qualification of spirit and is completely wrapped up in probability, within which possibility finds its small corner; therefore it lacks the possibility of becoming aware of God. Bereft of imagination, as the philistine-bourgeois always is, whether alehouse keeper or prime minister, he lives within a certain trivial compendium of experiences as to how things go, what is possible, what usually happens. In this way, the philistine-bourgeois has lost his self and God. [41]

We notice here that Kierkegaard substitutes the word “probability” for the word “possibility” in order to describe the “philistine-bourgeois mentality.” On the surface, these words appear synonymous, but probability refers to something that is likely to happen while possibility refers to something that has the potential to happen. These definitions also appear synonymous, but Kierkegaard is distinguishing between the perspective of a human being who lifts his eyes no higher than this earth and the things of this earth and the perspective of a human being who truly sees God as the one who saves him from his moral depravity and its eternal consequences. The philistine, whether the lowliest person in society or the highest, thinks only of what *probably* will happen, as he focuses on strictly his material and earthly pursuits. The person of belief thinks of what *possibly* can happen if God graciously forgives him and promises him eternal life. Thus, the philistine can list a whole host of probable and yet relatively unimportant occurrences in his life (biblically speaking), but he cannot add to this list the occurrence of God’s grace and forgiveness that is possible only for those who have

become aware of God by believing. The result is that the philistine has lost his true self and the meaning of his human existence in the wide open desert of his physical and worldly cravings, because he lacks sufficient imagination to picture God's loving him and forgiving him with the end result of eternal life.

In order for a person to become aware of his self and of God, imagination must raise him higher than the miasma of probability, it must tear him out of this and teach him to hope and to fear—or to fear and to hope—by rendering possible that which surpasses the *quantum satis* [sufficient amount] of any experience. But the philistine-bourgeois mentality does not have imagination, does not want to have it, abhors it. So there is no help to be had here. And if at times existence provides frightful experiences that go beyond the parrot-wisdom of routine experience, then the philistine-bourgeois mentality despairs, then it becomes apparent that it was despair; it lacks faith's possibility of being able under God to save a self from certain downfall. [41]

Kierkegaard is saying that living with only probability, focusing on human experiences without taking human moral depravity and God into account, turns human beings into inhuman animals and is sheer poison to the human soul. What is needed is for our imaginations to lift our minds above this earth to heaven where we can look to God, fear Him, and hope for His grace which brings us eternal salvation. Such inward movement would take us beyond what the materialistic heart considers sufficient for life's experiences—the satisfaction of sensual desires. However, the philistine lacks the proper, moral imagination to see God. In fact, he hates God. Therefore, he lives his life going from one routine experience to another, employing the wisdom he has gained by simply parroting and copying others. Even when he encounters frightening events in his life that ought to push him toward God, he spurns His help. Instead, he chooses to despair, and it becomes obvious that he has always been in despair, progressively collapsing inside emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually as he runs away from faith's possibility of God's saving him from eternal hopelessness.

Fatalism and determinism, however, do have sufficient imagination to despair of possibility, sufficient possibility to discover impossibility; the philistine-bourgeois mentality reassures itself with the trite and obvious and is just as much in despair whether things go well or badly. [41]

Interestingly enough, fatalism, while lacking the imagination to fear and hope in God, does have sufficient imagination to know that it is not fearing and hoping in God. This is in contrast to philistinism. The latter keeps reassuring itself that everything is copacetic, even if things go badly, because it has focused on the trivial for its sense of comfort. Fatalism is conscious of its hopeless state, while philistinism deceives itself by thinking that the things of this life, as unimportant as they are, are adequate to satisfy itself.

Fatalism and determinism lack possibility for the relaxing and mitigating, for the tempering of necessity, and thus lack possibility as mitigation. The philistine-bourgeois mentality thinks that it controls possibility, that it has tricked this prodigious elasticity into the trap or madhouse of probability, thinks that it holds it prisoner; it leads possibility around imprisoned in the cage of probability, exhibits it, imagines itself to be the master, does not perceive that precisely thereby it has imprisoned itself in the thralldom of spiritlessness and is the most wretched of all. [41,42]

On the one hand, people who believe their choices are useless because everything happens by fate are incredibly uptight. They despair of the possibility of eternal salvation. What they need is God, His grace, and His mercy to allow them to relax. On the other hand, people who are obsessed with satisfying their physical cravings believe that they have reached a place in this life where they are in adequate control of their circumstances. Therefore, what they have now is sufficient to satisfy all their needs, including their need for God's mercy and eternal life. In other words, they do not need God's mercy and eternal life. Kierkegaard says that it is as though they have imprisoned the possibility of God's mercy in a cage and will not let it out to help them. Instead, they count on the things that they *probably* can bring about in their lives in order to feel good about themselves. Thus, they think that they have tricked their need for eternal life into being satisfied by their fulfilling their needs of this temporal life. However, they have deceived only themselves. In addition, while believing themselves to be happy, they are miserable, and they hide their misery from both themselves and others as much as

possible. And those who live in this manner, like animals consumed with indulging their appetites, are spiritless and inhuman. They have lost their selves and their God.

The person who gets lost in possibility soars high with the boldness of despair; he for whom everything became necessity overstrains himself in life and is crushed in despair; but the philistine-bourgeois mentality spiritlessly triumphs. [42]

Kierkegaard concludes by comparing the emotional and psychological states of the three different kinds of people whom he has described in these last two sections, “Possibility’s Despair Is to Lack Necessity” and “Necessity’s Despair Is to Lack Possibility.” He says that if we focus on merely the possibility of what we could become in this life—a king, a successful business man, a famous athlete, etc.—and do not face into the necessity of our moral depravity, then we are like a bird who is soaring in the sky. We look as though we are free and confident with nothing to hinder us from reaching our goals. Nevertheless, behind our boldness, in the midst of “gett[ing] lost in possibility,” is despair. On the other hand, we can get lost in necessity in one of two ways. First, we could succumb to the darkness of fatalism, so intimidated by our lack of control of the things in this life, especially our being stuck in our moral depravity, that we become crushed by despair. Second, we could pretend as though life is always wonderful, madly pursuing the satisfying of our every whim and fancy while appearing completely happy to those around us. Thus, we are philistines and look triumphant in this life, but we lack spirit. We are avoiding our true selves and God, thus making ourselves just as miserable and despairing as the fatalist.

B. DESPAIR AS DEFINED BY CONSCIOUSNESS

The ever increasing intensity of despair depends upon the degree of consciousness or is proportionate to its increase: the greater the degree of consciousness, the more intensive the despair. [42]

Is Kierkegaard in this section moving beyond the previous discussion of the different kinds of despair, or is he coming at it from a different angle? It is the latter. He is saying that infinitude's despair, finitude's despair, possibility's despair, and necessity's despair can all be experienced at different levels of consciousness, or what we could also call awareness. In other words, the more aware that we are of whatever kind of despair we are experiencing (infinitude's despair, finitude's despair, possibility's despair, or necessity's despair), the more intense is our *conscious* sense of hopelessness.

This is everywhere apparent, most clearly in despair at its maximum and minimum. The devil's despair is the most intensive despair, for the devil is sheer spirit and hence unqualified consciousness and transparency; there is no obscurity in the devil that could serve as a mitigating excuse. Therefore, his despair is the most absolute defiance. This is despair at its maximum. [42]

Kierkegaard is presenting an interesting idea—that, of all God's *personal* creatures (human beings in the physical realm and angels and demons in the spiritual realm), the devil, Satan, actually feels the greatest hopelessness and despair—in spite of his complete and total aggressive commitment to rebelling against God. Why? Because, as Kierkegaard says, the devil is “sheer spirit and hence unqualified consciousness and transparency.” In other words, Satan is not only the most rebellious of all creatures but also the most honest and open about his rebellion. In no way does the devil desire or attempt to hide his hatred of God. He is completely honest and transparent about his commitment to violating every moral commandment that he can. Also, in no way is there any hope, even theologically, that the devil will desire or attempt to change from his abject rebellion against God, because God has written the story of creation in such a way that the devil remains committed to evil and his hatred of God. For human beings, there is hope that God will change them inwardly, so that they are no longer rebellious. Indeed, God has promised that this will happen for those whom He has chosen and predestined. However, for the devil, the only promise of God is that he will remain

committed to evil until the end of the temporal realm, and then God will rightly and justly destroy him. Thus, “his despair is the most absolute defiance,” which also means that he experiences the maximum of eternal hopelessness, even if he never displays it outwardly.

At first glance, despair and defiance within a creature do not seem to go together. Certainly, the defiant person, fully convinced in his defiance, is not despairing, is he? Instead, we would think that he is confident that he will prevail in his defiant and rebellious stance. However, we are talking about God whom he is defying, and who can succeed in winning against God? No one. Therefore, Kierkegaard is correctly pointing out that the most defiant person, the devil, is actually the most despairing, because even he must know that he cannot succeed in rebelling against God. God will always win the battle. Kierkegaard is also hinting at the fact that, if we human beings are defiantly committed to rebelling against God and very much aware of this commitment, then we are not far behind the devil in our level of despair and hopelessness. We, too, are reaching the maximum level of eternal despair.

Despair at its minimum is a state that—yes, one could humanly be tempted almost to say that in a kind of innocence it does not even know that it is despair. There is the least despair when this kind of unconsciousness is greatest; it is almost a dialectical issue whether it is justifiable to call such a state despair. [42]

At the opposite end of the spectrum, in contrast to the devil, there are those human beings who are seemingly unaware of their rebellion against God. They, in fact, appear rather innocent, as though they do not know that they are in despair. Therefore, can they be said to be in despair? Yes, and no—yes, because all human beings experience some degree of eternal hopelessness because of their inherent moral depravity; no, because they are doing a fairly good job of hiding their rebellious condition, not only from others but also from themselves. Thus, one is tempted to claim that they are not really in

despair. However, such a claim could only be made by giving in to appearances and not stating accurately the real situation.

a. The Despair That Is Ignorant of Being Despair, or the Despairing Ignorance of Having a Self and an Eternal Self

That this condition is nevertheless despair and is properly designated as such manifests what in the best sense of the word may be called the obstinacy of truth. *Veritas est index sui et falsi* [Truth is the criterion of itself and of the false]. But this obstinacy of truth certainly is not respected; likewise, it is far from being the case that men regard the relationship to truth, relating themselves to the truth, as the highest good, and it is very far from being the case that they Socratically regard being in error in this manner as the worst misfortune—the sensible in them usually far outweighs their intellectuality. [42,43]

We recall that Kierkegaard has just mentioned in his introduction to this section, “Despair as Defined by Consciousness,” the condition of being unaware of one’s despair. He is saying here that the fact that those who are the least mindful of their hopelessness are still hopeless is a tribute to “the obstinacy of truth.” Normally, we think of people, not concepts, as being obstinate and unwilling to budge in the midst of their stubbornness. Kierkegaard, however, astutely points out that truth, i.e., biblical truth, will simply not permit people to escape their eternally hopeless condition before God, because the truth is ultimately God Himself. Eventually, at the final judgment, God will oblige all human beings to answer for their morally depravity and rebellion, and the truth will then and there “obstinately” maintain that a person has been hopelessly engaged in being hopeless.

However, people do not properly heed this inevitability and do not pay attention to it the way that they should. They do not “regard [their] relationship to truth” as “the highest good.” They do not believe that their pursuit of and belief in the truth of God as He has revealed Himself in creation and the Bible is the greatest goal for all human beings in the present realm. In addition, as Kierkegaard goes on to say, “[I]t is very far from being the

case that they Socratically regard being in error in this manner as the worst misfortune.” Kierkegaard will discuss Socrates in much more detail later, but he is referring to the ancient Greek philosopher’s willingness to admit that he did not know all that he ought to know or that he could know, as well as his conviction that ignorance of truth was the greatest form of poverty for a human being. Thus, to deny that being ignorant of relating properly to biblical truth is the greatest evil that a person can perform is also to deny the appropriateness of Socrates’ approach to life, and Socrates was clearly one of Kierkegaard’s heroes of history, just notch under his greatest hero, Jesus of Nazareth.

Instead, people, quite un-Socratically and unbiblically, ignore God and their accountability to Him while also overlooking the fact that their misfortune of material poverty, physical disease, business failure, or social obscurity cannot come close to being compared to the greatest misfortune of all—their eternal hopelessness before God, while they also currently engage in the misfortune of willfully ignoring the truth and thus relating improperly to the truth. Rather than embracing the truth by seeking it and believing it with authentic, biblical inwardness, people allow their sensual appetites, “the sensate in them,” to rule them. Their physical cravings overshadow their knowledge of their need to pursue and relate properly to truth.

For example, if a man is presumably happy, imagines himself to be happy, although considered in the light of truth he is unhappy, he is usually far from wanting to be wrenched out of his error. On the contrary, he becomes indignant, he regards anyone who does so as his worst enemy, he regards it as an assault bordering on murder in the sense that, as is said, it murders his happiness. Why? Because he is completely dominated by the sensate and the sensate-psychical, because he lives in sensate categories, the pleasant and the unpleasant, waves goodbye to spirit, truth, etc., because he is too sensate to have the courage to venture out and to endure being spirit. [43]

People think that they are happy even while ignoring God and their moral rebellion, but they are not. In addition, they are so wedded to their physical cravings that they have no desire to escape their wretched condition of being under God’s judgment and

condemnation. Instead, they get angry if someone attempts to help them out of this eternal predicament. They are so committed to satisfying their earthly, temporary desires that they consider it a crime if someone offers them assistance in leaving their obsession with sensual happiness in order to gain eternal life and salvation from God. They are thus focused on avoiding only temporary pain and pursuing only temporary pleasure rather than eternal pain and eternal well-being respectively. Consequently, they do not want to take the risk of becoming “spirit”—of being authentically human by facing into the truth of their moral depravity and need for God’s mercy.

However vain and conceited men may be, they usually have a very meager conception of themselves nevertheless, that is, they have no conception of being spirit, the absolute that a human being can be; but vain and conceited they are—on the basis of comparison. Imagine a house with a basement, first floor, and second floor planned so that there is or is supposed to be a social distinction between the occupants according to floor. Now, if what it means to be a human being is compared with such a house, then all too regrettably the sad and ludicrous truth about the majority of people is that in their own house they prefer to live in the basement. Every human being is a psychical-physical synthesis intended to be spirit; this is the building, but he prefers to live in the basement, that is, in sensate categories. Moreover, he not only prefers to live in the basement—no, he loves it so much that he is indignant if anyone suggests that he move to the superb upper floor that stands vacant and at his disposal, for he is, after all, living in his own house. [43]

We would think that people who are proud and arrogant have an accurate perception of themselves, because they seem thoroughly confident of their supposed tremendous capabilities. For example, if a person is proud of his ability to make money to the extent that this is the focus of his life, then it is usually because he is good at making money. Yet, Kierkegaard is saying that this person does not perceive himself accurately, because he is overlooking the fact that he is “spirit” too—that the most important aspect of his being human is that he is a moral and rational person who is accountable before God and needs His mercy.

Therefore, he is like a person who owns a beautiful two-story house with a basement and, yet, who chooses to live in the basement. The basement represents the person’s

obsession with his sensual and physical desires, while the well-furnished and beautiful second floor represents a biblical relationship with God whereby he would face into his moral depravity, appeal to God for eternal mercy, and eventually receive it at the final judgment. Kierkegaard is saying that people would rather live in the basement of ignoring God while pursuing the satisfaction of their physical cravings. The wonderful furnishings of the second story, its view beautiful view of the eternal countryside out its windows, and the never-ending sunshine pouring through them is not attractive enough to them. In fact, their pride will not permit them to humble themselves before God and escape the basement of eternal despair in order to live on the second floor of eternal hope. Plus, they become angry if someone suggests that they are living in the basement and missing out on enjoying better accommodations. How dare someone tell them how to live in their own house!

No, to be in error is, quite un-Socratically, what men fear least of all. There are amazing examples that amply illustrate this. A thinker erects a huge building, a system, a system embracing the whole of existence, world history, etc., and if his personal life is considered, to our amazement the appalling and ludicrous discovery is made that he himself does not personally live in this huge, domed palace but in a shed alongside it, or in a doghouse, or at best in the janitor's quarters. Were he to be reminded of this contradiction by a single word, he would be insulted. For he does not fear to be in error if he can only complete the system—with the help of being in error. [43,44]

Here we see Kierkegaard once again critiquing, indeed attacking, Hegel's philosophy whereby each individual human gets absorbed into the mass of humanity and human history and disappears in it the same way that a drop of water becomes indistinguishable from the rest of the ocean as soon as it falls into it. Yet, Kierkegaard points out that not even Hegel could live under and within his own philosophy. If we think of his philosophy as a magnificent building, a marvelously logical system of thought, then Hegel himself occupied a shed beside the building. Why? Because he was an individual who had to live as an individual and even think about his corporate system of thought from outside

the system! In addition, his shed lacked the structure and furniture of true spirituality, because, by virtue of his philosophical approach that ignored people's basic individuality, he ignored embracing the most important aspect of human existence, his own need for God's mercy. Plus, if someone had suggested that he was settling for such an inglorious home, Hegel would indignantly have disagreed. He had convinced himself that he was in the truth. However, Kierkegaard is saying that he was more interested in formulating an impressive philosophy that brought him great acclaim than in genuinely pursuing the truth. Hegel lacked a quality that Socrates had, the humility to admit that he did not know all that he should know or could know, because Hegel always claimed to be "this close" so to speak to completing his accurate explanation of the whole of reality, something that the Bible, the inerrant and divinely inspired message of God does not even claim to do.

Therefore, it makes no difference whether the person in despair is ignorant that his condition is despair—he is in despair just the same. If the despair is perplexity, then the ignorance of despair simply adds error to it. The relation between ignorance and despair is similar to that between ignorance and anxiety (see *The Concept of Anxiety* by Vigilius Haufniensis); the anxiety that characterizes spiritlessness is recognized precisely by its spiritless sense of security. Nevertheless, anxiety lies underneath; likewise, despair also lies underneath, and when the enchantment of illusion is over, when existence begins to totter, then despair, too, immediately appears as that which lay underneath. [44]

Kierkegaard states here that despair exists in a person's psyche regardless of whether or not he truly knows it. In other words, conscious awareness of despair is not necessary for despair to exist. It exists regardless. The same, Kierkegaard says, is true of anxiety and a person's knowledge of his anxiety. He refers to his pseudonymous book, *The Concept of Anxiety*, where he argues that anxiety manifests itself as a false confidence, what he calls "a spiritless sense of security." A person feels and appears self-assured, but in reality he is insecure and fearful. Indeed, anxiety and apprehension underlie his self-confidence, even if he is not consciously aware of his anxiety. In the same way, despair underlies his lack of awareness of it. Kierkegaard also says that the

person's despair reveals itself when his life, especially his physical health, begins to fall apart and he approaches death. As temporal disaster or death closes in, the person's underlying despair can no longer hide behind the false sense of welfare, health, safety, and security.

Compared with the person who is conscious of his despair, the despairing individual who is ignorant of his despair is simply a negativity further away from the truth and deliverance. Despair itself is a negativity; ignorance of it, a new negativity. [44]

Think back to your 8th grade algebra class when you learned about the X and Y axes of a Cartesian coordinate system as illustrated below in Figure 1.

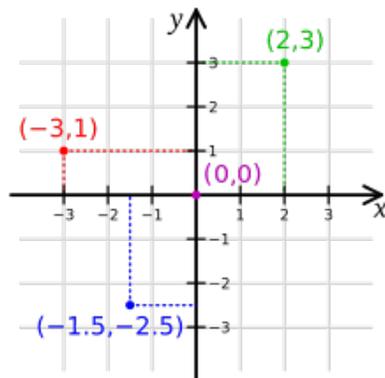


Figure 1

We see on the X axis that “0” is in the middle, positive numbers are to the right, and negative numbers are to the left. Let “0” represent truth and salvation from eternal despair. Then, “-1” represents being in a state of eternal hopelessness and despair. Kierkegaard is saying that a person can go even farther left on the axis, to “-2” which represents being ignorant of one's despair. Thus, when a person is at “-2,” he is both in despair *and* unaware of his despair.

However, to reach the truth, one must go through every negativity, for the old legend about breaking a certain magic spell is true: the piece has to be played through backwards or the spell is not broken. [44]

In order to get to “0” where truth and salvation reside on the X axis, a person must first recognize that he is at “-2” and ignorant of his despair so that he can move to “-1” where he is still in despair but now consciously knowledgeable of it. Then, he can keep moving to the right until he reaches truth and salvation that are located at “0.” Thus, the person must deal with each “negativity” in proper order, like breaking a magic spell that someone cast upon him by speaking “Abracadabra.” Indeed, he must say the spell backwards, “Arbadacarba,” if he expects to break the spell. Thus, Kierkegaard is saying that first came despair in the person’s life when his mother gave birth to him at “-1” on the X axis, because of his inherent and innate moral rebellion. Then came ignorance of his moral rebellion, and he moved to “-2” on the X axis, because the person wanted to avoid dealing with his immorality and eternal despair. Now, the person must first face into his ignorance and then into his despair and moral depravity, in order to escape the latter and find truth and eternal salvation from God.

However, it is in only one sense, in a purely dialectic sense, that the individual who is ignorant of his despair is further from the truth and deliverance than one who knows it and yet remains in despair, for in another sense, an ethical-dialectical sense, the person who is conscious of his despair and remains in it is further from deliverance, because his despair is more intensive. [4]

When we are ignorant of our despair, we may seem farther from escaping from it, because we are not even aware of our despair. However, such distance from salvation and eternal life is only in a manner of speaking. It is the person who knows he is in despair who is farther away from climbing out of his eternal despair. He is at “-3” on the X axis. The reason for this is that consciously avoiding one’s despair requires greater energy and determination than when one is simply ignorant of it. Plus, this conscious avoidance actually results in a more intensive despair, which Kierkegaard will address in the next section.

Yet ignorance is so far from breaking the despair or changing despair to nondespair that it can in fact be the most dangerous form of despair. To his own demoralization, the individual who in ignorance is in despair is in a way secured against becoming aware—that is, he is altogether secure in the power of despair. [44]

Kierkegaard is saying that despair is not just a feeling, but it is also a power. And it can be so powerful as to grip a person in its ignorance, thus insuring that he never becomes consciously aware of it. Thus, this state of ignorance is perhaps the most dangerous of situations, because the question is, how will the person become consciously aware of his despair in order to escape it in a good and proper manner by appealing to God for eternal mercy? In a very real sense, his ignorance is guarding him from dealing with his despair, and such a high-walled fortress can seem even more problematic than a person's conscious and aggressive avoidance of dealing with his despair.

An individual is furthest from being conscious of himself as spirit when he is ignorant of being in despair. But precisely this—not to be conscious of oneself as spirit—is despair, which is spiritlessness, whether the state is a thoroughgoing moribundity, a mere vegetative life, or an intense, energetic life, the secret of which is still despair. In the latter case, the individual in despair is like the consumptive: when the illness is most critical, he feels well, considers himself to be in excellent health, and perhaps seems to others to radiate health. [44,45]

Besides being the most dangerous place a human being can be, ignorance of one's eternally hopeless condition is also where a person is farthest from being someone who admits that he is morally accountable before God and should appeal to Him for mercy. Yet, this is merely another way of stating that the person is in a state of despair, because avoiding one's moral accountability is in itself an act of rebellion against God that pushes the person even farther into despair. Such ignorance and accompanying hopelessness exists whether a person is near death and barely alive or is the very picture of health and gung-ho about life. However, in the latter case, enthusiasm for life does not change the fact that the person is in eternal despair, even if he considers himself to be in the best

psychological and spiritual condition. In fact, when a person exudes tremendous confidence and enthusiasm for life, he may be the most critically ill spiritually speaking, because he is in eternal despair. This latter condition is like an illness, such as consumption, i.e., pulmonary tuberculosis, or cancer that hide themselves when they are actually still dangerous. For a while, a person can feel healthy and alive, but, because of these insidious diseases, he is terminally ill.

This form of despair (ignorance of it) is the most common in the world; indeed, what we call the world, or, more exactly, what Christianity calls the world—paganism and the natural man in Christendom, paganism as it was historically and is (and paganism in Christendom is precisely this kind of despair) is despair but is ignorant of the fact. [45]

As Kierkegaard has already pointed out, the world can be divided into two equally hopeless camps—the “pagan” world of all other religions, which consciously and publicly reject the basic tenets of biblical Christianity, and the world of Christendom, which subconsciously and inwardly reject the basic tenets of biblical Christianity, even while using biblical terminology, indeed New Testament terminology, not only to appear Christian, but also to rebel against God. In the world, people are not averse to expressing explicitly and publicly that they do not agree with Christianity. They may believe that their religion or perspective on the nature of reality is the absolute truth. Or, they may believe that all religions are equally truthful and lead to God. Either way, in the world, people are eternally hopeless, because they are rejecting the fact that a Christian understanding of reality is the only absolute truth.

In Christendom, people are actually expressing publicly and explicitly their support of Christianity, whether simply by going to church on Sundays or by being fully involved in the most active and evangelistic church organizations. However, like the people in the world, they too are eternally hopeless, because they remain ignorant of the most important discovery that they can make about themselves, that they are fundamentally

morally depraved and stand condemned by God. Their religious activity within the Christian church is nothing more than another form of rebelling against God.

Therefore, whether we are talking about the world or Christendom, ignorance of *eternal* despair is more common than being aware of it.

To be sure, paganism and likewise the natural man make the distinction between being in despair and not being in despair—that is, they talk about despair as if only some individuals despaired. Nevertheless, this distinction is just as misleading as the distinction that paganism and the natural man make between love and self-love, as if all this love were not essentially self-love. Beyond this misleading distinction, however, paganism and also the natural man cannot possibly go, because to be ignorant of being in despair is the specific feature of despair. [45]

Worldly people, whether in other religions or in the false Christianity of Christendom, who all are rejecting Christianity, think that they have a firm intellectual and emotion grasp on real despair, but the despair they talk about is superficial in comparison to the true despair. They talk about feeling hopeless, because they have no food, no job, no spouse, no health, etc. However, Kierkegaard says that this worldly talk of hopelessness is like making a distinction between true love and self-love, as though in order to love people authentically, we must love them and not ourselves. Otherwise, we are guilty of self-love or selfish love. But this false distinction forgets the biblical commandment, “You shall love your neighbor *as yourself* (emphasis mine).” It is impossible to love another person well if you do not love yourself properly. Indeed, loving others well requires a biblical kind of self-centeredness, whereby a person wants and is pursuing what is ultimately best for himself, i.e., God’s eternal mercy and eternal life. Therefore, to think of despair only in terms of the things of this life is to miss the whole point regarding one’s state of hopelessness with respect to the next life, which is the most profound hopelessness and despair because it is the result of our moral rebellion and the eternal judgment that we all deserve from God.

It is easy to see from all this that the esthetic conception of spiritlessness by no means provides the criterion for judging what is despair and what is not, which, incidentally, is quite in order, for if what is spirit cannot be defined esthetically, how can the esthetic answer a question that simply does not exist for it! [45]

Very simply put, Kierkegaard is saying that our feelings of despair, or lack thereof, are *not* the measure of our despair—eternally speaking. The spiritual aspect of our existence as human beings is not always detectable by our feelings. On the one hand, we may be in complete despair and eternal hopelessness but not feel it, because we are not aware of it. On the other hand, we may not be in eternal despair at all, because we have become authentic Christians, and yet we feel despairing—either because we question the authenticity of our Christianity or we are despairing about something in the present life—our health, our finances, our relationships, etc. Therefore, our feelings should not be the absolute measure of our spiritual condition.

It would also be very stupid to deny that individual pagans as well as pagan nations *en masse* have accomplished amazing feats that have inspired and also will inspire poets, to deny that paganism boasts examples of what esthetically cannot be admired enough. It would also be foolish to deny that in paganism the natural man can and does lead a life very rich in esthetic enjoyment, using in the most tasteful manner every favor granted him, and even letting art and science serve to heighten, enhance, and refine his pleasure. [45]

Because our feelings are no reliable barometer of our spirituality, people who are in a state of eternal hopelessness (“pagans” as Kierkegaard calls them) can lead very esthetically pleasing lives that incorporate every earthly facet of human existence available. In other words, people can appear as though they are not in despair, because they are enjoying to the maximum the rich opportunities of the present realm—allowing the arts and sciences, including modern technology, to provide all the fulfillment that is possible from them.

No, the esthetic category of spiritlessness does not provide the criterion for what is and what is not despair; what must be applied is the ethical-religious category: spirit or, negatively, the lack of spirit, spiritlessness. Every human existence that is not conscious of itself as spirit or conscious of itself before God

as spirit, every human existence that does not rest transparently in God but vaguely rests in and merges in some abstract universality (state, nation, etc.) or, in the dark about his self, regards his capacities merely as powers to produce without becoming deeply aware of their source, regards his self, if it is to have intrinsic meaning, as an indefinable something—every such existence, whatever it achieves, be it most amazing, whatever it explains, be it the whole of existence, however intensively it enjoys life esthetically—every such existence is nevertheless despair. [45,46]

Kierkegaard begins this paragraph by repeating that our feelings and desires for the pleasures of this life are an inadequate means to measure genuine despair. Instead, we must take into account God and the fact that He causes us to exist as moral beings, yet moral beings who are immoral. Kierkegaard calls this the “ethical-religious” aspect of life, so that we are not simply physical beings but also spiritual beings. He says that we are “spirit,” and it is vital that we think of ourselves as spiritual beings before God. If we think of ourselves merely as participants in a group, such as a nation, a club, or even a church, with the ability to act within the present world for the benefit of our group, then we are missing the point. We are ignoring the central aspect of our humanity, that God is our Creator who causes us to exist as moral beings at every moment.

Even if we accomplish something truly amazing in this world—we become president of the United States, we start a charitable organization that feeds millions of people, we discover the cure for cancer, we formulate a philosophical system that completely explains reality, etc.—and yet we ignore God and our moral accountability before Him, we are in eternal despair. Indeed, true belief and true faith are to “rest transparently in God.” True belief that arises from genuine, biblical inwardness moves us to face into our innate immoral condition and honestly bring it before God, seeking His eternal mercy. However, when we are unaware of our moral rebellion (for whatever reason), and, instead, we derive our meaning and purpose from a group of people such as our country, our ethnic group, or our religious organization, we remain in eternal despair. When we view our human capabilities merely as a means to an end *in the present*

realm, even if we think we have achieved great things on earth, perhaps having explained human existence as well as anybody could (such as Hegel), we are also still in a state of eternal hopelessness.

That is what the ancient Church Fathers meant when they said that the virtues of the pagans were glittering vices: they meant that the heart of paganism was despair, that paganism was not conscious before God as spirit. That is why the pagan (to cite this as an example, although it touches this whole investigation in a much more profound way) judged suicide with such singular irresponsibility, yes, praised suicide, which for spirit is the most crucial sin, escaping from existence in this way, mutinying against God. The pagan lacked the spirit's definition of a self, and therefore it judged suicide [*Selvomord*: self-murder] in that way; and the same pagan who judged suicide in that way passed severe moral judgment on stealing, unchastity, etc. He lacked the point of view of suicide, he lacked the God-relationship and the self; in purely pagan thinking, suicide is neutral, something entirely up to the pleasure of each individual, since it is no one else's business. If an admonition against suicide were to be given from the viewpoint of paganism, it would have to be in the long, roundabout way of showing that suicide violates the relation of obligation to others. The point that suicide is basically a crime against God completely escapes the pagan. Therefore, it cannot be said that the suicide is despair, for such a remark would be a thoughtless hysteron-proteron; but it may be said that such a judging of suicide by the pagan was despair. [46]

Paganism, by definition, excludes the one true God from its understanding of reality. Paganism is the worship of and ultimate dependence upon anything or anyone other than the biblical God. Therefore, paganism is also any belief system that does not adequately incorporate into it the biblical God. In addition, Kierkegaard is saying that, if God is not properly taken into account during a particular action, then the action cannot ultimately be called right or virtuous. Take, for example, giving a glass of water to a thirsty person. Outwardly, this is a virtuous action, but, inwardly, it is a "glittering vice" if the person performing it is a pagan. Kierkegaard remarks that the early Church Fathers, the biblical theologians of the second through fifth Christian centuries, correctly pointed out this inadequacy of moral actions among the idol worshippers of the Roman Empire. In other words, an action is virtuous only if a person's inwardness and heart are oriented toward God with biblical faith.

The same is true in any discussion. If God is not properly taken into account in the discussion of a particular topic, then the discussion will not arrive at the complete truth in regard to this topic. Kierkegaard cites the example of suicide. For pagans, who do not bring God into a discussion, suicide appears to be a morally neutral act. After all, for the pagan, his life belongs to him and to no one else, not even to God. Therefore, suicide is not an act that can be evaluated on a moral basis, because it is something that a person can do only to himself, and what he does to himself is no one else's business—like abortion as it is discussed in our society. In fact, Kierkegaard says that pagans went so far as to commend suicide as an act that demonstrated the ultimate in individuality—certainly a good thing, especially for an existentialist.

Kierkegaard also states that such a limited and incorrect perspective still permits the pagan to condemn other “moral” actions—such as murder, stealing, or unfaithfulness to one's spouse, because these actions are clearly unloving toward *another person*. However, he says that the pagan thus is in despair, because he is not taking into account that he is “spirit,” that he is created by God and accountable to Him and His definition of morality. The mere fact that God is his Creator means that his life is not his own to bring to an end whenever he wants. His life belongs to God, who, by Himself, has the right to decide when a human being's life must end. Thus, suicide is rebellion against God and His ownership of all human beings and their lives, and to judge suicide as permissible, while condemning murder and stealing, is to misunderstand reality and to rob God of His right to tell us what to do morally.

Kierkegaard goes on to point out that the only basis that paganism has to come up with an admonition against suicide is if it harms other people. For example, if a person's family is completely dependent upon him for the roof over their head and the food on the table, then it is a crime against his family to commit suicide and, thus, not provide their home and food. However, this explanation still ignores the person to whom we human

beings are ultimately accountable, God as our Creator. Consequently, suicide's greatest evil is its mutiny against the Creator, who owns every human being and his life.

We must recognize here the key to Kierkegaard's thinking—that a person's life and existence are intimately connected to God, exactly because God is the source and perpetuator of all human life. No human being exists except that God causes him to exist. Thus, we all owe our lives to God and not to anyone or anything else, including ourselves, which means that our lives are not our own. Indeed, they belong to God, and He has the right to direct us in how we should live, how we should die, and in what we should do between birth and death. The conclusion, then, is that we have no right to destroy what is not ours, especially our lives, so that suicide is a "crime against God."

Several questions arise from this analysis that Kierkegaard offers on suicide. Is it ever permissible to take a human life? What about capital punishment? What about war? Also, is suicide the "unforgivable sin?" A short and profound answer to these questions comes from the last point Kierkegaard makes in the above quoted paragraph—that our actions are not in and of themselves the demonstration of either authentic inwardness or total eternal hopelessness. Rather, we demonstrate the quality of our inwardness and eternal hopelessness by what basis we use for the evaluation of human actions. On the one hand, if we are committed to describing immoral actions as good or morally neutral because God is not properly a part of our discussion, then we are demonstrating that the condition of our hearts is "pagan, and we are in despair." On the other hand, if we are committed to evaluating ourselves and our actions accurately in the light of God's existence and presence as both moral Judge and Savior, then, while we will still commit immoral acts, which may even include suicide (as hard as this is for some Christians to accept), we are in a state of eternal hope and under God's grace, not His judgment.

Yet there is and remains a difference, and it is a qualitative difference, between paganism in the stricter sense and paganism in Christendom, the distinction that Vigilius Haufmiensis pointed out with respect to anxiety,

namely, that paganism does indeed lack spirit but that it still is qualified in the direction of spirit, whereas paganism in Christendom lacks spirit in a departure from spirit or in a falling away and therefore is spiritlessness in the strictest sense. [46,47]

Kierkegaard ends this section with a rather startling declaration, that unbelief on the part of people who are participating in the Christian church is less spiritual than unbelief on the part of abject pagans. We see that he is assuming that unbelievers exist within the church just as unbelievers exist in the world. In other words, there are people who are doing Christianity, so to speak, but they are not actually Christians. They are attracted to Christianity for some other reason beside the correct one. Perhaps they enjoy the social aspects of church, or the religious aspects, or the philanthropic opportunities, or even the esthetic aspects such as the music. However, they lack authentic inwardness and, therefore, lack authentic faith. Kierkegaard actually calls these supposed Christians “pagans,” as though they worship idols as people did in the Ancient Near East. Indeed, they do worship an idol, a false god. They worship the god of their minds whom they have either imagined or learned about from the Bible, but who is not the biblical God, because they lack proper inwardness. Nevertheless, they use biblical terminology to refer to their god as they passionately preach sermons based upon the Bible, or listen attentively to passionately preached sermons based upon the Bible, or participate enthusiastically in Bible studies, missions trips, and philanthropic programs of their churches.

Kierkegaard states that all paganism, Ancient Near Eastern or modern, misses the point regarding the true spirituality of Christianity. He refers again to his book *The Concept of Anxiety*, written under the pseudonym of Vigilius Haufmiensis, where he has a section on “The Anxiety of Spiritlessness” (pages 93-96). He defines spiritlessness as repeating by rote words that refer to one’s Christian doctrine without the authentic, inward passion for God’s mercy and eternal life. “Man qualified as spiritless has become

a talking machine, and there is nothing to prevent him from repeating by rote...a confession of faith” (pg. 95). Of course, this is usually accompanied by religious actions that are also repeated as mere habit, even while the habit may include an esthetic feeling of being close to God and pleasing Him with one’s obedience, like the Pharisees in Jesus’ day. Thus, Kierkegaard is saying that Christendom, the Christian-flavored religious community that uses biblical language to worship a false god, misses the point of Christianity more than abject paganism. This is surprising to us, because at least Christendom has the *appearance* of authentic Christianity. Yet, ironically, the closer one gets to being a Christian without becoming a Christian, the farther one is from genuine Christianity. Kierkegaard puts it this way in his book *Concluding Unscientific Postscript To Philosophical Fragments*,

If someone who lives in the midst of Christianity enters, with knowledge of the true idea of God, the house of God [a local Christian church], the house of the true God, and prays, but prays in untruth, and if someone lives in an idolatrous land, but prays with all the passion of infinity, although his eyes are resting upon the image of an idol—where, then, is there more truth? The one prays to God although he is worshiping an idol; the other prays in untruth to the true God and is therefore in truth worshiping an idol. [201]

Someone may have learned well from the Bible by sitting in church or Bible studies week after week, or he may be a seminary professor with correct knowledge about God, and then enter into a church to pray to God. But, if this “Christian” lacks authentic inwardness in comparison to the idol worshiper in a far off land who is looking at an idol while passionately longing for mercy and eternal life, then who is closer to the truth? Kierkegaard says that it is the pagan. The “Christian” is praying to an idol and thus is a pagan, while the “pagan,” even with the idol sitting in front of him, is praying to the one true God and thus is a “Christian.”

Therefore, from a human standpoint, it is easier to become a Christian as an abject pagan, who is passionately worshiping other gods outside Christianity and Christendom,

than to do so as a so-called Christian, who is using all the right terminology and engaging in all the right religious practices while also claiming to believe all the right doctrines. By being so close to the truth but expending so much energy to avoid it, the pagan “Christian” in Christendom will be more difficult to convince of his error. It will be hard for him to see the forest for the trees. He is convinced that he is doing all the right things, because he thinks that he is following the Bible. Yet, he is blind to the depth of the problem of his moral depravity and, therefore, lacks true inwardness.

In contrast, the “pagan” in the far off land will be easier to convince of his error. He already possesses genuine humility and remorse for his moral depravity. Therefore, he merely needs to be told who is the one true God beyond the idol that sits in front of him. We can put it this way. If we confront an abject pagan, who already has authentic inwardness, about his false religion and also present Christianity to him, he will say, “Of course,” because he will recognize the truth of God’s gracious mercy. However, if we confront a so-called “Christian” in Christendom about his rejection of Christianity, he will say, “What do you mean? Of course I am a Christian. I am doing what the Bible and my pastor and elders tell me to do, and I am following 1900 years of tradition.” Clearly, the idol-worshipper is closer to grasping and believing the truth than the religious Christian.

b. The Despair That Is Conscious of Being Despair and Therefore Is Conscious of Having a Self in Which There Is Something Eternal and Then either in Despair Does Not Will to Be Itself or in Despair Wills to Be Itself

Here, of course, the distinction must be made as to whether or not the person who is conscious of his despair has the true conception of what despair is. Admittedly, he can be quite correct, according to his own idea of despair, to say that he is in despair; he may be correct about being in despair, but that does not mean that he has the true conception of despair. If his life is considered according to the true conception of despair, it is possible that one must say: You are basically deeper in despair than you know, your despair is on an even profounder level. So it is also with the pagan (to recall the previous reference). When he regarded himself as being in despair by comparing himself with others, he was probably correct about his being in despair but wrong in regarding the

others as not being in despair—that is, he did not have the true conception of despair. [47]

This paragraph reminds us of the previous discussion. There are two kinds of despair—that with respect to the present life and that with respect to the next life. The despair of the present life is to feel hopeless in regard to one's health, finances, relationships, etc., i.e., earthly matters. The despair of the next life is to feel hopeless in regard to one's obtaining God's mercy, salvation, and eternal life, i.e., heavenly matters. Kierkegaard is saying that, if we have a "true conception of despair," then we are aware of and understand the latter despair—our hopelessness in regard to eternal life. If we lack this true conception but feel some kind of despair, then we have grasped only the former—a hopelessness in regard to the things of the present life—even while we may be feeling the latter—a hopelessness in regard to eternal life. In this case, we are more hopeless than we actually realize, which is true also of all those who leave out the real God from their understanding of the nature of reality, people whom Kierkegaard calls pagans. They measure their despair only by comparing themselves with other people and their earthly assets. For example, if other people have money, and they do not, then they believe that they are in despair, while the others are not. If other people are healthy, and they are not, then they believe that they are in despair while the others are not. However, they do not realize that all other people, if they lack authentic belief, are also in despair—in a state of eternal hopelessness—just as they are.

On the one hand, then, the true conception of despair is indispensable for conscious despair. On the other hand, it is imperative to have clarity about oneself—that is, insofar as simultaneous clarity and despair are conceivable. [47]

Here Kierkegaard indicates that knowledge of two things is important to become aware that we are in eternal despair as human beings. The first is knowledge of exactly what despair is. It is not the feeling that we get from the lack of money, health, etc.

Instead, it is the sense of doom that we feel from being in a position of eternal condemnation before a morally perfect and just God because of our immoral condition. The second thing for our becoming aware of our despair is knowledge of who we are—that we are human beings who are in despair, because we are accountable to our Creator God for our moral rebellion that has eternal consequences. The question is, though, if we can have a conscious and accurate understanding of our eternal, despairing condition and then remain in despair. It would certainly seem as though clarity about our despair would naturally lead us to do whatever is necessary to rid ourselves of the despair, as Kierkegaard goes on to say.

To what extent perfect clarity about oneself as being in despair can be combined with being in despair, that is, whether this clarity of knowledge and of self-knowledge might not simply wrench a person out of despair, make him so afraid of himself that he would stop being in despair, we will not determine here; we will not even make an attempt in that direction, since this whole investigation will be taken up later. [47]

Kierkegaard claims that he will take up this discussion later, but he never does in the present book. Nevertheless, it is an interesting thought experiment. Can a person, whether rich or poor, healthy or ill, a social success or friendless, fully grasp his eternal hopelessness before God and then choose to remain in despair without ever taking the necessary steps to appeal to God for mercy and be rescued from this condition? It seems hard to believe that it is possible. In fact, it seems that both things—coming to grips with one's eternal despair and doing something legitimate about it, i.e., appealing to God for mercy with genuine inwardness—would always naturally occur together, since we as human beings usually attempt to avoid pain and suffering in our lives, especially, in this case, the pain and suffering of God's eternal condemnation. As a side note, these two important aspects of human existence, consciousness of eternal despair and appealing to God for mercy, comprise the very definition of a person with biblical faith, a person who gains both aspects by means of the independent work of God's grace within

him. In other words, God changes recalcitrant, stubborn, and obstinate human beings so that they no longer refuse to worship Him and adhere to His truth in the Bible. Then, they also miraculously come to grips with their eternal despair and appeal to God for mercy. These inward movements that occur as a result of God's divine work in certain human beings become important characteristics of biblical faith.

Without pursuing the idea to this dialectical extreme, we merely point out here that just as the level of consciousness of what despair is can vary exceedingly, so also can the level of consciousness of one's own state that is despair. [47,48]

It is certainly reasonable to assume that just as different people have different levels of understanding of physics or calculus, so also people will have different levels of understanding of the very definition of eternal hopelessness. In the same way, they will have different levels of comprehending their own condition of eternal despair before God.

Actual life is too complex merely to point out abstract contrasts such as that between a despair that is completely unaware of being so and despair that is completely aware of being so. Very often the person in despair probably has a dim idea of his own state, although here again the nuances are myriad. To some degree, he is aware of being in despair, feels it the way a person does who walks around with a physical malady but does not want to acknowledge forthrightly the real nature of the illness. At one moment, he is almost sure that he is in despair; the next moment, his indisposition seems to have some other cause, something outside of himself, and if this were altered, he would not be in despair. [48]

Human beings and life are more complex than we sometimes realize. We certainly attempt to simplify our explanations of life so that we have some understanding of it. However, all the nuances involved in our awareness of our eternal, hopeless condition are simply too many to address individually. Nevertheless, as the apostle Paul claims in Romans 1:28-32, all people have at least some vague notion that they are accountable to God and will incur His judgment, if, at some point in their life, they do not resolve the problem of the consequences of their moral condition. Paul writes –

[Rom. 1:28](#) And just as they [all of humanity] did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper,

[Rom. 1:29](#) being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips,

[Rom. 1:30](#) slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,

[Rom. 1:31](#) without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful;

[Rom. 1:32](#) and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them. (NAS95)

Kierkegaard says that this is like a person who is physically ill but refuses to acknowledge the illness. Perhaps the person thinks that, by ignoring the illness, it will go away. The person in eternal despair thinks similarly. He senses his *eternal* hopelessness, but he convinces himself that it must have some outward and temporal cause instead of an inward cause. Even though he senses that God has created him to be a spiritual self (and eternity is a spiritual issue), he thinks that his spiritual hopelessness must have strictly an *external* cause. Therefore, if he could find the *external* cause and get rid of it, the vague feeling of despair would go away—and without God's help, which is all the better, because then God does not need to be brought into the discussion.

Or he may try to keep himself in the dark about his state through diversions and in other ways, for example, through work and busyness as diversionary means, yet in such a way that he does not entirely realize why he is doing it, that it is to keep himself in the dark. Or he may even realize that he is working this way in order to sink his soul in darkness and does it with a certain keen discernment and shrewd calculation, with psychological insight; but he is not in a deeper sense, clearly conscious of what he is doing, how despairingly he is conducting himself, etc. There is indeed in all darkness and ignorance a dialectical interplay between knowing and willing, and in comprehending a person one may err by accentuating knowing exclusively or willing exclusively. [48]

Kierkegaard is pointing out the natural response we human beings make to most pain that we encounter. We try to get rid of it! And how can we get rid of pain? One way is to distract ourselves so that we do not have to think about the pain. We use diversions

such as work, exercise, entertainment, drinking, etc. to keep from having to contemplate our poor health, our financial problems, and our marital and family conflicts.

Paradoxically, many times we do not even realize that we are using these diversionary tactics to avoid facing into the pain of life. It is as though we *want* to distract ourselves in order not to feel the pain, but we do not want to *know* that we are distracting ourselves, because then we would have to admit consciously that the pain is there. Nevertheless, deep within us, we know what we are doing, but we are not willing to admit it. Our intent definitely is to hide both from ourselves and from what ails us.

Kierkegaard also points out that, even if we suppress the knowledge of our willfully distracting ourselves for the sake of avoiding despair, the more important aspect of our choice to suppress our knowledge is that we are pursuing these diversions with a sense of despair, indeed, eternal despair. In other words, the despair does not actually go away. In fact, it is just as strong as ever, but it purportedly remains hidden behind the curtain of our distractions. Therefore, we are trying to *avoid* despair by *ignoring* it in the midst of experiencing *unavoidable* despair that *cannot be ignored*. In the light of this inextricable relationship between eternal despair and our subconscious, Kierkegaard is saying that there is also a vital relationship between our *knowing* that we are in a state of eternal hopelessness before God and our *unwillingness* to face into this dangerous condition. The key, obviously, would be to combine knowledge with willingness, i.e., to be willing to face into what we know to be true, that we are in eternal despair, so that we would do the right thing and appeal to God for mercy.

We could also ask how much of our conscious unawareness of our eternally hopeless condition is due to our lack of knowledge of it, and how much is due to our unwillingness to face the facts in the midst of whatever amount of knowledge that we do have? Kierkegaard claims that no one can really say and that our tendency is to emphasize either knowledge or willingness and then think that we are right when we are

actually wrong. In other words, we may claim that we or other people lack sufficient knowledge of our eternal hopelessness, and that this is the reason why we are not doing something about it by appealing to God for mercy. Or, we may claim that we or other people are completely unwilling to deal with our eternal hopelessness, and that lack of knowledge of this issue is not the reason why we or they are not appealing to God for mercy.

Nevertheless, both knowledge and willingness (or unwillingness) to use our knowledge wisely are always involved, which makes us accountable for both our knowledge (little as it may be) and our choices (as willing or unwilling we may be to make them).

As pointed out earlier, the level of consciousness intensifies the despair. To the extent that a person has the truer conception of despair, if he still remains in despair, and to the extent that he is more clearly conscious of being in despair—to that extent the despair is more intensive. [48]

Kierkegaard is saying something similar to this—if I understand the concept of happiness (that it feels really, really good), and if I feel really, really good because I just won a \$50 million dollar lottery, then my happiness is going to be extremely intense. The same is true of my eternal despair. If I understand the concept of eternal hopelessness (that it is the most dangerous position that a person can be in this side of eternity) and I choose to remain in this condition, then the more aware that I am of my choosing to do so, the more intense will be my fear and trepidation of someday having to answer for my unwillingness to come before God, acknowledge my immoral condition, and appeal to Him for mercy and grace. In other words, *clearly understanding* my eternal despair while *knowingly choosing* to ignore my eternal despair will only intensify the feelings of my eternal despair, just as *clearly understanding* that I won \$50 million dollars while *knowingly choosing* to receive the money will only intensify my happiness.

Another example would be this—if I do something wrong that harms others, and I choose not to reveal what I have done, then the more I am aware of my choosing to hide my actions, the more intense are my feelings of guilt for what I did, and the more effort that I will have to make to suppress my feelings of guilt so that they do not cause me to reveal what I have done. In other words, the intensity of my feelings is directly proportional not only to the level of awareness of my knowledge of what causes the feelings, but also to the level of effort that I make either to avoid the feelings or to embrace them. Therefore, I *know* what I am hiding in order to hide it. Kierkegaard is thus pointing out that there is a psychological interplay between my knowledge and my willingness to ignore the object of my knowledge, which means that I can never suppress my knowledge completely in order to hide what I know. Because I have to know what I am suppressing in order to suppress it, I can never suppress it completely.

The person who, with a realization that suicide is despair and to that extent with a true conception of the nature of despair, commits suicide is more intensively in despair than one who commits suicide without a clear idea that suicide is despair; conversely, the less true his conception of despair, the less intensive his despair. On the other hand, a person who with a clearer consciousness of himself (self-consciously) commits suicide is more intensively in despair than one whose soul, by comparison, is in confusion and darkness. [48,49]

Obviously, the example that Kierkegaard uses here is suicide. However, any immoral action would suffice. The person who commits murder or adultery or who steals, lies, cheats, deceives, etc. with both an accurate understanding that his actions are immoral and full comprehension and appreciation for the eternal consequences of his actions apart from God's mercy is going to feel more guilty for his actions than a person who lacks an accurate understanding of immorality and a complete appreciation for its eternal consequences. Similarly, the person with both an accurate understanding of the human condition of eternal hopelessness and a full comprehension and appreciation for *his* state of eternal despair is more intensely hopeless than the person who lacks these.

I shall now examine the two forms of conscious despair in such a way as to point out also a rise in the consciousness of the nature of despair and in the consciousness that one's state is despair, or, what amounts to the same thing and is the salient point, a rise in the consciousness of the self. [49]

In the next section below, Kierkegaard will describe in more detail how a proper understanding of one's *self* involves having a clearer notion of the human, moral condition before God—that all of us are under His eternal judgment and condemnation because of our moral depravity. Thus, a proper understanding of one's *self* also involves grasping the fact that we are members of the human race who intimately and individually participate in this condition of moral depravity and eternal despair. It is all of this that Kierkegaard will go on to explore in more depth in the next section. However, before he does, he briefly answers the question, what is the solution to this horrible condition of eternal despair?

The opposite to being in despair is to have faith. Therefore, the formula set forth above, which describes a state in which there is no despair at all, is entirely correct, and this formula is also the formula for faith: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it (cf. A, A). [49]

The solution to despair is faith, i.e., true biblical belief. And what is at the heart of biblical belief? It is facing into one's moral condition ("relating [oneself] to [oneself]") and being willing to be exactly who oneself is, thus truly being a "self," an immoral person in desperate need of God's eternal forgiveness, which drives a person to bring himself before God and say like the tax-collector in the temple, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner" (Luke 18:13). I also repeat Kierkegaard's words, which are worth pondering for their simplicity and profundity in defining biblical faith, with brief explanations—"in relating itself to itself," i.e., in fully and consciously comprehending one's own immoral condition, "and in willing to be itself," i.e., and in choosing not to avoid one's immoral condition through inappropriate means, "the self rests transparently in the power that

established it," i.e., a person chooses also to rely completely and strictly upon his Creator, God, and His eternal grace and mercy in order to resolve the problem of his immoral condition.

a. In Despair Not to Will to Be Oneself: Despair in Weakness

To call this form despair in weakness already casts a reflection on the second form, β , in despair to will to be oneself [despair in strength, what Kierkegaard will call "defiance"]. Thus the opposites are only relative. No despair is entirely free of defiance; indeed, the very phrase "not to will to be" implies defiance. On the other hand, even despair's most extreme defiance is never really free of some weakness. So the distinction is only relative. The one form is, so to speak, feminine despair, and the other, masculine despair.

Kierkegaard is going to distinguish between two kinds of *semi-conscious* despair, a weak kind of despair and a strong kind of despair. However, there is not much difference between them. Each contains elements of the other. The "weak" despair, where a person is not willing to face into his immoral condition, still contains a measure of defiance, a kind of strength and unwillingness to do the right thing. The "strong" despair of being willing to face into one's immoral condition still contains a measure of weakness, i.e., not having the strength to deal with one's immorality in an appropriate way that would result in eternal salvation from God. We see that, in typical 19th-century manner, Kierkegaard associates weakness with femininity and strength with masculinity.

(1) DESPAIR OVER THE EARTHLY OR OVER SOMETHING EARTHLY

This is pure immediacy or immediacy containing a quantitative reflection— Here there is no infinite consciousness of the self, of what despair is, or of the condition as one of despair. The despair is only a suffering, a succumbing to the pressure of external factors; in no way does it come from within as an act. The appearance of such words as "the self" and "despair" in the language of immediacy is due, if you will, to an innocent abuse of language, a playing with words, like the children's game of playing soldier. [50,51]

We recall that there are two factors that go into properly acknowledging our eternal despair. One is an accurate understanding of the very definition of despair. The other is

facing into the fact that *we* are the ones in despair. In this subsection (1), Kierkegaard is describing the first kind of despair where a person is not willing to be himself as he should be. It involves a person's focusing on the earthly and temporal aspects of his existence in order to avoid the fact that *it is he* who is in despair. Kierkegaard calls this "pure immediacy," which we can define as being concerned about only those things with which one is physically involved in the present realm—material things, relationships, physical health, etc.—and despairing over them because they have brought disappointment into one's life. When such is the case, a person lacks the proper awareness of what it truly means to be a human being, someone who is inwardly immoral and needs the eternal mercy of God. On the other hand, when this awareness exists, a person can be said to have an "infinite consciousness of the self," because he not only considers his *internal*, immoral condition in the proper light of God's justice, but also longs for eternal life and God's mercy.

However, an obsession with only earthly matters is merely a succumbing to *external* pressures that certainly can cause the present life to be arduous and difficult so that a person becomes deeply disappointed within himself. Nevertheless, this disappointment caused by external circumstances in no way reflects what is actually going on at an even deeper level within a person with respect to his immoral condition. Kierkegaard is saying that these common human experiences of suffering and the despair that follows are *not* directly connected to the problem of a person's immoral condition that ultimately relates only to his eternal destiny.

In other words, people who have properly dealt with their immorality and long for eternal life and God's mercy will suffer material, relational, and physical hardship in the present realm just as will people who have not properly dealt with their immoral condition. In addition, people who have properly dealt with their eternal despair can and will still feel genuine, human sadness and even grief as a result of disappointing,

external circumstances just as will people who have not properly dealt with their immoral condition. Thus, to talk about despair (properly speaking) in the situation of sadness caused by external circumstances is to misuse the term, because it misses the point about what is the only kind of truly important despair—*eternal* despair. Kierkegaard says that it is like a child who plays with toy soldiers as opposed to an adult who actually goes to war.

The *man of immediacy* is only psychically qualified (insofar as there really can be immediacy without any reflection at all); his self, he himself, is an accompanying something within the dimensions of temporality and secularity, in immediate connection with “the other” (το ἕτερον), and has but an illusory appearance of having anything eternal in it. The self is bound up in immediacy with the other in desiring, craving, enjoying, etc., yet passively; in its craving, this self is a dative, like the “me” of a child. Its dialectic is: the pleasant and the unpleasant; its concepts are: good luck, bad luck, fate. [51]

Kierkegaard uses the word “qualified” to refer to what a person has accomplished teleologically with respect to his fundamental humanity. Has he faced into the real purpose and meaning of human existence, or is he missing the point, even choosing to miss the point because of his unwillingness to deal with his immoral condition? Thus, Kierkegaard is saying that a person who is concerned only about temporal and earthly matters is only mentally qualified, not spiritually qualified, to discern the important issues in his life. The fact that God has designed him for eternity, to which he can attain only by coming to grips with his immoral condition before God, has gotten lost in the midst of his earthly pursuits.

As we observe this person, we might conclude from his behavior that the present world is all there is, that eternity is not even an option. In fact, as far as he is concerned, this really is the case. He has become so caught up in the here and now that his true self, that aspect of him that informs him that God has created him with eternity in mind, is merely along for the ride. He does not even acknowledge that it is there. In addition, his relationships with other human beings of like-mindedness further motivate him to

focus on his physical cravings and appetites as he permits other people to lead him in this direction. The only thing worth worrying about is whether or not his experiences will be pleasant or unpleasant, and the only cause worth mentioning with respect to his experiences is whether he is having good luck or bad luck. In other words, it is all up to fate. There is nothing of the transcendent God or eternal life in his pursuits and his explanation of human existence along with its meaning and purpose.

Now something *happens* that impinges (*upon + to strike*) upon this immediate self and makes it despair. In another sense, it cannot happen at this point; since the self has no reflection, there must be an external motivation for the despair, and the despair is nothing more than a submitting. By a “stroke of fate” that which to the man of immediacy is his whole life, or, insofar as he has a miniscule of reflection, the portion thereof to which he especially clings, is taken from him; in short, he becomes, as he calls it, unhappy, that is, his immediacy is dealt such a crushing blow that it cannot reproduce itself: he despairs. [51]

Here Kierkegaard speaks of a crisis that comes from the outside and forces itself upon the “man of immediacy,” who is concerned about only the things of the present realm. This man’s instant reaction is to lose hope. However, his losing hope is only in regard to his earthly life, not in regard to eternal life. All he really does is react emotionally to his *external* circumstances, not to the real issue of his human existence, his immoral condition *within him*, because he has chosen not to deal with his inwardness properly. His “self has no reflection.” Nevertheless, he all of a sudden feels that his whole life, or at least a major portion of it if he has the ability to think about it clearly enough, has been ripped away from him. He feels crushed, and he experiences a deep sadness from which he cannot recover. Then, he calls his unhappiness despair.

Or—and although this is rarely seen in actuality, it is dialectically quite in order—this despair on the part of immediacy is occasioned by what the man of immediacy calls extraordinary good luck, for immediacy as such is so extremely fragile that every *quid nimis* [excess] that requires reflection of it brings it to despair. [51]

We probably agree that the situation that Kierkegaard describes in the above paragraph is highly unlikely. Indeed, it happens so rarely that maybe none of us has seen it, but unhappiness could come about through what the “man of immediacy” calls “extraordinary good luck,” i.e., unexpected favorable circumstances. Perhaps, we are more aware of these situations in our day than were the people of the early 19th century, because we constantly hear about people who experience the “excess” of “extraordinary good luck.” For example, professional athletes are so well paid and idolized by the rest of society that, instead of life being ripped away from them, they seem to be experiencing the very fullness of life. Nevertheless, we hear about their making foolish choices that adversely affect their ability to enjoy the life that they have acquired, and they make these choices because they are unhappy in the present situation. Thus, even people who have experienced “extraordinary good luck” because they possess great athletic ability, or fell into the right business opportunity, or were born into privileged circumstances can easily despair because of such fullness of life.

Why do they despair? Kierkegaard says that it is because the condition of human beings who are all caught up in earthly matters that bring them happiness is actually very delicate—psychologically and emotionally. Thus, even if something good happens to them, they can react with such confusion and insecurity that they are actually more unhappy in their extraordinary lucky circumstances of being a good athlete, a successful business person, or born into privileged circumstances than if they were to lack these things. Similarly, we can ask why famous and popular people find help and solace in drugs and alcohol. It is because earthly fame and success is strictly “immediate” and cannot bring the fullest sense of security and meaningfulness to us human beings, who can find such in only the expectation of eternal happiness and God’s mercy.

So he despairs—that is, in a strange reversal and in complete mystification about himself, he calls it despairing. But to despair is to lose the eternal—and of this loss he does not speak at all, he has no inkling of it. In itself, to lose the

things of this world is not to despair; yet this is what he talks about, and this is what he calls despairing. In a certain sense, what he says is true, but not in the way he understands it; he is conversely situated, and what he says must be interpreted conversely: he stands and points to what he calls despair but is not despair, and in the meantime, sure enough, despair is right there behind him without his realizing it. [51,52]

The person who is focused on having the things of this life (money, health, relationships, reputation, respect, fame, power, etc.) despairs when he loses one or all of these things. However, Kierkegaard says that this is to misunderstand despair. Despair is not the feeling that a person experiences when he loses the things of the present realm. Despair is the dread of losing the things of the next life. It is “to lose the eternal.” However, the person who is all caught up in the present life to the exclusion of caring about eternal life never speaks of eternal hopelessness and misery, only of temporal anguish and gloom. Therefore, properly speaking, the loss of anything valuable in the present life, except the loss of true faith (which, fortunately, is impossible under the umbrella of God’s grace), is not actually a gloomy prospect. Consequently, while this “man of immediacy” is explaining how miserable he is because of all that he has lost in his present life, he actually is not miserable, or at least is not acknowledging his misery—in the ultimate sense. Nevertheless, he is miserable, truly miserable, without even realizing it, because he does lack, without being fully aware of it, the most important commodity that a human being can possess, eternal life. In addition, the reason why he lacks eternal life is because he is unwilling to reflect accurately upon his *self*, i.e., his internal immoral condition that requires appealing to the transcendent Creator for mercy.

It is as if someone facing away from the town hall and courthouse pointed straight ahead and said: There is the town hall and court house. He is correct, it is there—if he turns around. He is not in despair—this is not true—and yet he is correct in saying it. He claims he is in despair, he regards himself as dead, as a shadow of himself. But dead he is not; there is still, one might say, life in the person. If everything, all the externals, were to change suddenly, and if his desire were fulfilled, then there would be life in him again, then spontaneity and

immediacy would escalate again, and he would begin to live all over again. This is the only way immediacy knows how to strive, the only thing it knows: to despair and faint—and yet, that about which he knows the least is despair. He despairs and faints, and after that lies perfectly still as if here were dead, a trick like “playing dead”; immediacy resembles certain lower animals that have no weapon or means of defense other than to lie perfectly still and pretend that they are dead. [52]

Kierkegaard’s illustration involves pointing in the opposite direction from where an object lies and saying, “There is the object.” The statement contains a certain element of truth. The object does exist, but in the opposite direction. The person who says that life is wonderful and that he is entirely happy probably is happy. Yet, he is still in despair, eternal despair, if his happiness is dependent on only the things of his present life. Then, when he loses the things of this life that he is counting on to make him happy, it is all doom and gloom as far as he is concerned. He feels a sense of death, and yet he is alive. He is caught in the dichotomy of his feelings and reality.

In addition, what if all of a sudden his circumstances changed and he had everything back, and more, that he had lost? Quite naturally, a sense of life would return to his mind, and he would be happy. Kierkegaard says that this is the only way a person of sensuousness and dependence on the things of the current world knows how to respond to the changing circumstances of life. In other words, the esthetic life, or “immediacy” as Kierkegaard calls it, is highly mercurial, dependent on whether or not it has what it desires in the present realm. Thus, when the “man of immediacy” loses his earthly valuables, he agonizes and becomes paralyzed, incapable of making any movement, because he is so despondent. He is in a state of living death that only a change in his circumstances (or facing into his eternal despair) could eliminate.

Meanwhile, time passes. If help arrives from the outside, the person in despair comes alive again, he begins where he left off; a self he was not, and a self he did not become, but he goes on living, qualified only by immediacy. If there is no external help, something else frequently happens in actual life. In spite of everything, there is still life in the person, but he says that “he will never be himself again.” [52]

We say that time heals all wounds. We mean by this that, eventually, even the most traumatized person will be able to function again with some degree of normalcy, particularly if he gets help from outside himself, e.g., an infusion of money, chemicals that cure his cancer, or another relationship that looks promising. Then, he can begin again where he left off in life when he became immobilized as a result of the crisis. Nevertheless, his newfound lease on life may be in spite of not having discovered the real crisis—his eternal hopelessness before God. Regardless of how much Christians hope and believe that suffering caused by physical ailments, financial difficulties, or any other *external* circumstances will motivate their friends and family to “turn to the Lord,” they should remember that it is not the pain that ultimately converts a human being into a believer in God. It is God’s grace that does.

However, if nothing changes and the person remains in the dire circumstances in which his catastrophe placed him, then, while he can still claim to be alive (after all, he continues to breathe), he also claims that “he will never be himself again.” The spring in his step is gone. The enjoyment of life has disappeared. He is just—living. There is no joy or hope in life. In addition, he still remains in eternal despair—even if he does not acknowledge it.

He now acquires a little understanding of life, he learns to copy others, how they manage their lives—and he now proceeds to live the same way. In Christendom he is also a Christian, goes to church every Sunday, listens to and understands the pastor, indeed, they have a mutual understanding; he dies, the pastor ushers him into eternity for ten rix-dollars—but a self he was not, and a self he did not become. [52]

For this person, devastated by life’s losses, his existence becomes merely an opportunity to mimic others. Indeed, imitating people in their pursuits, even religious pursuits, may be all that he is capable of, because in his unhappy state he has lost any sense of life as it used to be. Kierkegaard then points out that one of the easiest places

to mimic people and feel good about oneself is a church where a person can say that he is a Christian, have an intellectual grasp of all the right Christian doctrines, even say that he believes them, do all the things that the pastor tells Christians to do in their relationship with God, and then die—a non-Christian, who has never come to grips with his immoral condition and the fact that God’s grace alone is what delivers him from eternal judgment and condemnation by means of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But not to worry. At this person’s funeral, the pastor will speak glowingly of his strong faith, his service to the church’s programs, and his commitment to the Lord. Little does the pastor know that the deceased never dealt with the central issues of his inward immorality and God’s mercy but merely copied others in their religious actions, who were probably copying others in their religious actions, who were probably copying others in their religious actions... The reason the pastor does not know this about the man whom he is eulogizing so eloquently is because he is merely copying his seminary professors who were copying their teachers, who were copying others, who were more interested in the traditions of Christianity than resolving the problem of their internal moral depravity—ironically, even while they preached moral depravity.

This form of despair is: in despair not to will to be oneself. Or even lower: in despair not to will to be a self. Or lowest of all: in despair to will to be someone else, to wish for a new self. Immediacy actually has no self, it does not know itself; thus it cannot recognize itself and therefore generally ends in fantasy. When immediacy despairs, it does not even have enough self to wish or dream that it had become that which it has not become. [52,53]

As Kierkegaard has been saying, Christianity is all about being a “self,” indeed, to be willing to be one’s self, the self who is inwardly immoral and yet goes on to be desirous of God’s eternal mercy and appeal to God for it. The despair that he has been describing in this section involves a person who is unwilling to be himself in this way. He looks only to the things of the present world to cheer him and provide a sense of happiness. He does not want to be a “self,” a person who thinks about eternity the way God wants him

to. In fact, he even wants to be someone different from whom he is so that he does not even have to consider thinking about God and eternity. He longs for a “new self” who has an excuse to avoid God.

Kierkegaard goes so far as to say that this person of immediacy “actually has no self,” because he does not “know,” or, at least is unwilling to recognize, who he really is, a morally depraved human being who desperately needs God’s eternal mercy. Therefore, because this person is unwilling to be himself, he ends up only dreaming about being someone else who does not have to be himself as he presently is. In addition, when this person despairs in the midst of the crises of life, he actually ends up with no energy even to wish that his circumstances were different and that he was someone else.

In other words, to be a true self requires honesty and inward resolve. It requires a difficult choice—to be exactly who God has created one to be and no other. God has created us as immoral human beings, who must honestly face into our immorality and transparently come before God to seek His forgiveness and promise of eternal life. This is to be a “self.” Yet, I could refuse to be a “self” in this way and still be who I am—an immoral person in need of God’s forgiveness. Or, as Kierkegaard goes on to say, I could wish that I were someone different, someone who lives according to only his physical cravings, which amounts to living in a fantasy world where people believe that satisfying their earthly desires is all that life is about. They simply are not in touch with the reality of their true self.

The man of immediacy helps himself in another way: he wishes to be someone else. This is easily verified by observing immediate persons; when they are in despair, there is nothing they desire more than to have been someone else or to become someone else. [53]

Loss of earthly pleasures (health, money, relationships, etc.) hurts. It causes people who are counting on such things for their happiness to feel hopeless. And, generally

speaking, people say in the midst of their deprivation and hopelessness that they would love to have life be otherwise. Or, they would love to become somebody else, indeed someone who is not suffering loss and having to experience such intense pain—if only their circumstances were different or they were someone different.

In any case, it is difficult to keep from smiling at one who despairs in this way, who, humanly speaking and despite being in despair, is so very innocent. As a rule, one who despairs in this way is very comical. Imagine a self (and next to God there is nothing as eternal as a self), and then imagine that it suddenly occurs to a self that it might become someone other—than itself. And yet one in despair this way, whose sole desire is this most lunatic of lunatic metamorphoses, is infatuated with the illusion that this change can be accomplished as easily as one changes clothes. The man of immediacy does not know himself, he quite literally identifies himself only by the clothes he wears, he identifies having a self by externalities (here again the infinitely comical). There is hardly a more ludicrous mistake, for a self is indeed infinitely distinct from an externality. So when externalities have completely changed for the person of immediacy and he has despaired, he goes one step further: he thinks something like this, it becomes his wish: What if I became someone else, got myself a new self. Well, what if he did become someone else? I wonder whether he would recognize himself. There is a story about a peasant who went barefooted to town with enough money to buy himself a pair of stockings and shoes and to get drunk, and in trying to find his way home in a drunken state, he fell asleep in the middle of the road. A carriage came along, and the driver shouted to him to move or he would drive over his legs. The drunken peasant woke up, looked at his legs and, not recognizing them because of the shoes and stockings, said: “Go ahead, they are not my legs.” When the man of immediacy despairs, it is impossible to give a true description of him outside the comic: if I may put it this way, it is already something of a feat to speak in that jargon about a self and about despair. {53,54}

In his book *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard defines the comical as the contradictory (pg. 462). For example, there is something quite amusing about calling a person who is 7 feet tall “Shorty.” Thus, the person who defines his existence by his circumstances and his possessions is quite comical, because he contradicts himself. The true definition of our human existence is not what happens to us on the outside, but, instead, who we are on the inside. The “man of immediacy” who lives by his physical desires thinks that his “self” is dependent on things external to him that can satisfy these desires. Kierkegaard calls such thinking a

“ludicrous mistake,” as though the person can change his “self,” i.e., his eternal self, as easily as he changes clothes.

When the “man of immediacy” suffers the external loss of his job, his marriage, or his health, he feels crushed by life and in despair. Then, he thinks, “If I just get a new job, a new marriage, or good health, then I will no longer be in despair.” Well, what if he did get these things? Would he recognize that he was still the same person who is in *eternal* despair? The key to Kierkegaard’s rather tragic illustration is that the peasant with the new external circumstances, i.e., shoes and stockings, gets drunk. Then, in his drunken state, he does not think clearly enough to recognize his own legs and feet with the new shoes and stockings. Likewise, people, who think that they need change only their external circumstances in order to eliminate their hopelessness and despair that come from losing the things of the present life, might as well be drunk. They are not thinking clearly about their true condition as human beings. They are missing the point that God has made us and designed us for eternity, which comes to us only if we take into account what is going on *inside* us—specifically our immorality with our need for His mercy.

When immediacy is assumed to have some reflection, the despair is somewhat modified; a somewhat greater consciousness of the self comes about, and thereby of the nature of despair and of one’s condition as despair. It means something for such an individual to talk about being in despair, but the despair is essentially despair in weakness, a suffering, and its form is: in despair not to will to be oneself. [54]

Now Kierkegaard heads down a related path and brings in the concept of personal reflection that results in a despair that is slightly different from that brought on simply by a change in external circumstances. To reflect on what life is all about, to sit down and contemplate who I am, and to think about what it means for me as a human being to exist are all good things. For instance, they bring about a greater awareness of myself, including an awareness of my despair. I detect an angst in myself, and I even talk about

it explicitly with certain people. Nevertheless, I do nothing more than really feel it and talk about it. I do not go further and come to grips with my immoral condition and its eternal consequences. Therefore, Kierkegaard says that I am still unwilling to be who I really am, to be *myself* in the deepest sense of the word *self*, an immoral person who needs and asks for God's eternal mercy. I am not "strong" enough to take this last step, and, thus, my angst, my despair, my hopelessness is only of a weak kind.

The advance over pure immediacy manifests itself at once in the fact that despair is not always occasioned by a blow, by something happening, but can be brought on by one's capacity for reflection, so that despair, when it is present, is not merely a suffering, a succumbing to the external circumstance, but is to a certain degree self-activity, an act. A certain degree of reflection is indeed present here, consequently a certain degree of pondering over one's self. With this certain degree of reflection begins the act of separation whereby the self becomes aware of itself as essentially different from the environment and external events and from their influence upon it. But this is only to a certain degree. When the self with a certain degree of reflection in itself wills to be responsible for the self, it may come up against some difficulty or other in the structure of the self, in the self's necessity. For just as no human body is perfect, no self is perfect. This difficulty, whatever it is, makes him recoil. Or something happens to him that breaks with the immediacy in him more profoundly than his reflection had done, or his imagination discovers a possibility that, if it eventuated, would thus become the break with immediacy. [54]

Suppose that life is going well for a person so that his external circumstances are not causing him any trouble, and, therefore, he is not feeling any despair because of them. Then, some warm, lazy, weekend afternoon he finds himself alone, and, in the quietness of the moment, he simply starts reflecting on who he is as a human being, and he feels an angst, a pang of despair. Why does he feel this? Because he realizes that he is not perfect, and something about that bothers him. In addition, he definitely senses that he is different from his surroundings. They are truly outside of him, and they are not causing his angst. Upon further reflection, he realizes that he is the source of his anxiety with the result that this process is actually making him take more responsibility for himself. His mind and his inner being lead him to conclude that his circumstances are not all that

affect his emotional state. Ultimately, on an existential level, he, and he alone, is the one who directly affects his emotional state!

In the midst of this realization, he also becomes aware of some hindrance or barrier that is preventing him from continuing down this path of *self*-discovery. It is as though there is something *within* him that necessitates that he stop where he is in his reflective process. If he were perfect, then he could keep going and finish dealing with his *self*. However, just as his physical body is not perfect, neither is his inner being, and he shrinks at the thought of coming to grips with his immoral condition and appealing to God for mercy. Or, again, something external occurs, or he imagines that something might happen that he fears, and his attention is diverted so that he stops short of coming to grips with his true *self*.

So he despairs. In contrast to the despair of self-assertion, his despair is despair in weakness, a suffering of the self; but with the aid of the relative reflection that he has, he attempts to sustain his self, and this constitutes another difference from the purely immediate man. He perceives that abandoning the self is a transaction, and thus he does not become apoplectic when the blow falls, as the immediate person does; reflection helps him to understand that there is much he can lose without losing the self. He makes concessions; he is able to do so—and why? Because to a certain degree he has separated his self from externalities, because he has a dim idea that there may even be something eternal in the self. Nevertheless, his struggles are in vain; the difficulty he has run up against requires a total break with immediacy, and he does not have the self-reflection or the ethical reflection for that. He has no consciousness of a self that is won by infinite abstraction from every externality, this naked abstract self, which, compared with immediacy's fully dressed self, is the first form of the infinite self and the advancing impetus in the whole process by which a self infinitely becomes responsible for its actual self with all its difficulties and advantages. [54,55]

Kierkegaard will eventually describe in detail the “despair of self-assertion,” which is the strong form of despair. Currently, he is still working on the weak form of despair. Nevertheless, he is moving towards the stronger despair by having introduced the concept of self-reflection, of a person's taking the time to ponder who he is as a human being instead of only responding to his physical cravings without much thought at all.

Any amount of self-reflection introduces an element of awareness of one's true self and eternity.

Kierkegaard is saying that, when external circumstances turn sour, such personal and inner awareness allows a person not to feel crushed by life so that he would only become angry as a result of things not having proceeded according to his expectations. Because he has begun to distinguish his *self* from the externalities of his existence, he realizes that there is more to life than what he has, where he lives, and even how good his health is. He can say to himself that he still has himself, even if he loses everything and everyone else. In addition, this inner discovery gives him a dim idea that he is made for more than just the present world, that he is made for eternity. However, without further help from God's grace, he cannot make the complete break from thinking that his sense of well-being is dependent upon his earthly, external circumstances. He does not have adequate strength from which he can draw in order to become more aware of himself and his moral condition. He is still too attached to the "clothes" of his external circumstances to imagine himself as completely detached from them and standing naked before God. The difficulties of doing the latter are too daunting, and the advantages of doing so are not attractive enough.

So he despairs, and his despair is: not to will to be himself. But he certainly does not entertain the ludicrous notion of wanting to be someone else; he keeps up the relation to his self—reflection has attached him to the self to that extent. His relation to the self is like the relation a person may have to his place of residence (the comic aspect is that the self certainly does not have as contingent a relation to itself as one has to a place of residence), which becomes an abomination because of smoke fumes or something else, whatever it might be. So he leaves it, but he does not move away, he does not set up a new residence; he continues to regard the old one as his address, he assumes that the problem will disappear. So also with the person in despair. As long as the difficulty lasts, he does not dare, as the saying so trenchantly declares, "to come to himself," he does not will to be himself; presumably this will pass, perhaps a change will take place, this gloomy possibility will probably be forgotten. So as long as it lasts, he visits himself, so to speak, only occasionally, to see whether the change has commenced. As soon as it commences, he moves home again, "is himself once again," as he says; but this simply means that he begins where he left off—he was a self up to a point and he went no further than that. [55]

Kierkegaard has explained that a little self-reflection gives a person at least a glimpse of who he is, even if not all of who he is. Here, Kierkegaard comments that the person is attracted enough to what he sees in his self-reflection that, in the midst of his eternal hopelessness, he has no desire to be someone other than who he is. To an extent, he recognizes that he is who he is, and he wants to keep being himself.

Kierkegaard likens this kind of person to someone who must leave his home because of a fire and the resulting unpleasant odor of smoke that lingers. However, rather than leave the house forever, because the smell of smoke will never disappear, and let everyone know his new address, he considers the new place where he is leaving only temporary. His plan is to move back into the old house once the smell of smoke disappears, i.e., once his external circumstances change that he believes could eliminate even his eternal despair and he will be able to feel good about himself once more. In addition, he is convinced that the smell of smoke really will go away.

Thus, the self-reflecting person in despair still refuses to deal with *himself* as he should, as a human being in *eternal* despair not just *temporal* despair. He thinks that, soon, the feelings of despair, even eternal despair of which he has become dimly aware, will disappear like the smell of smoke in a house where there has been a fire. Therefore, he keeps reflecting on himself to see if the feelings have gone away. Whenever they begin to do so, he “starts moving home.” His feelings begin to subside because his external circumstances change ever so slightly. Thus, he gains a somewhat greater sense of temporal hope in his life, which, in turn, causes him to think that even his eternal despair is subsiding. The result is that, now, he can put all his despair out of his mind in an energetic attempt to forget it. He really begins feeling better about life and himself. However, Kierkegaard points out that he is only back to where he started. He has progressed no further towards dealing with the most important issue in his life—his

eternal despair and hopelessness. He thinks that, by ignoring the smell of smoke and by whatever change in external circumstances have occurred, that he is no longer in a state of eternal hopelessness. But, indeed, he still is.

If there is no change, he seeks another remedy. He turns away completely from the inward way along which he should have advanced in order truly to become a self. In a deeper sense, the whole question of the self becomes a kind of false door with nothing behind it in the background of his soul. He appropriates what he in his language calls his self, that is, whatever capacities, talents, etc. he may have; all these he appropriates but in an outward-bound direction, toward life, as they say, toward the real, the active life. He behaves very discreetly with the little bit of reflection he has within himself, fearing that what he has in the background might emerge again. Little by little, he manages to forget it; in the course of time, he finds it almost ludicrous, especially when he is together with other competent and dynamic men who have a sense and aptitude for real life. Charming! He has been happily married now for several years, as it says in novels, is a dynamic and enterprising man, a father and citizen, perhaps even an important man; at home in his own house the servants call him "He Himself"; downtown he is among those addressed with "His Honor"; his conduct is based on respect of persons or on the way others regard one, and others judge according to one's social position. In Christendom he is a Christian (in the very same sense as in paganism he would be a pagan and in Holland a Hollander), one of the cultured Christians. The question of immortality has often occupied him, and more than once he has asked the pastor whether there is such an immortality, whether one would actually recognize himself again—something that certainly must be of very particular interest to him, since he has no self. [55,56]

If the self-reflecting person experiences no change in his external circumstances that allow even his feelings of eternal despair to subside, i.e., nothing happens that permits him to ignore the odor of smoke after the fire has been put out, then he pursues a different angle to rid himself of this nagging inner problem. With self-reflection, he was moving in an inward direction (towards his inner being, towards dealing with his immoral condition), which would have led him truly to become a self and discover more clearly his design for eternity. Instead, he progressively forgets (or, to be more precise, avoids) that there is more to his being than his feelings. He grabs onto his mere human ability to live life as well as possible in the present realm, but only in a worldly sense. He musters all the strength and talent that he can and joins other human beings by becoming a dynamic, successful, and respected person within his community. His marriage is sound.

People treat him with respect. He holds an admirable social position within his community. He calls himself a Christian and goes to church. There, he hears and even reflects upon sermons about eternal life, but not too much, because he fears having to bring to the forefront what he has kept in the background in the midst of his self-reflection, his eternal despair. Nevertheless, he wonders if in heaven he will recognize himself—a rather silly question since, by definition, a self is eternal and, therefore, eternally self-recognizable. Thus, his wondering only means that he has not embraced his true self, and, therefore, he remains in eternal despair.

It is impossible to depict this kind of despair accurately without a certain touch of satire. It is comical that he wants to talk about having been in despair; it is appalling that after the conquering of despair, according to his view, his condition is in fact despair. Ideally understood, it is extremely comical that underlying the worldly wisdom that is so celebrated in the world, underlying all that diabolical profusion of good advice and clever clichés—“Wait and see,” “Don’t worry,” “Forget it”—there is utter stupidity about where and what the danger actually is. Again, it is this ethical stupidity that is appalling. [56]

We may be tempted to think that Kierkegaard is not very kind by saying in a rather mocking tone that a person is being comical by talking about his temporal hopelessness while avoiding his eternal hopelessness. However, he is being only honest and straightforward. For this once self-reflective person to think that both his worldly success and the respect that he has gained from society have solved his problem of despair is, in the final analysis, “utter stupidity.” He has taken such worthless advice as that of the modern song “Don’t Worry; Be Happy.” As a result, he is merely avoiding the real danger, the eternal danger of not coming to grips with who he is from an accurate ethical and moral standpoint. He is still avoiding the fact that he is a morally depraved person in desperate need of God’s eternal forgiveness and mercy. Such disregard for the most important aspect of human existence appalls Kierkegaard, because it is so far from the truth and so indicative of self-deception.

Despair over the earthly or over something earthly is the most common form of despair, and especially in the second form, that is, immediacy with a quantitative reflection. The more despair is thought through, the more rarely it is seen or the more rarely it appears in the world. This by no means proves that the majority have not despaired; it proves only that they have not gone particularly deep in despairing. There are very few persons who live even approximately within the qualification of spirit; indeed, there are not many who even try this life, and most of those who do soon back out of it. They have not learned to fear, have not learned “to have to” without any dependence, none at all, upon whatever else happens. Therefore, they are unable to bear what already appears to them to be a contradiction, what in reflection in the surroundings looks all the more glaring, so that to be concerned about one’s soul and to will to be a spirit seems to be a waste of time in the world, indeed, an indefensible waste of time that ought to be punished by civil law if possible, one that is punished in any case with scorn and contempt as a kind of treason against the human race, as a defiant madness that insanely fills out time with nothing. [56,57]

Was it possible in the Denmark of Kierkegaard’s day where the state-run Lutheran church required that every Dane be a Christian that there would be laws *against* Christianity? In Kierkegaard’s opinion, yes. Why? Because eventually all societies and cultures turn against authentic Christianity, even where there is a state-supported church institution. Biblical Christianity is not dependent upon numerical or quantitative measurements for determining its success. Therefore, it is ultimately offensive to us human beings, and we are hostile to it in the fabric of our being that is unavoidably characterized by moral depravity. Human beings naturally say, “Measure it,” so to speak, in order to gain an understanding of “its” success. For example, how many people are attending your church? How large is your church budget? How many people have gone on mission’s trips? Etc.? The Bible says, “Have you, the individual, faced into your inward, immoral condition and do you long for God’s eternal mercy?” The former needs organizations, institutions, and administration. The latter needs only the individual to examine his heart and make the choice to appeal to God for mercy. The former results in a distortion of Christianity. The latter results in following the truth.

In other words, we tend to measure our happiness quantitatively. If we have a lot of money in our bank accounts, we are happy. If we have a lot of friends, we are happy. If

our house is large, spacious, and well decorated, we are happy. If we do not have any or all of these things, we are sad. Kierkegaard calls this “despair over something earthly,” and he says that this is the “most common form of despair.” He also claims that the more people have thought through this particular kind of despair, the less appears in the world. Why? He has previously explained that it is because people learn how to hide their despair by mimicking others who are hiding theirs. In addition, most people, even if they have thought through their earthly despair rather well, still have not despaired enough. They have not thought it through to the point that they are motivated to escape their *eternal* despair. Instead, they choose to live in the unhappiness of their self-delusion and avoidance of the major issue of their life. They are not willing to fear God and become individuals who no longer rely for their sense of well-being on either the things of the present realm or others’ approval and respect.

They even sense that they are living a contradiction—acknowledging their temporal despair while ignoring their eternal despair. However, rather than resolve the contradiction and deal with their eternal despair with the same gusto and enthusiasm as their temporal despair, they consider the former “a waste of time.” Indeed they go so far as to encourage the civil authorities to punish authentic Christians (like Kierkegaard) for their “treason against the human race.”

Thus, Kierkegaard claims that very few people have bothered to go inward enough and properly deal with their moral condition before God. They have not learned how to fear God and His justice and love God and His mercy. They have not learned to depend for their sense of well-being only on God and not on the things and circumstances of the present realm. Indeed, they consider *authentic* Christianity not only a waste of time but actual criminal behavior and sheer insanity.

Then comes a moment in their lives—alas, this is their best time—when they begin to turn inward. Then, when they encounter their first difficulties, they turn away; it seems to them that this path leads to a dismal desert—*und rings umher*

liegt shone grune Weide [while all about lie meadows fresh and green]. And so they take off and soon forget that time, the best time of their lives—alas, forget it as if it were a piece of childishness. They are also Christians, reassured by the pastors of their salvation. [57]

Kierkegaard says that, eventually, something potentially helpful, i.e., eternally helpful, happens to them. They begin to realize that there is a problem *inside* them when they first encounter their immoral condition in an honest manner. However, rather than continuing to go farther inward and deal with their immorality before God, they shy away, because it feels like walking into a hot desert without water. In other words, they feel as though they will die a slow and painful death, if they genuinely face into their immoral condition. There is nothing truly attractive to them about admitting before God the depth of their moral depravity. Instead, avoiding their immorality feels like the joy of strolling through a beautiful, green meadow on a warm, delicious, spring day and breathing in the fresh, clean air. Thus, they put behind them as quickly as possible this flirtation with becoming authentically spiritual. If they happen to look back on it, they think of it as a momentary lapse into immaturity. In other words, they believe that genuine, human maturity consists in guarding themselves from becoming self-absorbed in their inward, moral condition and, instead, pursuing becoming successful in the world. Also, fortunately, as faithful members of their local church, they have the assurance from their pastors that they are truly Christians and will inherit eternal life and salvation. After all, they participate consistently in all that their church has to offer and its many ways of demonstrating “authentic” Christianity. In the church, they can conveniently guard themselves from facing into their moral condition, because, as they say, Christ died for their sins, which means that to delve into their inwardness is to deny the cross of Christ. In addition, the pastor tells them that Christians pursue Christian success by the power of the Holy Spirit and walk in the fresh meadow and air of the “victorious Christian life,” slaying the dragons of their lives with the “abundant life” that Jesus promised his

followers (cf. John 10:10). Consequently, they are just as worldly and hostile towards God as non-Christians who avoid church and the Bible altogether.

As stated, this despair is the most common, so common that this alone explains the common notion that despair is part of being young, something that appears only in the early years but is not found in the mature person who has reached the age of discretion. This is a desperate error, or, more correctly, a desperate mistake that disregards—yes, and what is even worse, disregards the fact that what it disregards is almost the best that can be said about people, because very often something far worse happens—disregards the fact that, fundamentally, most people virtually never advance beyond what they were in their childhood and youth: immediacy with the admixture of a little dash of reflection. [57,58]

Kierkegaard is claiming that we typically think that only young people despair, because they lack the maturity of adults who have gone through the school of hard knocks, setting aside their angst about the future and, instead, learning to tackle life and acquire some degree of success and respect from others. This erroneous perception of human beings is possible, because, as Kierkegaard has said, adults have discovered how to imitate other adults in their confident pursuit of life and, in the process, hide their temporal and eternal despair. However, he says that this perspective disregards the fact that most people really never grow up. Indeed, he claims, people turn a blind eye to the fact that they are turning a blind eye to the most important issue in their lives, the very issue that would permit them to grow up, i.e., *genuinely* to grow up and become adults.

They ignore the beneficial consequences of this wonderful opportunity to address their true *self* so that “the best that can be said about people” is that they deal with their temporal anxiety and succeed in business, society, athletics, or other pursuits that the world considers valuable. Thus, their childhood issues remain with them throughout their adulthood so that they “never advance beyond what they were in their childhood and youth: immediacy with the admixture of a little dash of reflection.” This is to say that, in the adult period of their life, they are driven by their worldly feelings and desires so that their contemplation of their self and life is only superficial. They never get down to the

real nitty gritty of their human existence, to their immoral condition, and bring it before God.

No, despair certainly is not something that appears only in the young, something one outgrows as a matter of course—"just as one outgrows illusion." This is not the case, even though one may be foolish enough to believe it. On the contrary, we can often enough meet men and women and older people who have illusions just as childish as any young person's. [58]

Here, Kierkegaard says that despair, even worldly despair, is common in both the young and the old, contrary to what grownups think. People do not outgrow their despair as they would outgrow their shoes in the process of becoming adults. Adults may think that they are grown-up, but they are not. Indeed, adults remain childish, because, as Kierkegaard now goes on to claim, it is natural for all older people to despair and have false conceptions about the past just as much as it is for youths to despair and have false conceptions about the future.

We disregard the fact that illusion essentially has two forms: the illusion of hope and illusion of recollection. Youth has the illusion of hope; the adult has the illusion of recollection, but precisely because he has this illusion, he also has the utterly biased idea of illusion that there is only the illusion of hope. [58]

To think that only youths harbor misconceptions about life is to overlook the fact that misconceptions come in two forms—the youthful illusion regarding the future, "the illusion of hope," and the adult illusion regarding the past, "the illusion of recollection." Certainly, young people experience the former, while older people experience the latter. In addition, precisely because adults misconstrue their past, they also deceive themselves into thinking that only young people are the deceived ones. Adults do not realize that that are just as self-deceived as youths.

The adult, of course, is not troubled by the illusion of hope but instead by the quaint illusion, among others, of looking down on the illusions of youth, presumably from a higher point free of illusion. The youth has illusions, hopes for something extraordinary from life and from himself; the adult, in recompense, is often found to have illusions about his memories of his youth. An older woman who presumably has left all illusions behind her is often found to be just as fantastically deluded as any young girl when it comes to her

recollection of herself as a young girl, how happy she was then, how beautiful, etc. this *fuimus* [we have been], which is common to older people, is just as great an illusion as the illusions of young people about the future: they both lie or fictionalize. [58]

Kierkegaard is saying that adults are mature enough to understand that the future may not turn out the way they hope. They have been through enough of life to understand its unpredictable nature and experienced enough of its hardships to resist entertaining unreasonable Pollyannaish notions. On the other hand, because young people possibly have not experienced too much hardship in their childhoods that would discourage them completely, they can hope that their futures are bright and prosperous. They have their whole life ahead of them so that they can expect a lot not only from life but also from themselves.

The problem with this picture, Kierkegaard says, is that adults deceive themselves into thinking that they are correct in looking down on the illusions of hope of the youths from their lofty and mature position of freedom from illusion. However, they forget what their childhood was really like. We often hear people say, "I had a good childhood, and my parents were very loving." Then, they swiftly add, "Sure, my father drank a little too much, and my mother was too busy placating him to pay much attention to us children, but we still had a happy childhood." Kierkegaard mentions the example of an older woman who remembers herself being such a happy and beautiful young girl—itsself an illusion. Thus, both youths and adults "lie or fictionalize"—the youths about their future and the adults about their past.

The mistaken notion that despair belongs only to youth is also desperate and despairing in quite another way. Moreover, it is very foolish and simply shows a lack of judgment as to what spirit is—along with a failure to appreciate that man is spirit and not merely animal—to think that faith and wisdom come that easily, that they come as a matter of course over the years like teeth, a beard, etc. No, whatever a man may arrive at as a matter of course, whatever things may come as a matter of course—faith and wisdom are definitely not among them. As a matter of fact, from a spiritual point of view, a man does not arrive at anything as

a matter of course over the years; this concept is precisely the uttermost opposite of spirit. [58,59]

For adults to think that only young people misperceive life demonstrates a profound lack of understanding of “what spirit is,” i.e., what it means for God to have created us as spiritual beings instead of making us animals. Kierkegaard says that this lack of understanding regarding our spiritual nature also leads to our believing that Christian faith and wisdom come about in a human being as naturally and easily as growing teeth or a beard. We think that they just happen. However, this perspective is the very opposite of the truth.

On the contrary, it is very easy to leave something behind as a matter of course over the years. And over the years, an individual may abandon the little bit of passion, feeling, imagination, the little bit of inwardness he had and embrace as a matter of course an understanding of life in terms of trivialities (for such things come as a matter of course). This—improved—condition, which, to be sure, has come with the years, he now in despair considers a good thing; he easily reassures himself (and in a certain satirical sense nothing is more sure) that now it could never occur to him to despair—no, he has secured himself. But he is in despair, devoid of spirit and in despair. Why, I wonder, did Socrates love youth if it was not because he knew man! [59]

Instead of its being easy to acquire true faith and wisdom “as a matter of course,” it is entirely easy to leave behind whatever modicum of inward passion that a person had in his youth that could have led him eventually to become an authentically spiritual being. Such leaving behind of the bare minimum of inwardness leads not to wisdom but to understanding life on the basis of trivial and insignificant matters—such as money, health, beauty, reputation, religious pursuits, etc.

Thus, the person who leaves behind true wisdom and measures life by means of trivial, quantifiable, and worldly issues thinks that he has actually improved his situation as a human being. He really believes he is more secure and stable. However, Kierkegaard says that he is completely lacking true spirituality and is still “in despair,” even eternal despair. The fact that adults thus deceive themselves is the reason

Socrates enjoyed interacting with the youths of Athens, because youths typically demonstrate in their innocence some degree of inwardness that, hopefully over time (and by the grace of God), will develop into the profound inwardness described in the Bible and of which Kierkegaard is speaking.

If over the years an individual does not happen to sink into this most trivial kind of despair, it still by no means follows that despair belongs merely to youth. If a person really does develop over the years, if he becomes mature in an essential consciousness of the self, then he may despair in a higher form. And if he does not develop essentially over the years, although he still does not sink completely into triviality—that is, if he never advances any further than being a young man, a youth, even though he is an adult, a father, and a gray-head, consequently retaining some of the good in youth—he will be just as liable as a youth to despair over the earthly or over something earthly. [59]

We simply cannot say that temporal despair is something only young people experience, even if a person never seems to succumb to this less than eternal despair in his adulthood. Kierkegaard says that the adult is just as susceptible to temporal despair as he was in his youth. He has simply suppressed his temporal despair so that he is barely consciously aware of it. The only way that he will despair in any “higher form,” even that of eternal despair, is if he “really does develop over the years” and he acquires “an essential consciousness” of his self. In other words, true human maturity is ultimately defined by becoming fully aware of one’s immoral condition and dealing with it before the transcendent, merciful God for the sake of one’s eternal destiny. However, Kierkegaard has been saying that this kind of maturity is quite foreign and even intolerable to the worldly mind so that it requires a miracle of the grace of God in order to achieve.

There may well be a difference between the despair of an adult like that and a youth’s despair, but it is purely incidental, nothing essential. The youth despairs over the future as the present *in futuro* [in the future]; there is something in the future that he is not willing to take upon himself, and therefore he does not will to be himself. The adult despairs over the past as a present *in praeterito* [in the past] that refuses to recede further into the past, for his despair is not such that he has succeeded in forgetting it completely. This past may even be something that repentance really should have in custody. But if repentance is to arise, there must first be effective despair, radical despair, so that the life of the spirit can break through from the ground inward. But in despair as he is, he does not dare to come to such a decision. There he stands still, time passes—unless, even more

in despair, he succeeds in healing it by forgetting it, and thus instead of becoming a penitent, he becomes his own receiver of stolen goods. But essentially the despair of a youth and of an adult remains the same; there is never a metamorphosis in which consciousness of the eternal in the self breaks through so that the battle can begin that either intensifies the despair in a still higher form or leads to faith. [59,60]

Young people get anxious about their future that may involve having to do something that they do not want to do. Thus, strictly speaking, in the future, they do not want to be themselves. On the other hand, adults agonize over their past, wishing that they had not made certain choices that, quite possibly, even make them feel guilty, because they were immoral choices, not just innocent and unwise choices. Thus, they are unwilling to have been who they were in the past and, therefore, unwilling to be who they are now as products of their past. They will not reconcile themselves to their past and accept it for what it was. Thus, they despair over their past, temporally speaking. Kierkegaard's conclusion from this analysis is that there is no significant difference between youthful despair and adult despair, regardless of appearances. The difference is only one of the future vs. the past.

In addition, perhaps the adult ought to repent before God of certain choices he made in the past in order to deal with his despair properly. However, in order for this to happen, a radical and effective despair must take place that pushes the adult inward and causes him to assess realistically the gravity of his immoral condition. In addition, Kierkegaard reminds us that this potential penitent is in some kind of despair, even if it is only temporal despair. Nevertheless, this temporal despair is exactly what could prevent him from facing into his eternal despair. Thus, by remaining in temporal despair, he lacks the courage to make the decision to repent and escape the vastly more important eternal despair. He is caught in limbo—between guilt and forgiveness.

Maybe, over time, he forgets about his past choices of which he should repent. If so, then he is like a thief who has stolen what rightfully belongs to himself, his own

repentance, and received it for himself precisely in order to avoid repentance.

Kierkegaard says that the proper inward change that would lead finally to authentic, biblical belief never occurs. Therefore, youthful despair and adult despair are basically the same, unless somewhere along the journey of life a person becomes utterly aware of his need for God's mercy and genuinely and humbly acts on this need before God, and God alone—without any inappropriate help from the church and Christendom. And Kierkegaard has been claiming that most of the help from the church is inappropriate, because it is based upon the concept of quantifying success, which is completely antithetical to the biblical message.

Is there, then, no essential difference between the two expressions used identically up to now: to despair over the earthly (the category of totality) and to despair over something earthly (the particular)? Indeed there is. When the self in imagination despairs with infinite passion over something of this world, its infinite passion changes this particular thing, this something, into the world *in toto*; that is, the category of totality inheres in and belongs to the despairing person. The earthly and the temporal as such are precisely that which falls apart or disintegrates into particulars, into some particular thing. The loss or deprivation of every earthly thing is actually impossible, for the category of totality is a thought category. Consequently, the self infinitely magnifies the actual loss and then despairs over the earthly *in toto*. However, as soon as this distinction (between despairing over the earthly and over something earthly) must be maintained essentially, there is also an essential advance in consciousness of the self. This formula, to despair over the earthly, is then a dialectical initial expression for the next form of despair. [60]

Certainly, to be unhappy about the whole of one's human existence is different from being unhappy about one small aspect of this existence. For example, to be in the frame of mind where life in its entirety is not worth living is different from lamenting the fact that I stubbed my toe that continues to hurt while merrily going on about the main business of my life. However, if I were to "despair with infinite passion" over my stubbed toe, then it is as though my whole human existence is completely ruined—or so I think. In other words, I have turned my toe (or my marriage, my job, my health, etc.) into the whole world. Kierkegaard claims that it is so easy for the "category of totality" to inhere in the

despairing person and belong to him. He means by this that it is so easy for us to make a mountain out of a molehill, to take something small in our lives and turn it into the whole of our human existence, as though our toe, our marriage, our job, our health, etc. completely defines who we are. Anyone who has grieved deeply over the loss of someone or something hugely important in his life can identify with Kierkegaard's suggestion here, that we can feel as though nothing in life can bring us any joy or happiness after such a loss or until the loss is rectified.

However, in this state of mind, I really am only imagining that I am pondering life in its totality. It is sheer fantasy that, by losing something, maybe many things, I have actually lost everything. It feels as though I possess nothing in life worth having, and I have even convinced myself that nothing that I could possess would change the way that I feel now. However, Kierkegaard is actually claiming that thinking about life in its totality is impossible. For example, even if all my relationships disappear, I still have my material possessions. Then, even if all my material possessions are stolen, I still have my body. Then, even if I lose the use of all my limbs, I can still breathe. Then, if I lose my breath, I die. But this is exactly the point. Short of death, I still have something as a human being, even if it is the bare minimum necessary to say that I am alive.

Thus, Kierkegaard wants us to realize that our tendency is to magnify any *particular* loss in our lives so that we feel as though we have lost *everything*—to blow the particular out of proportion so that it feels like the whole of our human existence. We will even say that our tendency is to make mountains out of molehills, which demonstrates that we have not lost everything, because we can still breathe and say that we have lost everything, while deep inside we know that we have not. Nevertheless, when a person becomes capable of making the distinction between losing everything (total loss) and losing something (particular loss), then he has made an important step towards being aware of his *self* as God would have him do so. The result is that describing this concept

of despairing over the earthly, the first kind of weak despair, allows Kierkegaard to move on to the next category of weak despair—despair of the eternal or over oneself.

(2) DESPAIR OF THE ETERNAL OR OVER ONESELF

Despair over the earthly or over something earthly is in reality also despair of the eternal and over oneself, insofar as it is despair, for this is indeed the formula for despair. But the individual in despair depicted above is not aware, so to speak, of what is going on behind him. He thinks he is despairing over something earthly and talks constantly of that over which he despairs, and yet he is despairing of the eternal, for the fact that he attributes such great worth to something earthly—or, to carry this further, that he attributes to something earthly such great worth, or that he first makes something earthly into the whole world and then attributes such great worth to the earthly—this is in fact to despair of the eternal. [60,61]

Notice the different prepositions Kierkegaard uses—*over* and *of*. He says that to despair *over* the earthly, even if it is one small thing in life, i.e., over *something* earthly, is to despair *of* the eternal and *over* oneself. In other words, the person who is so worried and anxious about his life in the here and now is actually anxious about his eternal destiny. He thinks that his hopelessness has to do only with the stuff outside him in the present realm, but, really, his hopelessness is as a result of what is inside him in regard to eternal life. In other words, all earthly despair fundamentally has an eternal component.

This despair is a significant step forward. If the preceding despair was *despair in weakness*, then this is *despair over his weakness*, while still remaining within the category: despair in weakness as distinct from despair in defiance (β). Consequently, there is only a relative difference, namely, that the previous form has weakness's consciousness as its final consciousness, whereas here the consciousness does not stop with that but rises to a new consciousness—that of his weakness. [61]

Kierkegaard is making a distinction between hopelessness that comes about because a human being is too weak even to see the cause of his hopelessness and despair that comes about because a human being recognizes that he is too weak to rise above the cause within him and fix the problem. In other words, the “significant step

forward” is that a person acquires a higher level of consciousness and understanding about himself. He actually acknowledges that he is too weak to want to fix the problem of his eternal despair. Therefore, rather than simply being hopeless *in the midst* of his eternal problem without any recognition of exactly what the problem is, he grasps the problem and actually despairs over the fact that he is too weak to appeal to God for mercy and fix it.

The person in despair himself understands that it is weakness to make the earthly so important, that it is weakness to despair. But now, instead of definitely turning away from despair to faith and humbling himself under his weakness, he entrenches himself in despair and despairs over his weakness. In so doing, his whole point of view is turned around: he now becomes more clearly conscious of his despair, that he despairs of the eternal, that he despairs over himself, over being so weak that he attributes such great significance to the earthly, which now becomes for him the despairing sign that he has lost the eternal and himself. [61]

Kierkegaard is saying that this person is very much aware that putting all his eggs in the basket of earthly matters (his health, his bank account, his relationships with people, his standing in the community, his job, etc.) is a weakness. This person acknowledges that he is missing the point about life—that God has designed him for eternity beyond the present realm. However, instead of embracing this truth and humbling himself before God, seeking His forgiveness for worshiping the creation instead of the Creator, this person cannot help himself but remain firmly committed to the things of the world and “despairs over his weakness” of doing so. He is, therefore, completely aware of his weakness and its resultant despair. He is even aware of the fact that he is giving up eternal life and despairs of this, too. In addition, he despairs *over* himself, realizing how wretched he is for being so weak as to ascribe more significance to the temporal and earthly than to the eternal and heavenly. Such weakness signifies to him that he has lost not only eternal life, but also himself. He is too weak to be his true *self*.

The progression is as follows. First, comes the consciousness of the self, for to despair of the eternal is impossible without having a conception of the self, that there is something eternal in it, or that it has had something eternal in it. If a

person is to despair over himself, he must be aware of having a self; and yet it is over this that he despairs, not over the earthly or something earthly, but over himself. [62]

There is a definite sequence in this despair *over* oneself. First, a person becomes aware that he is designed for eternity and that eternal life is even a possibility. Thus, when he despairs *over* himself, it is because he is aware of this eternal aspect of who he is. However, now his despair is not in regard to earthly things such as money and health. Instead, it is in regard to just himself as a person who is designed for eternity but who lacks eternity.

Furthermore, there is greater consciousness here of what despair is, because despair is indeed the loss of the eternal and of oneself. Of course, there is also a greater consciousness that one's state is despair. Then, too, despair here is not merely a suffering but an act. When the world is taken away from the self and one despairs, the despair seems to come from outside, even though it always comes from the self, indirectly-directly from the self, as the counter-pressure (reaction), and it thereby differs from defiance, which comes directly from the self. Ultimately, this is still a step forward, although in another sense; simply because this despair is more intensive, it is in a certain sense closer to salvation. It is difficult to forget such despair—it is too deep; but every minute that despair is kept open, there is the possibility of salvation as well. [62]

Being aware of one's lack of eternal life means greater awareness of one's despair in regard to it. In addition, the despair is a choice that a person makes. It does not simply happen to him from outside. For example, if a person catches a cold, the germs originate outside him, and then he has no choice when they enter and he gets sick. Nevertheless, how the person chooses to react to the cold does not come from outside him, existentially speaking. It comes directly from him, i.e., from within him. If he chooses to be in a bad mood until he gets well, his choice is not a direct effect of the cold. Instead, the cold is merely an indirect cause of his choice. He is the direct cause of his choice.

The same is true if he consciously chooses to remain in a state of eternal despair, even if the initial blow that made him aware of his lack of eternity came from outside—the loss of a loved one, the loss of a job, the loss of his health, etc. Nevertheless, by

becoming aware of himself this way, the person actually moves closer to eternal salvation and forgiveness from God, simply because his despair is more conscious and intense. And the more conscious and intense the despair, the closer he is to giving it his despair, existentially speaking, because it is more difficult for him to put it out of his mind and ignore it.

Nevertheless, the despair is under the form: in despair not to will to be oneself. Like a father who disinherits a son, the self does not want to acknowledge itself after having been so weak. In despair it cannot forget this weakness; it hates itself in a way, will not in faith humble itself under its weakness in order thereby to recover itself—no, in despair it does not wish, so to speak, to hear anything about itself, does not know anything to say. [62]

Even though there is a conscious choice to remain in despair, Kierkegaard still categorizes this despair as despair in weakness, not in strength. He is saying that it is not a despair that is chosen *defiantly* like that of strong despair. Instead, it is like a father who disinherits his son and does not want to acknowledge that he has a son. The person in eternal despair does not want to acknowledge that he is in despair after also recognizing that it is because of his weakness that he makes his choice. Therefore, he loathes himself for his weakness, but it is also a prideful loathing. Kierkegaard says that he is not willing to humble himself in faith and deal appropriately with his moral depravity before God by appealing to Him for mercy.

With this kind of despair, a person has become very aware of what is going on inside himself. Nevertheless, it still falls under the category of “not to will to be oneself,” the category of weakness. Kierkegaard will show that the category of strength, i.e., to will to be oneself and yet remain in despair, is to face into the despair with such an intensity as to choose *defiantly* to avoid dealing with it properly. On the other hand, authentic belief involves facing into all the despair possible for a human being, especially eternal despair, and bringing it before God. Thus, authentic belief is to choose to be *oneself* and not remain in despair. In this latter situation, a person chooses to be exactly who he is in

the *best* way possible by bringing his immoral condition before God and seeking His forgiveness and eternal salvation. In contrast, to become aware of one's weakness and unwillingness to grant more significance to God than to the things of the present world is to remain in a state of unwillingness to be exactly who one is, i.e., "not to will to be oneself." There can even be an element of silent self-loathing in this despair as the person just stewes in his own weakness and unwillingness to move forward into authentic belief.

Nor is there any question of being helped by forgetting or of slipping, by means of forgetting, into the category of the spiritless and then to be a man and a Christian like other men and Christians—no, for that the self is too much self. As is often the case with the father who disinherits his son, the external circumstance is of little help; he does not thereby rid himself of his son, at least not in his thought. It is often the case when a lover curses the one he detests (his beloved) that it does not help very much; it captivates him almost more—and so it goes with the despairing self in regard to itself. [62,63]

To try to forget one's despair is like a father's trying to forget the son whom he disinherited. The more he tries to forget, the more he thinks about his son. Therefore, for the person who is aware of his eternal despair and is trying to forget his despair, any external circumstances, such as going to church and acting like a Christian or even professing to believe in Christ, are no help in forgetting his despair. Kierkegaard thus points out that, in this condition of self-awareness, the despairing person cannot forget that he despairs. He is too self-aware. His situation will continue to haunt him even though he has resolved the issue in his mind by choosing to remain in a state of unwillingness to be himself and trying to ignore his despair.

This despair is qualitatively a full level deeper than the one described earlier and belongs to the despair that less frequently appears in the world. That false door mentioned previously, behind which there is nothing, is here a real door, but a carefully closed door, and behind it sits the self, so the speak, watching itself, preoccupied with or filling up time with not willing to be itself and yet being self enough to love itself. This is called inclosing reserve [*indesluttethed*]. And from now on we shall discuss inclosing reserve, which is the very opposite of immediacy and in terms of thought, among other things has a great contempt for it. [63]

We recall that Kierkegaard has described the “immediate” person as one who may not even be aware of himself as being designed by God for eternity and, therefore, is in despair. All he realizes is that his desires for pleasure and to avoid pain lead him to want the things of the present world—money, health, food, etc. In contrast, the person whom Kierkegaard is currently describing is actually aware of his eternal design and his despair. Nevertheless, he is unwilling to do what he should in order to secure eternal life for himself. He sits there, watching himself go through life engaged in the activities of the present world that could include the religious activities of a church within Christendom, and, in a sense, he loves himself. Kierkegaard calls this self-love “inclosing reserve,” which he goes on to describe.

Is there no one with such a self in the world of actuality, has he taken flight from actuality into the desert, the monastery, the madhouse; is he not an actual human being, dressed like others, wearing ordinary outer garments? Of course, why not! But this matter of the self he shares with no one, not a soul; he feels no urge to do so, or he has learned to subdue it. Just listen to what he himself says of it: “In fact, it is only purely immediate man—who in the category of spirit is just about on the same level as the young child, who, with utterly lovable unconstraint, tells all—it is only purely immediate people who are unable to hold anything back. It is this kind of immediacy that often with great pretension calls itself ‘truth, being honest, an honest telling it exactly as it is,’ and this is just as much a truth as it is an untruth when an adult does not immediately yield to a physical urge. Every self with just a minuscule of reflection still knows how to constrain the self.” [63]

Do people who are aware of their despair but who choose to remain in despair really exist? Kierkegaard says that, perhaps, one could find them only in complete isolation away from normal society, sequestered in monasteries or insane asylums, precisely because they are not “normal” human beings. However, he also says that these people truly do exist right within mainstream society. Nevertheless, they do not make known their situation to anyone. In fact, they consider it quite childish to be so open and honest if they were to share their despair and awareness of it. They believe that to share their despair would be to imitate a young child who simply cannot help but talk about himself.

In addition, they look down on those who claim to talk about themselves with honesty and openness, and they call them immature, because they believe that maturity demonstrates itself by constraining oneself from the childish need to spill one's guts.

And our man in despair is sufficiently self-inclosed to keep this matter of the self away from anyone who has no business knowing about it—in other words, everyone—while outwardly he looks every bit “a real man.” He is a university graduate, husband, father, even an exceptionally competent public officeholder, a respectable father, pleasant company, very gentle to his wife, solicitude personified to his children. And Christian? —Well, yes, he is that, too, but prefers not to talk about it, although with a certain wistful joy he likes to see that his wife is occupied with religion to her upbuilding. He rarely attends church, because he feels that most pastors really do not know what they are talking about. He makes an exception of one particular pastor and admits that he knows what he is talking about, but he has another reason for not wanting to listen to him, since he fears being led too far out. [63,64]

Kierkegaard is claiming that this person who is aware of his despairing condition and who chooses to remain in despair looks just like everyone else. He even claims to be a Christian, but he rarely darkens the door of his local church, because he thinks that Bible teachers really do not know what they are talking about (and he may be right since they are promoting Christendom, the institution of Christianity, and not authentic Christianity that needs no institution). He may believe that one pastor does speak the truth, but he rarely listens to him for fear that doing so would lead him into having to come to grips with his despair in a deeper way. Nevertheless, he is pleased that his wife finds Christianity and Bible study helpful. Yet, he does not want to become a fanatic in his Christianity. Instead, he merely plays the part of a good Christian by treating his wife with gentleness and training up his children with great care, while also conducting himself morally and purposefully as a conscientious businessman or public official.

On the other hand, he not infrequently longs for solitude, which for him is a necessity of life, at times like the necessity to breathe, at other times like the necessity to sleep. That this is a life-necessity for him more than for most people also manifests his deeper nature. On the whole, the longing for solitude is a sign that there still is spirit in a person and is the measure of what spirit there is. “Utterly superficial nonpersons and group-people” feel such a meager need for solitude that, like lovebirds, they promptly die the moment they have to be alone. Just as a little child has to be lulled to sleep, so these people need the

soothing lullaby of social life in order to be able to eat, drink, sleep, fall in love, etc. In antiquity as well as in the Middle Ages there was an awareness of this longing for solitude and a respect for what it means; whereas in the constant sociality of our day we shrink from solitude to the point (what a capital epigram!) that no use for it is known other than as a punishment for criminals. But since it is a crime in our day to have spirit, it is indeed quite in order to classify such people, lovers of solitude, with criminals. [64]

The positive aspect of this self-inclosing person is that he often wants to be alone. He is not a social junkie like the rest of society who have an insatiable need to be around people all the time to feel good about themselves. Just as in ancient times and in the Middle Ages, the self-inclosing person recognizes that solitude is good for the soul. Kierkegaard says that the self-inclosing person's desire for solitude is a sign that he has some sense of his true spiritual nature as a rational and moral creature of God, because to stand alone before God is eventually what every human being must do in coming to grips with himself as morally depraved and in need of forgiveness for the sake of eternal life. Kierkegaard also claims that, in modern times, solitude, i.e., solitary confinement, is reserved for criminals. Kierkegaard sarcastically says that his society of the Danish State Lutheran Church considers an authentic and healthy spiritual life to be so abhorrent that it is basically a crime. Therefore, his "Christian" contemporaries categorize people who enjoy solitude, and therefore authentic Christianity, as criminals, because their authentic belief is so offensive to them.

The self-inclosing despairing person goes on living *horis succesivis* [hour after hour]; even if not lived for eternity, his hours have something to do with the eternal and are concerned with the relation of his self to itself—but he never really gets beyond that. When it is done, when his longing for solitude is satisfied, he goes out, as it were—even when he goes in to or is involved with his wife and children. Aside from his natural good nature and sense of duty, what makes him such a kind husband and solicitous father is the confession about his weakness that he has made to himself in his inclosed innermost being. [64,65]

In the midst of his awareness that eternity is ultimately what he must deal with, the self-inclosing person simply goes on living life as though all is well—but without dealing

with eternity. He rightly spends time alone and satisfies his desire for solitude. Then, he spends time with people, thus satisfying his proper sense of duty, and he comes across as the most pleasant of companions to his friends. He is kind to his wife and helpful to his children. However, even though he has admitted to himself that he is too weak to deal honestly with his need for salvation from God, he keeps this fact to himself. In addition, this self-inclosing person considers such hiding of his internal condition and weakness to be a strength. After all, he is not burdening others with his problems, and he appears strong enough to handle them himself. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard labels his strength a weakness, because this person is too weak to deal with his immoral condition before God.

If it were possible for anyone to share the secret of his inclosing reserve and if one were then to say to him, "It is pride, you are really proud of yourself," he probably would never make the confession to anyone else. Alone with himself, he no doubt would confess that there is something to it, but the passionateness with which his self has interpreted his weakness would soon lead him into believing that it cannot possibly be pride, because it is indeed his very weakness that he despairs over—just as if it were not pride that places such tremendous emphasis on the weakness, just as if it were not because he wants to be proud of his self that he cannot bear this consciousness of weakness. [65]

Assume for a moment that this very private person actually admits to someone else that he knows that he is morally depraved but is too weak to confess it before God and seek His forgiveness. Then, the other person might say to him, "Your problem is your pride, that you cannot humble yourself to seek God's mercy." First, the private person immediately decides that he will never share his secret with anyone else for fear of being similarly criticized. Second, when he reflects in the solitude of his mind on the possibility that his problem is pride, he may concur, but only to a degree. Instead, he is too emotionally committed to his current condition that he concludes that pride certainly is not his major problem, because he *admits* that his problem is actually weakness, and he even *despairs over his weakness*. He is convinced that prideful people do not admit to

others and to themselves that they are weak and then go on to despair over their weakness. They hide their weakness, even from themselves.

—If someone were to say to him, “This is a curious entanglement, a curious kind of knot, for the whole trouble is really the way your thinking twists around; otherwise it is even normal, in fact, this is precisely the course you have to take: you must go through the despair of the self to the self. You are quite right about the weakness, but that is not what you are to despair over; the self must be broken in order to become itself, but quit despairing over that”—if someone were to speak that way to him, he would understand it in a dispassionate moment, but his passion would soon see mistakenly again, and then once more he would make a wrong turn—into despair. [65]

Kierkegaard says that this person’s confessor could remark that he has tied himself in a knot. On the one hand, because he is unwilling to stop despairing over his weakness, he is guilty of pride. On the other hand, he admits that he despairs over his weakness, which, to him, indicates humility and not pride. Yet, his confessor points out that, in order to get through the despair of the self to the true *self*, this person must not only acknowledge his weakness, which is a good thing, but also proceed beyond despairing over it. To despair over his weakness is exactly what is preventing him from dealing properly with his immoral condition. He must move beyond simply despairing over it to confessing it before God. However, the confessor also points out that such a choice requires that a person become inwardly broken and contrite. Kierkegaard comments that the self-inclosing person might actually see that contrition is necessary and even admit it both to his confessor and to himself. Nevertheless, rather than making this bold move, he despairs again, but only over his weakness. In other words, he is stuck.

As stated, this kind of despair is quite rare in the world. If it does not stop there and just make time on the spot, and if on the other hand the person in despair does not experience an upheaval that puts him on the right road to faith, despair of this kind will either become intensified in a higher form of despair and continue to be inclosing reserve, or it will break through and destroy the outward trappings in which such a despairing person has been living out his life as if in an incognito. [65]

There are several possible ways that this rare kind of hopelessness will continue to manifest itself. It may simply proceed along the same track that it is on and hide behind a respectable life—as a good husband, an endearing father, a responsible employer or employee, etc. Or it may go through a strong and sudden change that actually leads to authentic faith. If neither of these two outcomes occurs, the despair will either increase in intensity and head towards an even higher form of despair while pursuing solitude and silence, or it will throw off the shackles of the pretentious respectable life and dive into the present world even more with new and unbounded vigor, thus outwardly and obviously demonstrating itself for what it really is—rebellion against God and eternity.

In the latter case, a person in this kind of despair will hurl himself into life, perhaps into the diversion of great enterprises; he will become a restless spirit whose life certainly leaves its mark, a restless spirit who wants to forget, and when the internal tumult is too much for him, he has to take strong measures, although of another kind than Richard III used in order not to hear his mother's curses. Or he will seek oblivion in sensuality, perhaps in dissolute living; in despair he wants to go back to immediacy, but always with the consciousness of the self he does not want to be. [65,66]

We recall that this person is aware of his weakness and unwillingness to deal with his inward moral depravity. However, if the pressure within him of both his despair and his pretending to be a respectable person becomes too great, then he will want to forget what he knows all too clearly about himself. What will he do to forget? Kierkegaard says that he will break out of his quiet shell and, in an agitated state, will want to become absorbed in great accomplishments that make him famous within his community. Such a strategy is different from Richard III who simply ordered the beating of drums to drown out his mother's criticisms and help him forget that she was even talking (Shakespeare, *Richard the III*, IV, 4). Or this despairing person, who wants to forget both his despair and his weakness, will hide in sensual and immoral pursuits, thinking that physical pleasure is the perfect amnesiac. He will wrap himself in all the physical possibilities of the present life, such as sexual pleasure, alcohol, or drugs, in order to escape his

despair. However, he can never get away from the realization that he is not willing to face into who he really is—an immoral person who needs God's mercy and forgiveness.

In the first case, if the despair is intensified, it becomes defiance, and it now becomes clear how much untruth there was in this whole matter of weakness—it becomes clear how dialectically correct it is that the first expression for defiance is this very despair over this weakness. [66]

On the other hand, if his despair only becomes more intense, then it will turn into outright defiance and hostile rebellion against God. Kierkegaard says that such a move on the part of the person makes it apparent that the beginning of open and willful opposition towards God is not only an awareness of one's weakness and unwillingness to face into one's immoral condition. It is also to despair over the unwillingness. In other words, the beginning of defiance towards God is to despair over one's despair, because this despair is to give up on changing inwardly and on making the choice to believe with biblical genuineness.

In conclusion, let us take still another little look at the person of inclosing reserve who in his inclosing reserve marks time on the spot. If this inclosing reserve is maintained completely, *omnibus numeris absoluta* [completely in every respect], then his greatest danger is suicide. Most men, of course, have no intimation of what such a person of inclosing reserve can endure; if they knew, they would be amazed. The danger, then, for the completely inclosed person is suicide. But if he opens up to one single person, he probably will become so relaxed, or so let down, that suicide will not result from inclosing reserve. Such a person of inclosing reserve with one confidant is moderated by one whole tone in comparison with one who is fully inclosed. Presumably he will avoid suicide. [66]

Kierkegaard concludes that inclosing reserve, despairing over one's despair, can naturally lead to suicide, just to rid oneself of despair. However, he points out that human beings are quite resilient and capable of surviving very difficult circumstances⁶, even despair over despair. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard states that the greatest danger for

⁶ Kierkegaard's optimistic assessment and mankind's resilience to adverse circumstances is similar to another existentialist's, the Russian Fyodor Dostoevsky's, statement definition of man as a being who can adapt to anything, a statement that is mentioned and affirmed by Victor Frankl, a holocaust survivor, in his book *Man's Search For Meaning*.

those who turn away from themselves while also, paradoxically, turning towards themselves, i.e., who despairingly run from their unwillingness to deal with their immoral condition while also being aware of their immoral condition, is suicide. Yet, if this person finds one trustworthy confidant who can keep his secret and help bear the load of his despair, then he probably will be able to weather it without taking the drastic measure of getting rid of himself in order to avoid the pain of despair. In other words, the possible antidote to the poison of wanting to self-annihilate is the comfort and safety of just one friend who shows patience and compassion.

However, it may happen that just because he has opened himself to another person he will despair over having done so; it may seem that he might have held out far, far longer in silence rather than to have a confidant. There are examples of persons of inclosing reserve who were thrown into despair by having found a confidant. In this way, suicide may still result. In a poetic treatment, the denouement (assuming *poetice* [poetically] that the person was, for example, a king or an emperor) could be designed so that the confidant is killed. It is possible to imagine a demonic tyrant like that, one who craves to speak to someone about his torment and then successively consumes a considerable number of people, for to become his confidant means certain death: as soon as the tyrant has spoken in his presence, he is put to death. —It would be a task for a poet to depict his solution to a demoniac's tormenting self-contradiction: not to be able to do without a confidant and not to be able to have a confidant. [66,67]

Here Kierkegaard describes the ultimate tragedy of the immoral human condition—that people are so twisted in their thinking that they will despair over confiding in someone about their despair. Indeed, some people can survive much better and longer in this life by never talking about their eternal hopelessness with any other human being. Kierkegaard intimates that he personally knows of situations where persons have felt horrible about sharing their awareness of their despair with a confidant and, thus, made themselves even more miserable. In addition, he claims that suicide may still be the outcome of such a situation. However, if the person is powerful enough (for example, a king or an emperor), then, in order to deal with his discomfort after confiding in a friend about his despair, he may destroy the life of the friend instead of his own life.

Kierkegaard labels such a king or emperor a “demonic tyrant.” On the one hand, he craves to get his anxiety off his chest by confiding in a friend. On the other hand, he is so tormented by having shared his inner secret with the friend that he feels compelled to destroy his friend in order to try to forget his torment. How, Kierkegaard asks, would a poet write about this inconsistency in the twisted king’s mind—that he needs a friend with whom he can confess his pain and suffering, but he needs to destroy any friend who is so willing to share the burden of his pain and suffering? Thus, Kierkegaard describes the desperate nature of human, eternal hopelessness when people are unwilling to deal with their immoral condition by continuing down the road to authentic faith that results in finding solace and hope in God’s mercy and promise of eternal salvation and life.

β. In Despair to Will to Be Oneself: Defiance

As pointed out, the despair in *α* could be called feminine; similarly, this despair may be called masculine. It is, therefore, in relation to the foregoing, despair considered within the qualification of spirit. So perceived, however, masculinity essentially belongs within the qualification of spirit, while femininity is a lower synthesis. [67]

Up to this point, Kierkegaard has been dealing with the weak form of despair, that which is *unwilling* to be itself. Now, he is moving on to the category of strong despair, that which is *willing* to be itself. We would think that a person who is *willing* to be himself would not be in despair. After all, to be a *self* is exactly how Kierkegaard has been defining a person who is not in despair. But alas, in Kierkegaard’s typical fashion, he is splitting hairs as he analyzes the complexities of human beings. In other words, there is a radical difference between being willing to be one *self* (a person not in despair) and being willing to be oneself (a person in despair). We notice that the communicated difference between these two expressions is whether or not “self” is italicized and part of

the same word as “one.” This all appears rather comical, but it is actually the difference between eternal life and eternal destruction.

In addition, Kierkegaard labels as feminine the despair of weakness that he had described in all of α above [*In Despair Not to Will to Be Oneself: Despair of Weakness*]. As he switches gears, he labels the despair of strength as masculine. Nevertheless, both kinds of despair, weak and strong, involve an inward decision that falls short of dealing completely with a person’s spiritual makeup and immoral condition. However, Kierkegaard states that strong, masculine despair “belongs within the qualification of spirit.” In other words, strong despair comes in much closer contact than weak despair with a person’s true spiritual makeup. Let us see how Kierkegaard goes on to describe this.

The kind of despair described in $\alpha(2)$ was over one’s weakness; the despairing individual does not will to be himself. But if the person in despair goes one single dialectical step further, if he realizes why he does not will to be himself, then there is a shift, then there is a defiance, and this is the case precisely because in despair he wills to be himself. [67]

In section $\alpha(2)$ [*alpha 2*] above [*Despair of the eternal or over oneself*], Kierkegaard spoke of the despair over one’s inability to move beyond recognizing that the things of the present world are not ultimately satisfying. Now, he writes about going one step further in the conversation with oneself, where a person actually realizes *why* he will not move beyond this kind of despair. With this extra step of realization, the person crosses the line from “Not willing to be himself: Despair in weakness” to “Willing to be himself: Despair in defiance” and strength. However, the self that this person is willing to be still falls short of the true self. He is willing to be himself, but not his *self*. He is willing to be himself, a person who is in defiance against God, but he is not willing to be his *self*, a person who humbles himself before God and appeals to Him for mercy. In addition, the person despairing in strength becomes more aware of the presence of his own immoral

condition and his defiance towards God, who wants and commands him to choose to go beyond being himself to being his *self*.

First comes the despair over the earthly or over something earthly, then despair of the eternal, over oneself. Then comes defiance, which is really despair through the aid of the eternal, the despairing misuse of the eternal within the self to will in despair to be oneself. But just because it is despair through the aid of the eternal, in a certain sense it is very close to the truth; and just because it lies very close to the truth, it is infinitely far away. The despair that is the thoroughfare to faith comes also through the aid of the eternal; through the aid of the eternal the self has the courage to lose itself in order to win itself. Here, however, it is unwilling to begin with losing itself but wills to be itself. [67]

Kierkegaard is describing the transition from weak despair to strong despair. He says that weak despair begins when a person realizes that all of human existence will not satisfy him, even if he were to become the wealthiest, healthiest, most beautiful, most powerful, most popular, and most successful person in the world. Or, weak despair may come about because a person allows one disappointment in life to crush him. This one disappointment feels so overwhelming that it seems to the person as though his whole existence has become depressing. The second step that brings about additional despair and allows it to grow from the weak form to the strong form occurs when the person senses that eternity is really his ultimate destiny—if he would just face honestly into his immoral condition and appeal to God for mercy. Instead, this person uses the added realization and understanding of eternity to choose to remain exactly who he is, a person who refuses to deal honestly and completely with his moral depravity before God. He “wills to be himself” and no other self, a person in defiance towards God. Therefore, he takes the eternally valuable notion of eternity and misuses it to defy God. Rather than allow his grasp of eternity to lead him both to God and to his true *self*, he takes eternity and “wills in despair to be himself.” He momentarily turns towards eternity, which is “the thoroughfare to faith,” but then turns away from eternity by making a choice of defiant unbelief.

As a result, the person's realization of eternity and his choice to be defiant towards it have actually brought him a little bit closer to the truth. However, because he refuses to embrace the truth and humble himself before God, Kierkegaard says that he might as well be infinitely far away from it. In God's economy, having been or being close to the truth counts no more than being infinitely far away from the truth. This person has been on the right path to eternity but has failed to continue on the path. Somehow, and really, only through the grace of God, it would be necessary from him to muster the courage to let go of and lose the self that refuses to deal with his moral depravity so that he can gain the *self* that rightly acknowledges it before God. For the moment, though, he is stuck with willing to be a defiant self rather than a humble *self*—eternally speaking.

In this form of despair, there is a rise in the consciousness of the self, and therefore a greater consciousness of what despair is and that one's state is despair. Here the despair is conscious of itself as an act; it does not come from the outside as a suffering under the pressure of externalities but comes directly from the self. Therefore defiance, compared with despair over one's weakness, is indeed a new qualification. [67]

Once a person transitions from weak despair to strong despair, Kierkegaard says that he gains a greater awareness of what is really going on inside of him. He now consciously knows that he is in state of hopelessness and that he has intentionally chosen to be in this state. Therefore, his despair is not an indirect consequence of external circumstances that have gravely disappointed him, as was the case with weak despair. Instead, his despair is a direct consequence of his own internal nature and, consequently, originates deep within him. As Kierkegaard will now go on to say, this person has sensed not only his immoral condition but also the possibility of eternity if he were to deal with his immoral condition appropriately. Therefore, he has moved from despair of weakness to despair of strength, because he now defiantly chooses to remain exactly where he is—hopelessly without eternal life.

In order in despair to will to be oneself, there must be consciousness of an infinite self. This infinite self, however, is really only the most abstract form, the most abstract possibility of the self. And this is the self that a person in despair wills to be, severing the self from any relation to a power that has established it, or severing it from the idea that there is such a power. [67,68]

Kierkegaard is saying that a person must become aware of his eternal design in order to choose defiantly to remain where he is in rebellion against God. Kierkegaard calls this the “consciousness of an infinite self,” because the person knows that he has a moral obligation to live infinitely, i.e., eternally. Nevertheless, since this person has only a conscious awareness of his infinite self and not a willingness to be this infinite self, i.e., a *self*, then his infinite self is only in theory and not in fact. He must take the infinitely valuable step to appeal legitimately (and not just religiously, if he is a church goer) to God for mercy in order for his “infinite self” to move out of the realm of possibility into the arena of actuality. However, this step is exactly what he defiantly refuses to take. Instead, he has relationally cut himself off from the very person, God, who not only has brought him into existence, but who also can rescue him from despair and his eternal and moral predicament. The strongly despairing person may even go so far as to exhibit the extreme in defiance by denying privately and publicly the very existence of God, while knowing all along, deep down inside, that he is lying.

With the help of this infinite form, the self in despair wants to be master of itself or to create itself, to make his self into the self he wants to be, to determine what he will have or not have in his concrete self. His concrete self or his concretion certainly has necessity and limitations, is this very specific being with these natural capacities, predispositions, etc. in this specific concretion of relations, etc. But with the help of the infinite form, the negative self, he wants first of all to take upon himself the transformation of all this in order to fashion out of it a self such as he wants, produced with the help of the infinite form of the negative self—and in this way he wills to be himself. In other words, he wants to begin a little earlier than do other men, not at and with the beginning, but “in the beginning”; he does not want to put on his own self, does not want to see his given self as his task—he himself wants to compose his self by means of being the infinite form. [68]

When a person realizes that he is designed for eternity and, yet, defies God by not dealing with his immoral condition properly, a strange thing happens. The person not only chooses to remain in despair, but he also wants more than anything else to be God. He wants to be his own “master” and to “create” himself. He wants to fashion himself into exactly what he, and not God, wants to be and thus determine how to define himself.

Genesis 1:1 states, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” and the Bible goes on to make it clear that God causes every human being to come into existence in the present, temporary realm and to go out of existence from the present, temporary realm. The Bible also states that God’s project is to create eventually an eternal realm where the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, will rule and people of authentic belief in God, who have dealt properly with their immoral condition by seeking His mercy, will live with Jesus. Kierkegaard is saying that, when a person realizes that God has ultimately designed him for eternity, and, yet, he rejects His design, then this person wants to be the very source and cause of his existence. God is the one who makes this person a “concrete” being who is very real in the midst of the rest of the reality that God has created. However, this person, who rebels against God and chooses to remain in despair, has decided that he wants to be the cause of whatever is real about him. He wants to give himself a sense of being a substantial and real person, the same sense that God gives all human beings so that they may properly believe that they are real and not just ethereal ghosts. Therefore, this despairing and defiant person wants to determine for himself who he is and what he does with his natural capabilities, even though, ironically, God is the one who has both gifted him and limited him with his particular, natural abilities. However, acknowledging such gifts from God is the last thing that this person wants to do.

Thus, this person takes what God has given him, the possibility of gaining eternal life, and uses it against God by stealing, so to speak, all his natural capabilities and

using them to fashion a person he wants to be—apart from God. In this way, he “wills to be himself.” Indeed, God, the transcendent Creator of his whole existence, is the one who has even caused him to be the morally depraved self that he is and that he is now willing to be—defiantly. But as such, he does not want to be an immoral self who comes before God and seeks His mercy and forgiveness. He wants to remain only cognizant of his real person, designed for eternity, whom God has made, but without following through and appealing to God for mercy and forgiveness. Kierkegaard calls this condition “the infinite form of the negative self,” because the person recognizes that he could live as an “infinite” being, i.e., eternally, but adopts an infinitely “negative” attitude towards this possibility. In other words, he categorically does not want to be a true *self*. He wants only to be a rebellious and “negative” self, who remains such while seeking to supplant God and while saying NO to His demand to become a positive *self* who humbly acknowledges his moral depravity.

If a generic name for this despair is wanted, it could be called stoicism, but understood as not referring only to that sect. To elucidate this kind of despair more precisely, it is best to distinguish between an acting self and a self acted upon and to show how the self, when it is acting, relates itself to itself, and how the self, when it is acted upon, in being affected, relates itself to itself—and thus to show that the formula always is: in despair to will to be oneself. [68]

Stoicism was a branch of Greek philosophy early in the third century B.C. Its basic tenet was that strong passions were the result of errors in judgment. Therefore, it was important for human beings to think well so that they did not become distracted by their emotions and live strictly on the basis of them. We see here that Kierkegaard is calling defiant despair stoicism. He says that he will now make it clear why he uses this label by describing how a person relates to himself when he is making choices apart from any external influence and how he relates to himself when something acts upon him from the outside (such as his financial situation, a relational conflict, or the culture in which he lives).

If the self in despair is an *acting self*, it constantly relates itself to itself only by way of imaginary constructions, no matter what it undertakes, however vast, however amazing, however perseveringly pursued. It recognizes no power over itself; therefore it basically lacks earnestness and can conjure forth only an appearance of earnestness, even when it gives its utmost attention to its imaginary constructions. This is a simulated earnestness. Like Prometheus stealing fire from the gods, this is stealing from God the thought—which is earnestness—that God pays attention to one; instead, the self in despair is satisfied with paying attention to itself, which is supposed to bestow infinite interest and significance upon his enterprises, but it is precisely this that makes them imaginary constructions. [68,69]

Here Kierkegaard begins his description of a person who makes choices apart from any external influence, a person whom he describes as “an *acting self*.” He says that this person, who is in eternal despair, relates to himself “only by way of imaginary constructions.” “[I]maginary constructions” are human goals and purposes that have nothing to do with concrete reality, i.e., with God. God is the *only* ultimate, real being, because He is uncreated, while everyone and everything else is created by Him.⁷ Therefore, even though this person pursues activity that is real since it is part of the creation, the fact that he excludes God from his understanding of reality means, to Kierkegaard, that he might as well be acting in an imaginary world. This is God’s universe, and this is God’s earth on which we live. He has created them. Therefore, it is only appropriate to take Him into account anytime someone thinks, acts, speaks, or feels within the creation. To do otherwise is to live in a fantasy.

As a result, no matter how huge, wonderful, and humanitarian is a person’s project into which he pours his whole life with every fiber of his being (really, only *apparent* fiber of his being, because he is omitting the “fiber” of his true *self*), Kierkegaard says that his project is essentially “imaginary.” This person may feed all the hungry in the world, build houses for all the homeless in the world, etc., but his project is still a fantasy, theologically speaking, because he refuses to include the most real being, God, in his

⁷ cf. Jack Crabtree’s book *The Most Real Being*

understanding of reality—even, perhaps, while attending church and talking about God all the time, yet all the while using the name of God to draw attention to only himself.

Kierkegaard also says that this person “recognizes no power over” himself. As far as this person is concerned, he is God. Therefore, Kierkegaard says that he “lacks earnestness,” which he defines as “the thought...that God pays attention to one.” We typically think that an earnest person is one who shows sincere and intense conviction about something, especially about accomplishing great and altruistic works for the rest of humanity. In contrast, Kierkegaard means that a person is earnest only when he acknowledges, believes, and embraces the fact that God pays attention to him with “infinite” and transcendent concern, love, and mercy every moment of his life. Indeed, this should be a person’s most sincere and impassioned conviction, that God is his gracious Creator and therefore his constant Provider, because God is creating every moment of his existence—his every thought, feeling, action, and situation. No one is more “earnest” about him than God. Therefore, he, in turn, should not be more earnest about anything or anyone than about God. Thus, he can be said to possess “earnestness” and to be a person of the most resolute and intense conviction when he acknowledges and believes that God unceasingly and unwaveringly pays loving and merciful attention to him at every moment of his life.

If this person chooses to act in the world, even by feeding all the hungry and housing all the homeless, without including God in his worldview, then he “lacks earnestness and can conjure forth only an appearance of earnestness, even when [he] gives [his] utmost attention to [his] imaginary constructions.” All his passion is towards the “imaginary,” a fantasy, in comparison to the reality of including God and His attention towards him. Therefore, his “earnestness” is only “simulated,” a fake and bogus earnestness, no matter how much he huffs and puffs, no matter how much money he pours into his

project, no matter how much the whole rest of the world acknowledges his far-reaching humanitarian efforts, and no matter how much he strives to accomplish his goals.

Such is the way that Kierkegaard is describing the self who is in despair defiantly as an *acting self*,” a self who wills to be himself—in defiance against God. This person is a proactive rebel against his Creator, and he tries to create his own sense of meaning, purpose, and importance in life, while refusing to acknowledge fully that there is nothing that he can create in and of himself and that his Creator lovingly cares for him every moment. Thus, he does not admit that there is a God. Or, he admits it only to appear religious to everyone else. As he pursues power, fortune, and fame, he thinks that he is producing them in and of himself. However, he is wrong, eternally wrong, because he is only a creature created by God, and God is the only Creator of whatever any human being does and acquires in this life. As a result, while the self-aware and defiantly despairing person appears sincere and passionate in his pursuit of his humanitarian and world-renowned goals, his “earnestness” is only a cheap imitation of true passion that stands in awe of God’s constant and loving concern for him and that would move him to pursue eternal salvation with authentic belief.

Kierkegaard says that this defiantly *“acting self”* is also a thief. Just as Prometheus stole fire from the Greek gods, this earnest person, who is only imitating genuine earnestness, steals from God what is rightfully only His—the idea of the concentrated and constant awareness by the Creator of *His* creation—of every galaxy, solar system, planet, person, animal, rock, tree, electron, proton, and pi-meson. It is difficult for us to imagine, much less admit, that God pays “infinite” attention to every detail of His vast creation. Instead, in his rebellious despair, this person, who is only “an *acting self*” in eternal despair, is apparently completely satisfied with the finite attention that he gives himself. He considers the attention that he pays himself to be sufficient, infinitely sufficient, such that his projects and goals are of the greatest significance and

importance, even though he is ignoring God. However, again, he is wrong, eternally wrong. His projects and goals are only a cheap imitation of the real thing so that they are, theologically speaking, worth nothing in comparison to the smallest endeavors of the person of true belief, because the “*acting self*” pursues them in defiance and rebellion against God and deserves nothing more than eternal condemnation.

For even if this self does not go so far into despair that it becomes an imaginatively constructed god—no derived self can give itself more than it is in itself by paying attention to itself—it remains itself from first to last; in its self-redoubling it becomes neither more nor less than itself. [69]

The fundamental problem in the defiant *acting self's* pursuits, even if he never goes so far as to imagine himself as actually God, is that he is still no more and no less than a creature, constantly being caused to exist by the transcendent Creator. This person cannot make himself any more than he is simply by focusing his attention on himself and accomplishing great, altruistic or award winning goals. No amount of his effort, education, planning, money, etc. can transform him into the one who ultimately determines who he is and what he does, thereby becoming the one from whom he derives his meaning and purpose in life. Neither can he make himself any less than who he is, even if he fails miserably in all his efforts and goals and becomes the most unaccomplished person in all of human history. Ironically, and almost comically, the defiant and “*acting self*” fortifies his self-image with all the strength that he can muster as *a creature* to become nothing more nor less than what he is—a creature! He began his impassioned journey as a mere creature in order to become great and important, and he ends his impassioned journey, regardless of its outcome, whether it is success or failure, right where he started, as a mere creature, who is living in his own fantasy world, despite the magnitude of his accomplishments.

In so far as the self in its despairing striving to be itself works itself into the very opposite, it really becomes no self. In the whole dialectic within which it acts there is nothing steadfast; at no moment is the self steadfast, that is, eternally

steadfast. The negative form of the self exercises a loosening power as well as a binding power; at any time it can quite arbitrarily start all over again, and no matter how long one idea is pursued, the entire action is within a hypothesis. The self is so far from successfully becoming more and more itself that the fact merely becomes increasingly obvious that it is a hypothetical self. [69]

In his despairing state of defying God and refusing to acknowledge his immoral condition before Him, this person desperately tries to be himself, or, at least, what he thinks is himself. Yet, to be himself, he must face into his *self*—the humanly insoluble immoral self that he is. However, he refuses, and he refuses while defiantly rebelling against God who has commanded him to face into his *self* with genuine contrition for eternity's sake. Therefore, the more he tries to be himself without truly being his *self*, or, to put it another way, the more he tries to be himself without being his true *self*, the farther he moves away from being himself as God would have him to be. In effect, he becomes more and more “no self,” because he has missed the point of human existence and what is required truly to become a self. Since he lacks the willingness to take into account both his eternal design and the depth of his immoral condition and, therefore, is willing to be only himself without eternity and without resolving his moral depravity through God's mercy, defiantly refusing to appeal to God for forgiveness, he lacks being the *self* that he ought to be and remains without any firm and eternal foundation as a human being.

Kierkegaard calls the self that results from such a defiant attempt to be a genuine person the “negative form” of the self, since the self has not positively moved towards the true *self* of acknowledging its moral depravity and obtaining God's forgiveness through genuinely and humbly appealing to Him for eternal mercy. Thus, Kierkegaard claims that the self that this person thinks that he has become is really only theoretical—biblically speaking. While this person's self is concretely real within the created reality, nevertheless, in comparison to how the Bible defines a true *self*, this defiant person is

merely “a hypothetical” and supposed self. Kierkegaard says that the proof of this is in the fact that, at any time, the person could start all over again in his pursuit of his project(s), and nothing would substantially or substantively change about himself. He is still merely a creature who is in eternal despair. In contrast, a person who has embraced both his eternal design and profound immoral condition that has led him to appeal to God for mercy cannot start over. He has irrevocably and permanently begun the journey towards eternity, and there is no turning back. While the defiant person is convinced that he is independent and becoming an authentic human being by virtue of his wonderful accomplishments, he is only fooling himself and living in the imaginary and speculative world of his own erroneous ideas and rebellion against God.

The self is its own master, absolutely its own master, so-called; and precisely this is the despair, but also what it regards as its pleasure and delight. On closer examination, however, it is easy to see that this absolute ruler is a king without a country, actually ruling over nothing; his position, his sovereignty, is subordinate to the dialectic that rebellion is legitimate at any moment. Ultimately, this is arbitrarily based upon the self itself. [69]

Kierkegaard is saying that the defiant self, who is nevertheless an *acting self*, believes itself to be its own master and ruler, completely in control of itself and its life. Yet, deep down this person despairs. In fact, such defiance and erroneous belief about being one’s own God is exactly Kierkegaard’s very definition of despair, because, an important aspect of despair is the willingness to try to create one’s own reality apart from God’s reality, to try to think of human existence apart from the one who causes human beings to exist, to try to live life without taking God, the Life Giver, into account.

This defiant and self-guided person, or should we say self-*mis*guided person, even takes great pleasure in thinking that he is in complete control of his existence. However, Kierkegaard states that the person knows differently. He knows deep down that he is trying to fool himself and yet failing. In addition, Kierkegaard says that, when we look more closely at what is really going on, we see that this defiant and misguided person

rules over nothing in comparison to that over which God rules. This person is master of only the hypothetical and the imaginary. For instance, how can a created self ultimately rule over itself in an uncreated way? It cannot. Only the uncreated Creator can rule over any aspect of *His* creation. Thus, while this person thinks that he rules over his life, he actually is only subordinating himself to his rebellion against God, which he also considers to be the right and legitimate way to carry out his existence within the creation. As a result, he has picked an arbitrary and whimsical view of reality that is not grounded in rational thinking. Certainly, he would never admit that he is irrational and, therefore, insane, crazy, and absurd, but how else can we describe a belief that is based upon an understanding of reality that excludes the most real being and aspect of reality, God?

Consequently, the self in despair is always building only castles in the air, is only shadowboxing. All these imaginatively constructed virtues make it look splendid; like oriental poetry, they fascinate for a moment; such self-command, such imperturbability, such ataraxia, etc. practically border on the fabulous. Yes, they really do, and the basis of the whole thing is nothing. In despair the self wants to enjoy the total satisfaction of making itself into itself, of developing itself, of being itself; it wants to have the honor of this poetic, masterly construction, the way it has understood itself. And yet, in the final analysis, what it understands by itself is a riddle; in the very moment when it seems that the self is closest to having the building completed, it can arbitrarily dissolve the whole thing into nothing. [69,70]

Here Kierkegaard goes on to say that the defiantly despairing person, who is so intent on accomplishing such great and world-famous goals, is “building only castles in the air,” eternally speaking. He has constructed a self that appears incredibly virtuous and good. However, it is a self that is based upon only itself and not upon God. “[L]ike oriental poetry,” this person’s virtues command great respect and fascination from others, especially others who are engaged in the same project of defying God and, therefore, who have a false view of reality. This person looks so self-assured, confident, and calm. His high moral goals are set, and he is pursuing them with great energy and confidence, even, perhaps, having accomplished them to a measureable and

praiseworthy degree. Maybe he has been an alcoholic or a drug addict, but now he has seen the light and is sober, so that every day he is exercising and taking great care of himself. Maybe he has even written a book and described his successful journey and the principles that guided him to such health, happiness, and a great feeling of purpose in life. With his book, he is able to motivate others to turn from their evil ways and adopt more virtuous goals and purposes in their lives. Talk show hosts interview him and affirm him for his remarkable transformation and the inspiration that he is to them and to their listeners.

However, all that this despairingly defiant "*acting self*" has done is build castles in the air. He has been dealing and continues to deal in the fantastical. He imagines that he has transformed himself into a respectful, self-made man. Thus, he expects and wants the honor of having becoming someone whom both he and others admire, even while denying that he wants such adulation, because to state publicly that this is his desire would appear arrogant.

The fundamental truth is, though, that he rebelliously refuses to acknowledge that God is the only one who ultimately makes things, even a human being's existence, virtues, and accomplishments. Therefore, this person has become his own contradiction, a divinely existing human being who thinks that he is divine and causes himself to exist. Nevertheless, that which he is producing and which he thinks is so concrete, i.e., a royal and worthwhile self, is just a castle in the air, because this person could cause all his goals and projects to disappear in a heartbeat.

Kierkegaard has been stating that, in stark contrast, the true *self*, the self who embraces its eternal design and deep immoral condition and humbly appeals to God for mercy, can neither destroy its project of reaching eternity nor start over. Once the person who embraces his true *self* has begun the genuine eternal journey, he can only continue moving forward on the journey. Kierkegaard does not explicitly explain why this journey

is unstoppable, but we can speculate that he believes the thoroughly biblical notion that God in His grace will make sure that it remains such⁸.

In conclusion, the defiant person of stoicism, who has become consciously aware of his eternal design and, yet, wills to be himself by making choices apart from any external influence, the person whom Kierkegaard describes as “an *acting self*,” remains in eternal despair despite all the confidence that he exudes in his demeanor, despite all the energy that he puts forth in his actions, and despite all the good that he does in the world. In his defiant attempt to become his own creator, he has merely created a false and fantastical self that is an eternity away from his true *self*.

If the self in despair is *acted upon*, the despair is nevertheless: in despair to will to be oneself. Perhaps such an imaginatively constructing self, which in despair wills to be itself, encounters some difficulty or other while provisionally orienting itself to its concrete self, something the Christian would call a cross, a basic defect, whatever it may be. The negative self, the infinite form of the self, will perhaps reject this completely, pretend that it does not exist, will have nothing to do with it. But it does not succeed; its proficiency in imaginary constructing does not stretch that far, and not even its proficiency in abstracting does. In a Promethean way, the infinite, negative self feels itself nailed to this servitude. Consequently, it is a self acted upon. What, then, are the manifestations of this despair that is: in despair to will to be oneself? [70]

Now Kierkegaard moves on to the second kind of defiant despair that also falls under the category of stoicism. This defiant despair involves the person who relates to himself when something acts upon him from the outside and is in contrast to the self, the “*acting self*,” who makes choices apart from any external influence. In this instance, the eternally despairing self is “*acted upon*” by outside circumstances that expose a moral, spiritual, or basic human defect within him that constitutes what a Christian would describe as a cross that he has to bear. In the midst of both the external circumstances and internal defect, this person tries to construct an imaginary self that allows him to ignore his defect. However, he continues to be confronted by his inability to control the

⁸ cf. Philippians 1:6 –For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus (NAS95).

circumstances of his human existence that are impinging upon him from the outside and by his inability to control his inward defects that these circumstances are exposing.

In the midst of his realization that the difficult, external factors of human existence and his inward defects are out of his control, he tries to ignore his defects. However, he fails miserably, because the only resource that he has available to himself is “the negative self, the infinite form of the self,” that is the same “self” that the “*acting self*” has available and that is ultimately incapable of producing anything that truly works for human beings for avoiding despair.

Thus, the person who is “*acted upon*” has encountered something that faces him into the “concrete self” within him, i.e., his inability to control completely both his existence and his internal defects, the latter being the cross that he has to bear. The lack of his control over the world and himself leads him to acknowledge God’s control over everything (and, perhaps, he does, if only to sound like all his fellow “Christian” friends). Thus, by admitting that he lacks control of the creation, this person adopts what Kierkegaard calls “the infinite form of the self,” infinite in the sense that he has rightly concluded that he is less than God. However, like the previous “*acting self*,” his self is still a “negative self” and falls short of his being a true *self*.

Kierkegaard says that the next step that this person takes is to reject completely the fact that his defects are out of his control. He pretends that his defects are not there and tries to have nothing to do with them. However, he fails, because he lacks the ability to construct an “imaginary” self that is devoid of his powerlessness over his moral, spiritual, and basic human defects that reside at the deepest level of his being. He, like the “*acting self*,” is trying to steal God’s role of ruling over him, just as Prometheus stole fire from the gods. Therefore, all that results is that he remains enslaved to his powerlessness and the influence of his external circumstances. The result is that he “is a self acted upon” as well as a defiantly despairing person who wills to be himself. He cannot build a

castle in the air strong enough to protect him from the cross that he is bearing. Neither can he escape the same kind of fantasy that enveloped the “*acting self*.”

In the preceding pages, the form of despair that despairs over the earthly or something earthly was understood basically to be—and it also manifests itself as being—despair of the eternal, that is, an unwillingness to be comforted by and healed by the eternal, an overestimation of the things of this world to the extent that the eternal can be no consolation. [70]

Kierkegaard reminds the reader that he has defined despair “over the earthly...as despair of the eternal.” He says that to despair of the eternal is to be unwilling “to be comforted by and healed by the eternal.” In the final analysis, the only truly helpful and significant comfort that we human beings have in the face of all of the present world’s heartaches is God’s gracious and faithful promise of mercy and eternal life. Yet, when a person is unwilling to be comforted by God’s eternal promise of which, ultimately, Jesus as the Messiah is the focal point, it is because he is granting too much value and importance to “the things of this world.” In other words, the person of despair who is unwilling to be his true *self* looks at the circumstances of life and becomes convinced that they make it impossible for him to find complete satisfaction anywhere—even in the promise of eternity. Therefore, he despairs over the fact that he is unwilling to find comfort in God and His promise of eternal life in the midst of his difficult situation. It is one thing to despair over eternity and its *apparent* unappealing nature of providing comfort through pain, because a person misperceives eternity. It is a completely different situation to perceive eternity accurately and despair over one’s rebellious and overpowering rejection of finding comfort in God’s promise of eternal life, regardless of how attractive both eternity and its comfort appear to a person. When a person is cognizant of his rejection of the most valuable commodity of human existence, God’s gracious and faithful promise of mercy and eternal life, then, as Kierkegaard goes on to explain, his despair is the most wretched of conditions.

But this is also a form of the despair, to be unwilling to hope in the possibility that an earthly need, a temporal cross, can come to an end. The despairing person who in despair wills to be himself is unwilling to do that. He has convinced himself that this thorn in the flesh gnaws so deeply that he cannot abstract himself from it (whether this is actually the case or his passion makes it so to him), and therefore he might as well accept it forever, so to speak. [70,71]

The defiantly despairing person, who is unwilling to find solace in God and *eternal* life, also looks at his difficult earthly and *temporal* circumstances and firmly believes that there is no possibility that he can escape them. In his opinion, he is stuck for the rest of eternity, so to speak, i.e., for the rest of his temporal life on this earth, with not only the pain and suffering that his external circumstances are causing, but also with the sense of hopelessness that result from them—because he wills to be himself in despair. This is to say that, while willing to be a person who is morally depraved and without the hope of eternal life, he is also unwilling to anticipate with the comfort of God’s mercy that he will move away from his earthly suffering by eventually dying and leaving the present realm, thus entering into eternity with God. His earthly and temporal, i.e., *temporary*, suffering feels so overwhelming to him that it feels like *eternal* suffering. He cannot imagine that it would ever end, no matter how much he hopes that it would. Therefore, he believes that nothing and no one can either ease the pain or bring a sense of hope, even eternal hope, into his current existence and make it worthwhile to bear this awful “temporal cross” that looms so large in his life. He is consumed by his pain, and...

He is offended by it, or, more correctly, he takes it as an occasion to be offended at all existence; he defiantly wills to be himself, to be himself not in spite of it or without it (that would indeed be to abstract himself from it, and that he cannot do, or that would be the movement in the direction of resignation)—no, in spite of it or in defiance of all existence, he wills to be himself with it, takes it along, almost flouting his agony. Hope in the possibility of help, especially by virtue of the absurd, that for God everything is possible—no, that he does not want. And to seek help from someone else—no, not for all the world does he want that. Rather than to seek help, he prefers, if necessary, to be himself with all the agonies of hell. [71]

Just as this defiantly despairing person would turn up his nose at a foul smell, he is offended by his pain and uses it as an excuse to complain about everything, the whole of earthly human life. His entire existence utterly feels painful and meaningless to him. It is not that he is wills to be his immoral self “in spite of” the pain, because this would be to remove himself from it to some degree. It would be a way to resign himself to the fact that earthly pain is temporary, thereby handling it with even a modicum of dignity. No, instead he rebelliously defies not only God but also the ultimate meaning of human existence by choosing, without any recourse, to be a morally depraved person who also is, in his opinion, *irreversibly* in great pain. Indeed, the pain becomes a badge of courage and honor, a badge of his humanness, and he almost scoffs at the agony of his suffering. He does not even want to hope in hope, to expect that there will be any possibility that his pain and suffering will end.

Kierkegaard mentions and thus implies that the most advantageous help for a person’s pain and despair is “by virtue of the absurd.” This is a reference to his book *Fear and Trembling* where he analyzes the story in Genesis 22 of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. He describes Abraham as a man of faith who obeys God’s injunction to sacrifice his son, Isaac. He says that Abraham’s reason for obeying God is because he is anticipating the “absurd.” He expects that God will act outside the course of normal human life, in a way that many people would call irrational and “absurd,” by raising Isaac from the dead. However, Kierkegaard claims that the absurd is really not that all absurd, because “for God everything is possible.” God is the transcendent Creator, and miracles are as easy for Him to create as normal, so to speak, events within earthly history.

Thus, neither is the “absurd” irrational. It makes perfect sense that the transcendent Creator can perform such a miracle. Yes, it is irrational that God make a rock that He cannot lift, or that He cause Himself to cease to exist. In other words, God cannot violate what Aristotle identified as the Law of Non-Contradiction, that states, for example, that a

rose cannot be both a rose and not a rose at the same time and in the same respect. This is also to say that God cannot violate His own nature, that is Rational and Logical with a capital “R” and a capital “L.” When Kierkegaard speaks of the “absurd,” he is not suggesting that God performs the irrational and illogical. He is suggesting God performs that which blows us away. We are absolutely astounded by God and His love, mercy, and actions to these effect. However, we should never say that God either is or does that which is irrational or illogical.⁹

Therefore, Kierkegaard is stating that the defiantly despairing person is the complete opposite of Abraham. Rather than hope that God can perform a miracle, the “absurd,” the person in despair does not want God’s help. Indeed, the last place from which he wants help is from God, who, obviously, as the transcendent Creator, could eliminate his suffering with the snap of his fingers. However, rather than turn to God for comfort and solace, realizing that eventually this temporal and earthly life will end and God would welcome him into eternal life where there will be no more pain and heartache, he willingly wallows in his suffering. In fact, he wants help from no one. For the sake of defying God and the reality of authentic human existence, this defiantly despairing person just wants to endure “the agonies of hell” that his pain represents.

The popular notion that “of course, a person who suffers wants to be helped if only someone is able to help him” is not really so, is far from true, even though the contrary instance is not always as deep in despair as the one above. This is how things go. A sufferer usually has one or several ways in which he might want to be helped. But when having to be helped becomes a profoundly earnest matter, especially when it means being helped by a superior or by the supreme one, there is the humiliation of being obliged to accept any kind of help unconditionally, or becoming a nothing in the hand of the “Helper” for whom all things are possible, or the humiliation of simply having to yield to another person, of giving up being himself as long as he is seeking help. Yet there is undoubtedly much suffering, even prolonged and agonized suffering, in which the self nevertheless is not pained in this way, and therefore it fundamentally prefers the suffering along with the retention of being itself. [71]

⁹ See my lengthier discussion on the topic of logic and its relationship to God and truth in my book *God’s Project: Through the Window of John 5*, Chapter 11

Kierkegaard states the “popular notion,” that a person in need *readily* accepts help from others. Yet, he claims that this is not always true, especially since the person who is willing to receive help is typically not in as much despair as the person who is not willing to receive help. This sounds contradictory. We would think that the more pain that a person is experiencing, the more he wants help. However, Kierkegaard says that when the pain involves despair of the eternal, the opposite is usually true. The more a defiant person is not only in pain but also in despair, the more entrenched he is in his rebellion against God so that he fundamentally does not want help, especially from God.

Then, Kierkegaard explains how things can go in this matter. A person who is suffering “usually has one or several ways in which he might want to be helped.” In other words, the person can imagine help coming from several different directions, all of which would be acceptable to him. However, when he realizes that being helped is “a profoundly earnest matter,” that is, that it involves his eternal destiny and, therefore, requires that he passionately bring God into the equation, then “there is the humiliation of being obliged to accept any kind of help unconditionally.” Accepting help always cuts to a person’s core so that it is not only a humbling experience, but it is also a humiliating experience. A person who needs help must not only admit that he is needy, but also that he is losing the opportunity to be proud of the fact that he is independent. The first admission requires humility. The second admission is humiliating and embarrassing, because he must swallow his pride and risk the disapproval of others who consider him incapable of performing like a normal and acceptable human being. According to earthly society that does not properly take eternity into account, normal and acceptable human beings do not *unnecessarily* need help from other human beings, and especially from God (unless society has become so socialistically minded that needing help in every way from human beings, especially the government, becomes a badge of honor; but this is a completely different form of perversion and defiant despair from that which Kierkegaard

is discussing here). This is why Christianity is often labeled a “crutch” and why even some Christians claim that “God helps them who help themselves.” The defiantly despairing person must admit that there is someone greater than he is who can and must help him. Otherwise, he would not need help.

In addition, by accepting help from the ultimate “Helper,” God, the person becomes in a sense “a nothing” before God “for whom all things are possible.” When Kierkegaard says that a person must become a nothing before God, he actually means it literally, because he believes a human being is “an existing individual human being¹⁰.” This is to say that God causes every human being to exist at every moment, like an author of a book who causes his characters to exist as he writes the book. In the same way, if God were to stop “writing” His book, all the characters in the story would cease to exist, because the pieces of paper on which God is writing are also part of the story and exist only to the extent that God continues to write the story. For example, if God were to stop writing me into His story, then I would simply cease to exist. In this sense, I am “nothing in the hand of the ‘Helper.’” I am something as long as God wants me to have an existence within His story, and I would be nothing, i.e., I would not even exist, if God were to cease to want me to be a part of His story. Thus, the person who accepts help, especially from God, gives up any attempt to be independent, regardless of how much an independent self he felt or thought that he was. He goes through the “humiliating” experience in the eyes of earthly society of submitting to the power and abilities of either another human being or God, or both. Now, he can no longer be only “himself.” He must also be himself *plus* the person who is helping him, which is exactly what authentic human existence is all about when a person is willing to be himself *plus* God, that is, *plus* the very manner in which God is causing him to exist and willing to help him through His grace and mercy.

¹⁰ CUP

On the other hand, the person who refuses help also chooses to suffer, perhaps with “even prolonged and agonized suffering.” Yet, we must realize that this suffering feels less intense than the humiliating suffering of accepting help from “a superior,” God, and “giving up being himself,” i.e., the prideful self. Instead, this prideful self “prefers the [less intense] suffering” along with holding on to the independence that it feels, even if the independence is a false independence as an “existing individual human being.”¹¹ Every person is ultimately dependent every moment on God’s transcendent creating activity. This means that a person is dependent on God for being even a prideful self who despairs defiantly against God. Nevertheless, this defiantly despairing person believes that he has been true to himself by rejecting God’s help. He would rather continue to be exactly who he is, a needy person in pain, than receive the aid of anyone else, especially God, and become the opposite, a comforted person, indeed an eternally comforted person, who, perhaps, must endure his pain and suffering until he dies and enters into the eternal Kingdom of God. This is how powerful defiant, human pride is.

The more consciousness there is in such a sufferer who in despair wills to be himself, the more his despair intensifies and becomes demonic. It usually originates as follows. A self that in despair wills to be itself is pained in some distress or other that does not allow itself to be taken away from or separated from his concrete self. So now he makes precisely this torment the object of all his passion, and finally it becomes a demonic rage. By now, even if God in heaven and all the angels offered to help him out of it—no, he does not want that, now it is too late. Once he would gladly have given everything to be rid of this agony, but he was kept waiting; now it is too late, now he would rather rage against everything and be the wronged victim of the whole world and of all life, and it is of particular significance to him to make sure that he has his torment on hand and that no one takes it away from him—for then he would not be able to demonstrate and prove to himself that he is right. [71,72]

What a frightful condition that Kierkegaard is describing here. The more aware this defiant and pridefully despairing person becomes of his eternal plight and hopelessness while suffering from some external influence in the present world that exposes his internal defects, two things occur. He first becomes more hopeless, and, second, he

¹¹ *ibid*

becomes angry. Since he wills to be his prideful self and remain in pain, despite the availability of help, even from God, he does not allow himself to move away from what he feels is “right” and part of his “concrete self,” his defiance and pride. He has become not only conscious of his rebellion against God, but he has become right at home with it. He would not think of changing and leaving it, because psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually he is trapped in his despair. In addition, the reason that he feels trapped in his despair is because he feels trapped in his pain. And the reason that he feels trapped in his pain is because he is too proud to accept help from others, especially from God. He simply feels that it is only right that he remain utterly independent, or what he perceives to be independent .

Then, to enhance his feelings of being right, he makes his pain and agony the very object of his whole being. He focuses every ounce of energy on his suffering and will not let go of it. As a result, his despair over the pain becomes “a demonic rage.” His anger turns into a wild and frantic rage—even if he allows no one else to see it. He may come across as the kindest person in the world, but, inwardly like an active volcano that appears dormant, he is seething so that his anger grows and grows. Thus, his rage becomes all consuming, and, even if God and all His angels were to stand before him and offer their infinite help, he would refuse. It is too late for him to accept anyone’s help. Certainly, just a little while ago, he would have given up “everything to be rid of this agony,” but God and all the rest of the creation have kept him waiting too long, and he feels justified in refusing their help.

More precisely to the point, if he were willing to admit it, his pride and defiant unwillingness both to humble himself and to experience the necessary humiliation of becoming “nothing in the hand of God” have kept him waiting. Yet, he blames God and everyone else. They have kept him waiting. They have been callous and uncaring. They have been mean and evil, even while he is conscious of his own evil and rebellion

against God. Indeed, he would have to give up his pride if he were to admit that he really is the one who is at fault, but this is a totally unacceptable solution to his problem of suffering. And he says that “now it is too late,” when, in actuality, it has always been too late. This is just how human pride works. “[H]e would rather rage against everything and be the wronged victim of the whole world and of all of life.” In addition, “it is of particular significance to him” that he holds on dearly to his pain and suffering. He must keep it “on hand” so that he has a proper excuse to rage incessantly against God and the world. In fact, he does everything in his power to make sure “no one takes it away from him.” If someone took away his suffering, “then he would not be able to demonstrate and prove to himself that he is right,” that he is a helpless and innocent victim of the evil and hurtful behavior of others. Not only is he convinced that no one should help him, but he is also convinced that no one can help him. He has become so consumed and so at home with both the pain and his anger that he wants nothing more in the world than to play the victim. As a result, the continuation of his suffering is vital to his self as he has shaped it with his pride, defiance, and despair. He dare not give up his pain and suffering. Being right in despairingly defying God becomes more important and more valuable than being free of pain, regardless of what anyone else might say, even God.

This eventually becomes such a fixation that for an extremely strange reason he is afraid of eternity, afraid that it will separate him from his, demonically understood, infinite superiority over other men, his justification, demonically understood, for being what he is. —Himself is what he wills to be. He began with the infinite abstraction of the self, and now he has finally become so concrete that it would be impossible to become eternal in that sense; nevertheless, he wills in despair to be himself. What demonic madness—the thought that most infuriates him is that eternity could get the notion to deprive him of his misery. [72]

This angry, defiantly despairing person has become so obsessed with his miserable condition on earth that, in an obviously perverse way, he is afraid that eternal life will rob him of it. In his confused and distorted state of mind, he has convinced himself that he is infinitely superior to all other human beings, especially those who are so weak as to flee

to God and His eternal mercy for comfort and help. Thus, he believes that he is justified in being himself—a defiant immoral rebel who is in pain. He actually started moving away from his defiance when he became aware that there was an eternal possibility of relief from his earthly, painful circumstances, but, now that he feels so much pain and anger, these have replaced any appropriate sense of the concrete reality of both eternity and God's having designed him for eternity. To him, his suffering and pride are more concrete than God and the eternal design that God has given him. Thus, he has become committed to holding on with every fiber of his being to his pain and rage. They are the most real things that he can imagine, even more real than the most real being, the uncreated and transcendent God who has made him. Certainly, this defiantly despairing person, who is in such tremendous pain, wants to be real. However, Kierkegaard claims that this person is obsessed with his insane anger, and the thought that makes him angrier than his suffering is that God and eternity would rob him of the satisfaction of being angry and in pain. He is too attached to his misery and despair to let go of them. Fortunately,...

This kind of despair is rarely seen in the world; such characters really appear only in the poets, the real ones, who always lend "demonic" ideality—using the word in its purely Greek sense—to their creations. Nevertheless, at times despair like this does appear in actuality. What, then, is the corresponding externality? Well, there is nothing "corresponding," inasmuch as a corresponding externality—corresponding to inclosing reserve—is a self-contradiction, for if it corresponds, then it does in fact disclose. [72]

Kierkegaard says that it is not often that we find such people who are so intensely despairing and angry with God and the world that they choose to sit in their unhappiness and just stew. He believes that they show up mostly in the writings of poets, who always inject frenzied Greek passion, the "demonic," into their poetry. Nevertheless, he does think that such despairing people, who will to be themselves with unlimited anger, really do exist in the world. But how can we tell who they are? What is the outward sign of

such inward hopelessness and rage? Kierkegaard claims that there is no outward sign. These people outwardly display nothing but calmness and even kindness that he has labeled above as “inclosing reserve,” whereby a person considers it far too childish to make public his inner despair, torment, and anger.¹² This person would contradict himself if he did not use all his energy both to focus on his pain while filled with rage and to appear publicly calm, composed, and virtuous. In other words, just as he dare not let down his pride and accept help from God, he also dare not let others know that he is a confused and distortedly vexed person. Consequently, there is typically no obvious sign that we can observe to inform us that a defiantly despairing person, who is willing to be himself, is not only in tremendous pain but also committed to remaining silently and boundlessly angry with God and the rest of reality. This person simply hides his despair, anger, and pain from everyone.

But externality in this case is of no consequence whatsoever here where inclosing reserve, or what could be called inwardness with a jammed lock, must be the particular object of attention. The lowest forms of despair—in which there is really no inwardness, or in any case none worth mentioning—the lowest forms may be presented by describing or discussing some external aspect of the person in despair. But the more spiritual the despair becomes and the more inwardness becomes a peculiar world of its own in inclosing reserve, the more inconsequential are the externalities under which the despair conceals itself. [72,73]

The paradox is that the weaker forms of despair that Kierkegaard first discussed, whereby a person is unwilling to be himself, demonstrate more obvious outward signs than this stronger form of despair, whereby a person defiantly and angrily wills to be himself. This is because the defiant person uses his energy to create an “inclosing reserve” of calmness and composure. “[I]nclosing reserve” means that it is a false composure that Kierkegaard calls “inwardness with a jammed lock.” It is though this person’s defiance and anger are banging on the door to be let out, but they are locked in

¹² cf. page 146

the room of the person's inwardness. No matter how much they want to get out, the person more passionately wants to keep them locked inside. Because of the "jammed lock," it is easier to describe the weaker forms of despair by their corresponding external signs than it is to describe the stronger forms of despair by their corresponding external signs. Such is the case in spite of the fact that the stronger forms are more "spiritual," i.e., that the person is more consciously aware of his internal immoral condition and God's design of him for eternity. In fact, contrary to what we might think, the stronger the hopelessness and the greater the anger, the more the person's internal condition becomes isolated from the rest of reality in the midst of his "inclosing reserve" and self-imposed calmness. Therefore, as the person pursues a greater and greater display of apparent internal serenity in the midst of his despair and anger, the less obvious are the external signs of his despair and anger, because he is putting so much effort into hiding them. As Kierkegaard goes on to say...

But the more spiritual despair becomes, the more attention it pays with demonic cleverness to keeping despair closed up in inclosing reserve, and the more attention it pays to neutralizing the externalities, making them as insignificant and inconsequential as possible. Just as the troll in the fairy story disappears through a crevice that no one can see, so it is with despair: the more spiritual it is, the more urgent it is to dwell in an externality behind which no one would ordinarily think of looking for it. This secrecy is itself something spiritual and is one of the safeguards to ensure having, as it were, an *in-closure* [*indelukke*] behind actuality, a world *ex-clusively* [*udelukkende*] for itself, a world where the self in despair is restlessly and tormentedly engaged in willing to be itself. [73]

Kierkegaard has already implied that the more a defiantly despairing person becomes aware of his defiance and despair, the more cunning he becomes in hiding them, even in the midst of agonizing pain and suffering that causes him to rage against God. This person's goal is to make any hint of his suffering as small and undetectable as possible. Whenever outward manifestations of his despair rear their ugly head, he immediately works to make them appear as of no importance. As a result, his outward behavior makes him look as ordinary as the person with the least despair, or even, as

the person with no despair, i.e., the true Christian. Thus, he may be the most ardent, passionate, and outspoken “Christian” of his community. Yet, his true belief is not in God’s mercy and Jesus as the Messiah, but in his need to hide his torment and restless despair behind an outward appearance that no one would think is merely a cover up for such tremendous agony. In this way, the defiantly despairing person, who wills to be himself, lives in two worlds, the world of his own personal agonizing hell and rebellious suffering on the inside and the world of moral, civil, and even so-called “Christian” rectitude on the outside.

We began in $\alpha(1)$ with the lowest form of despair: in despair not to will to be oneself. Demonic despair is the most intensive form of the despair: in despair to will to be oneself. It is not even in stoic self-infatuation and self-apotheosis that this despair wills to be itself; it does not will to be itself as that does which, mendaciously to be sure, yet in a certain sense, wills it according to its perfection. No, in hatred toward existence, it wills to be itself, wills to be itself in accordance with its misery. [73]

Kierkegaard began his discussion of the person who is aware of his being in despair by describing the weaker form whereby a person is unwilling to be himself. This was in section α [*alpha*]. Subsection (1) of α was about “despair over the earthly or over something earthly,” while subsection (2) of α was about “despair of the eternal or over oneself.” Then, in the present section, β [*beta*], Kierkegaard has described the stronger form of despair, in “despair to will be to be oneself,” i.e., the despair of defiance. There are two different kinds of this latter despair—the first where the person is an “*acting self*” and the second where the person is “*acted upon*.” Within this second subcategory in section β , Kierkegaard has spoken of “demonic despair” that becomes so obsessed with its externally caused pain that it works itself into a frenzy of fury and anger. This despair leaves the stoicism of the “*acting self*” in the dust. The despair of stoicism produces the highest form of a self short of the true *self* of eternity. This is the self that aspires to a kind of perfection, even though perfection, per se, is impossible in the present realm. In

contrast, the frantic, angry “demonic despair” lays claim to human misery as its right and “wills to be itself” while hating everything there is about human existence. This person knows that there is nothing perfect about himself, except that he comes close to being perfectly committed to despising all that it means for him to exist.

Not even in defiance or defiantly does it will to be itself, but for spite; not even in defiance does it want to tear itself loose from the power that established it, but for spite wants to force itself upon it, to obtrude defiantly upon it, wants to adhere to it out of malice—and, of course, a spiteful denunciation must above all take care to adhere to what it denounces. [73]

Even though this whole section β has been about the despair of defiance, Kierkegaard claims that this person who hates all existence wills to be himself not “in defiance” of God but “for spite.” Yes, he is being defiant, but also, and even more importantly, he wants to be mean and nasty towards God. He is a malicious and evil person who inwardly denounces God, even while, perhaps, outwardly participating in the worship of God at a local church. Thus, he does not will to be himself defiantly. Instead, he wills to be himself out of spite, out of a desire to harm the very person who has made him, God. Beyond this, he wants to force himself, his despair, and his spite upon God. Out of spite, he wants God to have to endure his pain and anger. By angrily committing himself to perpetuating his misery, he believes that he can make his transcendent Creator miserable by forcing Him to cause him to exist in his misery. For this person, misery truly loves company, and he hopes and expects God to accompany him arm in arm in his suffering, yet, without helping him by rescuing him from it. He does not want God’s help. He wants God to be miserable by having to put up with his suffering, defiance, and anger.

Rebelling against all existence, it feels that it has obtained evidence against it, against goodness. The person in despair believes that he himself is the evidence, and that is what he wants to be, and therefore he wants to be himself, himself in this torment, in order to protest against all existence with the torment. [73]

In the face of evidence to the contrary, i.e., that God really can lovingly and graciously rescue him *eternally* from his pain and suffering, this despairing and angry person firmly believes that he has collected enough evidence to indict both God and the rest of existence of perpetrating harm and evil, thereby justifying his rejection of God's help and mercy. In fact, he himself is his primary piece of evidence, exhibit A in the trial against God that he has initiated. This person also prefers to be the primary piece of evidence against God. Nothing gives him more satisfaction than putting God on trial and winning. Yet, without the evidence of his own misery, he has no truly personal basis for raging against God. Therefore, he must remain who he is, a hopeless person in agony and pain with no avenue of escape that he considers legitimate. Thus, he wills to be himself, in both defiance and spite, and, with his miserable self, he protests against God and all the rest of reality.

It is interesting that his evidence does not come mainly from outside, as he encounters life's difficult circumstances that are in the process of crushing him internally. Instead, his evidence comes from within him—from his own hopelessness, despair, pain, and suffering. In a perverse twist of logic, he desires to remain in this condition in order to protest maximally against it. He understands and hates who he is, but he believes that the greatest way to demonstrate that he is right to protest against God is simply to be exactly who he is and no other, with all the suffering that he is enduring.

Just as the weak, despairing person is unwilling to hear anything about any consolation eternity has for him, so a person in such despair does not want to hear anything about it, either, but for a different reason: this very consolation would be his undoing—as a denunciation of all existence. Figuratively speaking, it is as if an error slipped into an author's writing and the error became conscious of itself as an error—perhaps it actually was not a mistake but in a much higher sense an essential part of the whole production—and now this error wants to mutiny against the author, out of hatred toward him, forbidding him to correct it and in maniacal defiance saying to him: No, I refuse to be erased; I will stand as a witness against you, a witness that you are a second-rate author. [73,74]

In section α , Kierkegaard stated that the person who is weak in his form of despair does not want to listen to any message that offers God's mercy and eternal life as a solution to his despair. He desires to be consoled, but not by God. Similarly, in section β , the defiant person, who is strong in his form of despair, closes his ears to any suggestion that God and eternity can relieve his suffering. Neither person wants to solve the problem of his hopelessness by embracing God's promise and gift of forgiveness and eternal life. In this case, the angry person of strong despair does not want to solve it because he would have to denounce his own miserable and painful existence, which has become the very basis for his existence and the reason why he feels justified in continuing to despair and to be angry out of spite towards his Creator.

Kierkegaard likens him to a character in a book who believes that he has discovered that he is an "error" in the author's story. Yet, he is not an "error." Indeed, all characters, no matter how bizarre and evil, have their intended purpose within a story. Otherwise, the author would not include them in *his* story. However, in the case of the defiantly despairing person who "wills to be himself" in misery and pain, the "erroneous" character (so to speak) desires to rebel against his Creator, God, and hates Him with all his passion. Thus, he defiantly forbids the Author of reality to "correct" His error. Like a maniac who rebelliously rages against the very person who causes him to exist, he declares to God that he refuses to be erased from His story or to have his circumstances changed for the better. Instead, he wants to remain miserable so that he can continue to put God on trial, judge Him for being a lousy Creator and Storywriter, and then condemn Him for being "a second-rate author." All this feels so right to the defiantly despairing person who, in anger, inwardly rages against his Maker while looking so serene and composed on the outside, even, perhaps, proclaiming that he is a Christian who worships God and Jesus as the Messiah.

Part Two DESPAIR IS SIN

A *Despair Is Sin*

Sin is: before God, or with the conception of God, in despair not to will to be oneself, or in despair to will to be oneself. Thus sin is intensified weakness or intensified defiance: sin is intensification of despair. The emphasis is on before God, or with a conception of God; it is the conception of God that makes sin dialectically, ethically, and religiously what lawyers call “aggravated” despair. [77]

Kierkegaard states explicitly that everything about despair that he has presented up to this point is also a description of basic human sin against God. In other words, in the midst of human beings’ rebelling against God, they either are weak and, therefore, unwilling to be who they fundamentally are, sinners, which constitutes the despair of weakness, or they strongly and defiantly make the choice to be who they fundamentally are, sinners, yet, without repenting and seeking God’s eternal mercy, which constitutes the despair of defiance. The fact that both kinds of despair occur in the presence of and with the knowledge of God, our Creator, Judge, and possible Savior, makes the sin of despair just that much worse. It is not simply despair. Kierkegaard says that it is more serious than this. He calls it “aggravated” despair, because the person is conscious of what he is doing, like the crime of “aggravated” assault. However, in this case, he is committing the conscious crime of rebelling against the very person who can rescue him eternally from despair and immorality—God.

Although there is no room or place for a psychological delineation in this part, least of all in section A, reference may be made at this point to the most dialectical frontier between despair and sin, to what could be called a poet-existence verging on the religious, an existence that has something in common with the despair of resignation, except that the concept of God is present. Such a poet-existence, as is discernible in the position and conjunction of the categories, will be the most eminent poet-existence. [77]

Kierkegaard says that he has no plans in this section to become too detailed in his explanation of the psychological symptoms of despair. He either must be joking or immediately forgets what he says, because he does become quite detailed in his explanation.

In this section A, *Despair Is Sin*, Kierkegaard will draw attention to the psychological space that exists between despair that leads to true, Christian faith and despair that continues in rebellion against God and is, therefore, sin. He calls this space a “poet-existence verging on the religious.” Here, as is typical with Kierkegaard, he uses “religious” to refer to authentic Christianity. In other words, for him, “religious” has a positive connotation. Thus, a “poet-existence verging on the religious” is very similar to an existence as an authentic Christian while falling short of true Christianity.

Kierkegaard also says that “the poet-existence verging on the religious” is like “the despair of resignation, except that the concept of God is present.” By “resignation,” Kierkegaard means either giving up something and letting go of it or accepting something and resigning oneself to the fact that it exists and cannot be removed. Therefore, when a person is plagued by the “despair of resignation,” he either despairingly gives up certain things in life that, perhaps, he desires to have, or he accepts the inevitable presence of things that, perhaps, he desires not to have. In addition, in both cases, “the despair of resignation” does not acknowledge the existence of God. Therefore, “the poet-existence verging on the religious” is also characterized by either giving up certain things or accepting other things in life, yet along with acknowledging the existence of God.

Perhaps, Kierkegaard is also implying that both “the despair of resignation” and “the poet-existence verging on the religious” are, in some respects, healthy, because they are similar to authentic faith. He had mentioned in the previous part of the book that a person of true faith is willing to become “nothing in the hand of God,” because he

properly recognizes that God is his Creator and is causing him to exist at every moment, and, therefore, could cause him not to exist at any moment. Consequently, because God can effortlessly manipulate his existence, this person is as “nothing in the hand of God.” Perhaps, Kierkegaard is saying that both “the poet-existence verging on the religious” and “the despair of resignation” are similar to this healthy faith, because they have either relinquished the claim to something that God causes to exist in the present realm or accepted the presence of something that God causes to exist, even though “the despair of resignation” denies the very existence of God. Kierkegaard goes on to say that “a poet-existence verging on the religious,” by acknowledging God’s existence, is the highest quality of poet-existence.

Christianly understood, every poet-existence (esthetics notwithstanding) is sin, the sin of poetizing instead of being, of relating to the good and the true through the imagination instead of being that—that is, existentially striving to be that. [77]

From a biblical standpoint, every poet-existence is sin, just as both weak and strong despair are sin. Why is a poet-existence sin? Kierkegaard says that it is because poets, by definition, relate to life through only their imaginations and feelings. Despite their lofty language and ideas, poets have no fundamental desire to be or strive to be what they imagine and feel—a concrete human being before God, especially a concrete human being who is guilty before God of profound and inescapable immorality and who needs to seek God’s eternal mercy.

The poet-existence under consideration here is different from despair in that it does have a conception of God or is before God, but it is exceedingly dialectical and is as if in an impenetrable dialectical labyrinth concerning the extent to which it is obscurely conscious of being sin. A poet like that can have a profound religious longing, and the conception of God is taken up in his despair. He loves God above all, God who is his only consolation in his secret anguish, and yet he loves the anguish and will not give it up. He would like so very much to be himself before God, but with the exclusion of the fixed point where the self suffers; there in despair he does not will to be himself. [77]

Kierkegaard says that the “poet-existence,” which, by definition, only relates to reality through the imagination and feelings, is different from abject despair in that the poet embraces God to a greater extent than the person of either weak or strong despair. In fact, the “poet-existence” feels a strong need for God and even loves God above all other things. God consoles the poet in his hidden despair and anguish over life. However, the problem is that the poet loves his suffering more than God’s consolation and, thus, more than any eternal solution that God offers. He refuses to abandon his anguish and pain. Like “the despair of resignation,” the poet has resigned himself to the constant presence of his anguish with no plans to rid himself of it. Rather than be exactly who he is along with possessing the promise of eternal life, which would eventually rid him of his anguish, the poet chooses to be who he is without eternal life. Because he is a poet, there is a desire within him to be an authentic human being. Yet, he desires to escape his suffering only if he does not have to deal with it appropriately, i.e., by acknowledging at the deepest level of his being the immoral condition that plagues him and then by humbly seeking God’s eternal mercy. Instead, he chooses to despair of life and of being his true *self*. Kierkegaard says that this poet is stuck in the dark, impenetrable forest from which he cannot escape, that is the maze of his dim awareness of his sin before God, thus preventing him from finding a complete and appropriate way out of his pain. Yet,...

He hopes that eternity will take it away, and here in time, no matter how much he suffers under it, he cannot resolve to take it upon himself, cannot humble himself under it in faith. And yet he continues in the God-relationship, and this is his only salvation; it would be sheer horror for him to have to be without God, “it would be enough to despair over,” and yet he actually allows himself—perhaps unconsciously—to poetize God as somewhat different from what God is, a bit more like the fond father who indulges his child’s every wish far too much. [78]

We can see that Kierkegaard is describing the poet as being very similar to an authentic Christian. The poet has set his hope of escaping his suffering on the future and

not on the present realm. His desire is for eternal life. Yet, this is not his fundamental desire, because he cannot bring himself to seek God's mercy with proper humility. Nevertheless, he does persist in what he considers to be a legitimate relationship with God. He may even attend his local Christian church, worship God with his fellow "believers," pay strict attention in Bible studies, participate in the church's outreach programs, even lead the church as one of its elders or, perhaps, as the senior pastor or minister. Kierkegaard says that this kind of participation in a Christian setting "is [the poet's] only salvation." In other words, the poet must engage in a religious and even Christian environment, because "it would be sheer horror for him to have to be without God," or to what Kierkegaard is alluding as the poet's conception of God, that is accurate to some extent. If the poet did not go through the motions of Christianity by acting as a "believer," a worshiper on Sunday morning, a Bible study participant or leader, a church elder, or a senior-pastor, then he would truly despair.

However, Kierkegaard claims that the poet is in despair and that his despair is sin, the worst kind of sin, because, instead of worshiping the real God, he has chosen "to poetize God" and worship a god of his imagination and feelings. He has convinced himself that God is "like a fond father" who will indulge his wish to invent his own understanding of Him. As a result, he has rationalized his excuse for not humbling himself with true faith and dealing appropriately with his profound immoral condition.

He becomes a poet of the religious in the same way as one who became a poet through an unhappy love affair and blissfully celebrates the happiness of erotic love. He became unhappy in the religious life, dimly understands that he is required to give up this anguish—that is, in faith to humble himself under it and take it upon himself as part of the self—for he wants to keep it apart from himself, and precisely in this way he holds on to it, although he no doubt believes this is supposed to result in parting from it as far as possible, giving it up to the greatest extent humanly possible (this, like every word from a person in despair, is inversely correct and consequently to be understood inversely). But in faith to take it upon himself—that he cannot do, that is, in essence he is unwilling or here his self ends in vagueness. [78]

Kierkegaard likens the poet to a jilted lover who celebrates the joys of romantic and erotic love even though he no longer has a lover. In other words, the poet has somehow become unhappy and disappointed with Christianity and, therefore, has lost his lover within Christianity. In other words, he has lost God, even while poetically holding on to God through his Christian actions and rhetoric. Imagine, for example, a pastor who became a Christian and an educated servant of God, trained at the finest seminary and enthusiastically looked forward to preaching God's Word in order to expand the kingdom of God, but who now finds the work frustrating and unfulfilling because of all the political maneuverings that he is required to endure within a church organization. Not only is being a pastor much less satisfying than he ever imagined, but Christianity is profoundly disappointing, even "anguishing," because God is not answering his prayers and fixing the selfish and narcissistic people in his church. He also knows that all his people problems actually point to his own inward problem of humanly insoluble immorality. Yes, he has confessed Jesus as his Savior and even preaches it every Sunday, but, actually, he silently thinks that Jesus needs his help by his hard work of pastoring, preaching, and confessing his own sins. He even believes that Jesus owes him His help on the basis of his hard work and commitment to the gospel. However, this poetizing pastor has not yet come to grips with the depth of his immoral problem and is, therefore, holding on to it rather than dealing with it properly before God.

What does this pastor do in the midst of his anguish? He just keeps faithfully plodding along in his job, afraid to admit that he is actually a fake pastor and even a fake Christian. Yet, he "dimly understands that he is required to give up his anguish" by releasing his hold on his immoral condition and repenting before God. He has come face to face with the knowledge of what God requires of him in the same way that a lover has encountered romantic love. However, just like the lover who loses the experience of romantic love when his lover rejects him, the poet has lost the essence of his knowledge

of God by refusing to follow through completely on his knowledge. Thus, the poet can write and preach about sin, its consequent pain, the eternal punishment that it deserves, and even God's consolation of eternal mercy, without actually humbling himself before God and authentically seeking and obtaining God's forgiveness.

If the poetic pastor did properly humble himself, then he would "give up this anguish" of his sin to a degree by admitting that it is a natural "part of the self" this side of eternity. Thus, he would experience some relief from his anguish and pain by virtue of God's promise of eternal life and mercy. Instead, the poet has convinced himself that the best way to separate himself from the pain of his immoral condition is to hold on to it through letting go of it in a poetic way. He writes and preaches about it by extolling God for His wonderful love, even His love through the death of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. However, he is unwilling to make true, profound, and biblical humility a part of the equation. He holds on to the pain of his sin by letting go of it only to the extent that it is "humanly possible," but not divinely possible. Human beings can certainly appear appropriately religious and Christian, but, if their efforts towards God are not divinely caused by God's inward work of grace and mercy, then their efforts will take them only as far as what is "humanly possible," but not as far as what is divinely possible.

Kierkegaard calls these efforts on the part of the poet "inversely correct." The poet's choices appear correct, because he speaks so glowingly of God's love and consolation in the midst of his immoral condition. However, his efforts are the very opposite of what God fundamentally requires, because "he is unwilling" to humble himself fully and, thus, mitigate his anguish through God's promise of eternal life and mercy. By being unwilling to be his true *self*, the poet is like the person of the despair of weakness. Consequently, Kierkegaard says, the poet's "self ends in vagueness," because the only concrete human being is the one who is willing to be his *self*.

Yet this poet's description of the religious—just like that other poet's description of erotic love—has a charm, a lyrical verve that no married man's and no His Reverence's presentations have. Nor is what he says untrue, by no means; his presentation is simply his happier, his better *I*. His relation to the religious is that of an unhappy lover, not in the strictest sense that of a believer; he has only the first element of faith—despair—and within it an intense longing for the religious. [78]

Kierkegaard's claim is that the religious poet is truly remarkable. The poet's (and fake Christian's, and even, indeed, the fake pastor's) description of Christianity and God's love has more ability to warm the heart and to display an enthusiasm for God than that of most authentic Christians and legitimate pastors. Indeed, the poet's description of Christianity is more convincing than most married men's description of romantic love. The "Christian" poet truly seems in touch with biblical reality. In fact, he speaks the truth, biblical truth. In the midst of his pain and suffering that stems from his awareness of his immoral condition, he presents the happier part of his personhood, "his better *I*," as Kierkegaard calls it. This is the "*I*," the self, that appears quite religious and speaks so warmly and convincingly about God and His love.

However, Kierkegaard says, this poet's relationship to the biblical truth that he describes so accurately in his writings is like that of a jilted lover's relationship to romantic love. It is only in his imagination and not in his fundamental experience. It is not a part of who he really is. Certainly, he has consciously acquired "the first element of faith," i.e., despair over some painful aspect of human existence, even despair over his immoral condition, and resigned himself to its inevitable existence in the present realm. Thus, he longs for a religious and even Christian environment and context within which to express his despair and reduce its painful effect upon him. Nevertheless, he does not want to give up the anguish of his despair by authentically humbling himself before God and genuinely seeking His eternal mercy.

His conflict actually is this: Has he been called? Does his thorn in the flesh signify that he is to be used for the extraordinary? Before God, is it entirely in

order to be the extraordinary he has become? Or is the thorn in the flesh that under which he must humble himself in order to attain the universally human? —But enough of this. with the accent of truth I may ask: To whom am I speaking? Who cares about these high-powered psychological investigations to the nth degree? The Nurnberg pictures that the pastor paints are better understood; they deceptively resemble one and all, what most people are, and spiritually understood—nothing. [78,79]

Kierkegaard ends this chapter by pointing out that the real issue is whether or not the poet has been chosen by God to become eventually an authentic Christian, his true *self*. If he has not, then the poet will consider himself “extraordinary” and above all other human beings, because he writes about the reality of his pain and God with such profound eloquence and unequalled enthusiasm. If he has been chosen by God, then he will appropriately humble himself under the inescapable anguish of his human existence this side of eternity and acknowledge that he is neither superior nor inferior to any other human being. He will acknowledge that he is relentlessly subject to the universal condition of human moral depravity and, thus, required by God to acknowledge his condition with true, biblical faith and to seek His mercy.

Kierkegaard also concludes by declaring that he has dealt with this issue enough. He asks: “Who cares about these high-powered psychological investigations to the nth degree?” He intimates that understanding his “investigations” is actually quite difficult. It is easier to grasp the “Nurnberg pictures that the pastor paints,” referring to illustrations that Danish pastors would include in their sermons in their attempts to help their congregations understand biblical ideas. Nurnberg (or Nuremberg) is a region of Germany that has always been known for its beauty. Thus, Kierkegaard is saying that the Danish pastors would provide beautiful illustrations of biblical truths in their sermons in hopes of making Christianity just that much more attractive and understandable to the common people. However, the problem, according to Kierkegaard, was that the illustrations did not describe the uniqueness of Christianity but, instead, of mankind in

general, thus making no true, biblical point at all. In other words, the Danish pastors were failing miserably in doing their job of teaching the Bible. Their illustrations were more about what any human being can accomplish in his life now through his own human efforts rather than about what God accomplishes internally in human beings for the sake of eternity.

CHAPTER 1.
THE GRADATIONS IN THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE SELF
(THE QUALIFICATION: “BEFORE GOD”)

The preceding section concentrated on pointing out the gradation in the consciousness of the self: first came ignorance of having an eternal self (C, B, a), then a knowledge of having a self in which there is something eternal (C, B, b), and under this, in turn (α 1-2, β), gradations were pointed out. This whole deliberation must now dialectically take a new direction. The point is that the previously considered gradation in the consciousness of the self is within the category of the human self, or the self whose criterion is man. [79]

In Part One, “The Sickness Unto Death is Despair,” Kierkegaard discussed the various forms of human despair that all fall short of coming to grips with the most important issue in a human being’s existence—his need for God’s mercy and God’s promise of eternal life. The reason these forms of despair fall short is because the person in mind never appropriately takes into account both God and his own immoral condition. As he considers the meaning of his existence, the person limits his thinking strictly to himself and does not appropriately include God. This person chooses to be his own “criterion,” the accepted standard and foundation for making decisions about what really matters in life. He gauges all human experiences by merely what he thinks about them. Thus, his conclusions about what it means to be a human being do not take his Creator into account. He believes that he needs only his own self-created thoughts and ideas in order to understand reality correctly.

Here Kierkegaard says that Part One “concentrated on pointing out the gradation in the consciousness of the self,” that, while a person despairs, even of his immoral

condition and lack of God's eternal mercy, there are different degrees to which he is aware of what is really going on within him. For example, in Part One, C, B, a, "The Despair That Is Ignorant of Being Despair, or the Despairing Ignorance of Having a Self and an Eternal Self," Kierkegaard described the despairing person who is not consciously aware of the fact that God has designed him for eternity. Thus, the despairing person experiences the "ignorance of having an eternal self."

Then, in Part One, C, B, b, "The Despair That Is Conscious of Being Despair and Therefore Is Conscious of Having a Self in Which There Is Something Eternal and Then Either in Despair Does Not Will to Be Itself or in Despair Wills to Be Itself," Kierkegaard described two other kinds of despair. First, there is the despairing person who knows that eternity is a possibility for him, and, yet, he is unwilling to hope for eternity by genuinely facing into his immoral condition and appealing to God for mercy. Second, there is the despairing person who willingly chooses to be his natural, immoral self in defiance of God. Kierkegaard described the first of these latter two conditions both in Part One, C, B, b, α , 1, "In Despair Not to Will to Be Oneself: Despair in Weakness: Despair Over the Earthly or Over Something Earthly," and in Part One, C, B, b, α , 2, "Despair of the Eternal or Over Oneself." Then, he discussed the second of these latter two conditions in Part One, C, B, b, β , "In Despair to Will to Be Oneself: Defiance."

Now Kierkegaard wants to take his discussion in a new direction, because the previous discussion remained within the confines of man's considering himself to be the measure of his own existence, which obviously is illegitimate since God is his Creator. As Kierkegaard goes on to say...

But this self takes on a new quality and qualification by being a self directly before God. This self is no longer the merely human self but is what I, hoping not to be misinterpreted, would call the theological self, the self directly before God. And what infinite reality [*Realitet*] the self gains by being conscious of existing before God! A cattleman who (if this were possible) is a self directly before his cattle is a very low self, and, similarly, a master who is a self directly before his slaves is actually no self—for in both cases a criterion is lacking. The child who

previously has had only his parents as a criterion becomes a self as an adult by getting the state as a criterion, but what an infinite accent falls on the self by having God as the criterion! [79]

What if a person measures his existence by using God as his foundation for understanding reality? All of a sudden, he is no longer just a *human* being who is thinking strictly humanly. He is now a human being who is aware of the fact that he is God's creature, whom God is creating on an ongoing basis. Thus, he is a *theological* being, i.e., a human being who is thinking theologically about his existence "before God." Kierkegaard says that this person is no longer just a "human self." He now knows that he is a "theological self," someone who must always take God into account if he is going to understand himself and the rest of reality properly. Therefore, Kierkegaard says that this person becomes a kind of "infinite" self, not because he is infinite, but because he has brought the Infinite One, God, into his thinking about reality.

Kierkegaard uses three examples to illustrate his point. A cattleman who consciously acknowledges that he stands before his cattle is a self, but "a very low self." A master who consciously acknowledges his slaves is "actually no self," because he is lacking the most important "criterion" for measuring himself as a human being. This criterion is God. As a child grows up, his parents are his "criterion" for being a self. Then, when he becomes an adult, he must deal with the government that rules over him, which becomes the most powerful, earthly "criterion" for measuring his self. However, as Kierkegaard states emphatically, "what an infinite accent falls on the self by having God as the criterion!"

The criterion for the self is always: that directly before which it is a self, but this in turn is the definition of "criterion." Just as only entities of the same kind can be added, so everything is qualitatively that by which it is measured, and that which is its qualitative criterion [*Maalestok*] is ethically its goal [*Maal*]; the criterion and goal are what define something, what it is, with the exception of the condition of the world of freedom, where by not qualitatively being that which is his goal and his criterion a person must himself have merited this disqualification. Thus the goal and the criterion still remain discriminatingly the

same, making it clear just what a person is not—namely, that which is his goal and criterion. [79,80]

The person or entity before whom a person gauges who he is and assesses his existence is his “criterion.” What a person hopes to accomplish or to get out of life is his “goal.” Together, according to Kierkegaard, a person’s “criterion” and “goal” are what define him. In other words, a person’s theology and ethics define him. If he measures himself before only himself, then his theology is atheism, even if he thinks that he is God, because he does not acknowledge the one, true God. If he gauges himself before God, then his theology is truly theology. Correspondingly, if what he hopes to get out of life is only something that he has imagined, then his ethics are atheistic. If what he hopes to get out of life is that which God has presented and promised, i.e., eternal life, then his ethics are truly theistic. In addition, if the person’s “criterion” and “goal” are other than himself, e.g., God and eternal life, then, clearly, “the person is not...his goal and criterion.” Thus, the measure of a man is his theology and his ethics, i.e., his understanding of himself in relation to God and his decisions of a moral nature that lead him to his ultimate goal in life.

It was a very sound idea, one that came up so frequently in an older dogmatics [e.g., Augsburg Confession, Articles II and IV], whereas a later dogmatics [Kant, who argued a conception of God was not necessary for man to recognize his moral duty] very frequently took exception to it because it did not have the understanding or the feeling for it—it was a very sound idea, even if at times it was misapplied; the idea that what makes sin so terrible is that it is before God. It was used to prove eternal punishment in hell. Later, as men became more shrewd, they said: Sin is sin; sin is not greater because it is against God or before God. Strange! Even lawyers speak of aggravated crimes; even lawyers make a distinction between a crime against a public official, for example, or against a private citizen, make a distinction between the punishment for a parricide and that for an ordinary murder. [80]

Here Kierkegaard provides us with a lesson in historical theology. Early on, especially during the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, theologians argued that sin is heinous and reprehensible because it is sin *against God*. Later, other thinkers such

as the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) tried to argue that sin is equally evil even if we do not take God into account.

Kierkegaard considers the first understanding of sin to be “a very sound idea, even if at times it was misapplied.” However, he does not explain how this idea was misapplied. Instead, Kierkegaard goes on to say that theologians such as Kant “did not have the understanding or feeling for it...; the idea that what makes sin so terrible is that it is before God.” They could not conceive of the fact that our disobedience towards God, our morally perfect Creator and Judge, is more “terrible” than any evil that we commit towards man.

While early theologians, who believed in the first understanding of sin, used it “to prove eternal punishment in hell,”¹³ later theologians and philosophers “became more shrewd” and clever in their rebellion against God. Early theologians could conceive of “eternal punishment” for sin since it was a crime “before God” and not just before men. However, later thinkers claimed that “[s]in is sin,” meaning that “sin is not greater because it is against God or before God.” Kierkegaard considers this claim by theologians such as Kant to be rather strange and obtuse, even if men were trying to be so clever. He points out that “lawyers speak of aggravated crimes” when a public official or someone well-known and respected is the victim of a crime. This is to say that in societal law, the government makes a distinction between crimes that are committed against a “public official” and those committed against a “private citizen.” For example, we talk about the *assassination* of a government official, but not the assassination of a private citizen. The latter is just *murder* while the former is considered more aggravated because the victim is a “public official.” In Kierkegaard’s Denmark, this distinction was also true of the “aggravated” murder of a parent, “parricide,” in comparison to the

¹³ e.g., Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1108)

“ordinary murder” of another citizen. Therefore, Kierkegaard is asking, does it make sense to consider sin to be equally great whether or not it is “before God?”

No, the older dogmatics was right in maintaining that because sin is against God it is infinitely magnified. The error consisted in considering God as some externality and in seeming to assume that only occasionally did one sin against God. But God is not some externality in the sense that a policeman is. The point that must be observed is that the self has a conception of God and yet does not will as he wills, and thus is disobedient. Nor does one only occasionally sin before God, for every sin is before God, or more correctly, what really makes human guilt into sin is that the guilty one has the consciousness of existing before God. [80]

Kierkegaard states that the early church theologians, not Kant, had it right. The newer philosophers erred by thinking of God only as a person outside them and who occasionally showed up, like a policeman. Thus, “only occasionally did one sin against God.” Instead, Kierkegaard agrees with the older theologians that “every sin is before God,” especially since God is our Creator and causing us to exist at every moment. Certainly, God is outside me and different from me, even more so than a policeman. However, I am never out of God’s presence, because He is always inside me, causing me to exist, regardless of whether or not I acknowledge His presence.

In addition, Kierkegaard claims that “the self has a conception of God and yet does not will as he wills, and thus is disobedient.” In other words, all human beings, whether they are conscious or ignorant of having a *self*, a true self who is designed for eternity and repentant before God, realize that they exist in the presence of God. God has built this realization into all human beings. Yet, in spite of this realization and knowledge, they do “not will as [God] wills.” They do not act morally perfectly. Nor do they admit that they are profoundly evil internally and in need of God’s eternal mercy. Thus, they are particularly “disobedient” towards God.

Kierkegaard also says that neither “does [a person] only occasionally sin before God, for every sin is before God,” because every moment of our existence is before God,

since He is our Creator. In fact, Kierkegaard's main point is that "what really makes human guilt into sin is that the guilty one has the consciousness of existing before God." In other words, whether or not a person has chosen to be conscious of his eternal *self*, he still is conscious "of existing before God." It is completely impossible to escape all sense of our transcendent Creator. A person would have to cease to exist in order to do so.

Despair is intensified in relation to the consciousness of the self, but the self is intensified in relation to the criterion for the self, infinitely when God is the criterion. In fact, the greater the conception of God, the more self there is; the more self, the greater the conception of God. Not until a self as this specific single individual is conscious of existing before God, not until then is it the infinite self, and this self sins before God. [80]

Kierkegaard is saying that human despair becomes greater and greater the more a person becomes conscious of his true *self*, even if he does not choose to become his *self*, who, in despair, would rightly appeal to God for eternal mercy. Therefore, the criterion that he chooses for himself also plays an important part in the intensity of his despair. If the criterion is merely himself so that he thinks that he exists mainly before himself, then his despair is relatively small. If the criterion is God so that he realizes that he exists before God, then his despair is "infinitely...intensified." Kierkegaard likes to use the word "infinite," meaning immeasurable, to refer to our inability to fathom God's eternal, omnipotent, and omniscient nature. He goes on to say that "the greater the conception of God," i.e., the more a person grasps who God is and realizes that he lives in the presence of God, "the more self there is." Thus, the depth and breadth of a person's "conception of God" and the depth and breadth of a person's "consciousness of the self" are directly proportional to one another. The result is that a person becomes an "infinite self" when he is conscious of his being a "specific single individual" who is

“existing before God,”¹⁴ therefore recognizing that his “self sins before God” and not just before himself and/or other human beings.

Thus, despite everything that can be said about it, the selfishness of paganism was not nearly so aggravated as is that of Christendom, inasmuch as there is selfishness here also, for the pagan did not have his self directly before God. The pagan and the natural man have the merely human self as their criterion. Therefore, from a higher point of view, it may be correct to regard paganism as immersed in sin, but the sin of paganism was essentially despairing ignorance of God, of existing before God; paganism is “to be without God in the world.” [80,81]

Here, Kierkegaard claims that the “selfishness” found in pagan idolatry is less serious than the “selfishness” found in “Christendom.” We remember that Kierkegaard has previously said in Part One, B, “The Universality of This Sickness,” that just because a person is “in Christendom” does not mean that he is a Christian. For Kierkegaard, Christendom is a community, a church, that calls itself Christian, but may not actually be Christian. Certainly, it is possible that authentic Christians participate in it. However, its focus on externalities such as rituals and doctrines reveals its ignorance of the biblical message and authentic Christianity.

When Kierkegaard speaks of “Christendom,” he is thinking specifically of the Danish State Church of his day. Thus, he is suggesting that the Danish Church, i.e., “Christendom,” has only the appearance of Christianity and not the substance of Christianity. Consequently, from a spiritual and moral point of view, “Christendom” is no different from the world in its rebellion against God. Certainly, the Danish Church and any community within “Christendom” use the terminology of Christianity (Jesus, salvation, obedience to God, faith, prayer, etc.) and the main tool of Christianity (the Bible), but this terminology and tool are simply instruments of their worldliness, because they lack authentic inwardness.

¹⁴ cf. Concluding Unscientific Postscript – “a existing individual human being”

In comparing pagan idolatry with Christendom, Kierkegaard points out that the apostle Paul wrote that the former is “to be without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). Therefore, a pagan and any other “natural man” who is selfishly ignoring God are sinning against God without taking God into account. In contrast, Christendom, with its ritualistic, doctrinal, and traditional approach to the Bible as opposed to an approach that values inwardness more than empty externalities, selfishly sins against God while thinking and talking about Him all the time. As a result, Christendom is guilty of more aggravated sin against God than is paganism or the “natural man,” because Christendom has God for its criterion rather than man.

Therefore, from another point of view, it is true that in the strictest sense the pagan did not sin, for he did not sin before God, and all sin is before God. Furthermore, in one sense it is also quite true that a pagan is assisted in slipping blamelessly through the world simply because he is saved by his superficial Pelagian conception; but then his sin is something else, namely, his superficial Pelagian interpretation. On the other hand, it is certainly also the case that many a time, precisely by being strictly brought up in Christianity, a person has in a certain sense been plunged into sin because the whole Christian viewpoint was too earnest for him, especially in the early part of his life; but then again there is some help to him in this more profound conception of what sin is. [80,81]

As always, we must follow Kierkegaard carefully here. If sin is ultimately defined as disobedience “before God,” then a pagan does not sin *per se*, because he does not see himself as living his life “before God.” Instead, his worldview leads him to think that he lives his life before only his pagan gods. Additionally, Kierkegaard calls the pagan’s perspective a “superficial Pelagian conception.” In his book *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard says that Pelagianism “permits every individual to play his little history in his own private theater unconcerned about the [human] race.”¹⁵ In other words, for Kierkegaard, a “superficial Pelagian conception” of reality is pure narcissism, whereby a person is concerned with only oneself and not with anyone else. However, Kierkegaard

¹⁵ *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, Princeton University Press, 1980, page 34

says that the person's Pelagian, narcissistic interpretation of reality is itself sin, because it does not include the source of all existence, God.

What about being brought up in a Christian environment? Will this completely protect a person from becoming a pagan and narcissistic? Kierkegaard says no. In fact, the "whole Christian viewpoint" may so appropriately intimidate a person that he wholeheartedly plunges into the sin of rejecting Christianity. Nevertheless, there is some benefit to having been exposed to Christianity and its "profound conception of what sin is," i.e., disobedience "before God." As Kierkegaard goes on to say...

Sin is: before God in despair not to will to be oneself, or before God in despair to will to be oneself. Even though this definition may in other respects be conceded to have its merits (and of all of them, the most important is that it is the only Scriptural definition, for Scripture always defines sin as disobedience), is not this definition too spiritual? The first and foremost answer to that must be: A definition of sin can never be too spiritual (unless it becomes so spiritual that it abolishes sin), for sin is specifically a qualification of the spirit. Furthermore, why is it assumed to be too spiritual? Because it does not mention murder, stealing, fornication, etc.? But does it not speak of these things? Are not they also self-willfulness against God, a disobedience that defies his commandments? [81]

Throughout this book, Kierkegaard has been describing the core of sin as that which a person chooses in the midst of his despair over life and eternity. If he chooses not to will to be himself, i.e., not to will to be an immoral person who is in profound need of God's eternal mercy, then he is guilty of sin "before God." If he chooses to will to be himself, i.e., to will to be an immoral person who not only is in need of God's mercy but also defiantly refuses to appeal to God for mercy, then he is guilty of sin. Kierkegaard considers "this definition" of sin not only to "have its merits" but also to be the only biblical definition.

Nevertheless, he wonders if "this definition" is "too spiritual." He responds by saying that it is impossible for a "definition of sin" to be "too spiritual," unless "it becomes so spiritual that it abolishes sin," i.e., that it somehow allows a person to ignore his sin or believe that sin does not actually exist. The reason why a definition of sin cannot be too

“spiritual” is because “sin is specifically a qualification of the spirit.” In other words, since sin has to do with the spiritual aspect of our humanity, which is that aspect that concerns itself with being an individual whose source of existence is God, the more “spiritual” is the definition of sin, the more accurate is this definition. Therefore, the more the definition of sin takes into account man’s inwardness and the fact that he is created by God, the more it rightly describes sin.

Yet, why would Kierkegaard even suggest the possibility that the definition of sin that he has provided, *in despair before God not to be willing to be oneself or in despair before God to be willing to be oneself*, is “too spiritual?” It is because the definition does not explicitly mention any outward actions such as “murder, stealing, fornication, etc.” However, Kierkegaard claims that his definition implicitly mentions these actions. For example, is not murder “self-willfulness against God” and “a disobedience that defies his commandments?” Yes, indeed, it is. Therefore, to “will” to murder, etc. are included in “not to will to be oneself” in despair before God or “to will to be oneself” in despair before God.

On the other hand, if in considering sin we mention only such sins, we so easily forget that, humanly speaking, all such things may be quite in order up to a point, and yet one’s whole life may be sin, the familiar kind of sin: the glittering vices, the self-willfulness that either in spiritlessness or with effrontery goes on being or wants to be ignorant of the human self’s far, far deeper obligation in obedience to God with regard to its readiness to hear and understand and its willingness to follow every least hint from God as to his will for this self.

This is one of the main points of all of Kierkegaard’s writings. It is also one of the main points of the Bible. What is the point? That sin and the proper definition of morality are much deeper than our external actions, thoughts, and feelings. Instead, morality and sin are part of the very fabric and infrastructure of our being, and in such a way that we have no direct control over them.

Therefore, to define sin by “murder, stealing, fornication, etc.” is too superficial. A more biblically realistic view of sin acknowledges that a person may never have committed murder, adultery, etc. and, yet, his “whole life may be sin” because of the depth of his moral depravity, and especially because he chooses to ignore the depth of his moral depravity before God. As a result, this person’s immorality does not manifest itself in the obvious ways of murder or stealing. Instead, it oozes out of his inner being as what Kierkegaard calls “the familiar kind of sin: the glittering vices” of pride, envy, self-righteousness, etc. In this manner, the person may appear quite proper and civil, even religious and spiritual, because he faithfully attends his local church and worships with all other believers in Jesus Christ. However, he is still guilty of “self-willfulness” that is characterized “either in spiritlessness” and unwillingness to be a true, spiritual *self*, “or with effrontery” and defiant refusal to be a true, spiritual *self*. This person is a moral and spiritual charlatan, regardless of his claims to be a Christian.

Kierkegaard goes on to say that every human being has a “far, far deeper obligation in obedience to God” to be ready “to hear and understand” what God’s will is and, then, to be willing “to follow every least hint from God as to his will.” This will of God includes, most especially, that a person acknowledge and repent of his deep, moral depravity and rebellion against God. Consequently, Kierkegaard is saying that a person may have his external life “quite in order,” while his internal life lacks the proper order. Therefore, his “whole life may be sin.” Certainly, this person confesses his sins before God. His pastor insists that this is an important part of Christianity. Therefore, he is constantly confessing his *sins*, and he is proud of it. However, he refuses to acknowledge his *sin*, i.e., his inner, constant, deep rebellion against God. By refusing to acknowledge the depth of his sin, he converts the confessions of his sins into sin, thus making himself guilty of more aggravated evil before God than the person who ignores God.

The sins of the flesh are self-willfulness of the lower self, but how often is not one devil driven out with the devil's help and the last condition becomes worse than the first. For this is how things go in the world: first a man sins out of frailty and weakness, and then—well, then he may learn to flee to God and be helped to faith, which saves from all sin, but this will not be discussed here—then he despairs over his weakness and becomes either a Pharisee who in despair manages a sort of legal righteousness, or in despair he plunges into sin again. [81,82]

Because the “sins of the flesh” such as murder, stealing, etc. are “self-willfulness of the lower self,” they always include the profound depth of our moral depravity. This is why it is superfluous to confess our *sins*, our disobedient, external actions, without also confessing our *sin*, our deep, inner, immoral, and rebellious condition. Plus, Kierkegaard says that the problem with our humanity is that a person may appear to solve one moral problem, e.g., addiction to alcohol, only to create another and even worse moral problem, e.g., addiction to self-righteousness. This person has used the sin of pride to solve the sin of alcoholism, resulting in a more aggravated sin.

Perhaps, and it would seem only on rare occasions, the person's weakness appropriately leads him “to flee to God and be helped to faith, which saves from all sin.” Thus, the person truly becomes an authentic Christian. However, Kierkegaard chooses not to discuss this here. Instead, he goes on to talk about the person's remaining in despair over his moral weakness with one of two possible results. Either, in despair, he becomes a “Pharisee” and embraces a Christian system of rituals and traditional doctrines that he believes will impress God and make him worthy of God's forgiveness and eternal life, or he plunges into obvious immorality again and remains in despair in this way. In both cases, the person lacks genuine inwardness.

Therefore, the definition embraces every imaginable and every actual form of sin; indeed, it rightly stresses the crucial point that sin is despair (for sin is not the turbulence of flesh and blood but is the spirit's consent to it) and is: before God. As a definition it is algebra; for me to begin to describe particular sins in this little book would be out of place, and furthermore, the attempt might fail. The main point here is simply that the definition, like a net, embraces all forms. And this it does, as can be seen if it is tested by posing its opposite: faith, by which I steer in this whole book as by a trustworthy navigation guide. Faith is:

that the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God.
[82]

Kierkegaard's conclusion from what he has said so far is that he has correctly defined sin, because his definition includes "every imaginable and every actual form of sin." The "crucial point" is that "sin is despair" over oneself, either over one's cowardly unwillingness to be a true *self*, or over one's defiant willingness to be a self that falls short of being a true *self*. Therefore, sin is not "the turbulence of flesh and blood." It is not found in the passions that arise within us and that are contrary to God's moral commandments. Indeed, even Jesus, the morally perfect incarnation of God, had these passions. For example, in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before His crucifixion, Jesus knelt before the Father and, while sweating blood, asked that there be another way for Him to fulfill His responsibility as the Messiah other than by suffering on the cross. Therefore, at a certain, fairly tempestuous level within Him, Jesus did not want to obey God the Father. Yet, He was not sinning, because "sin is not the turbulence of flesh and blood." It is "the spirit's consent to it," and Jesus' fundamental inner being, that part of his humanity that was constantly relating to the Father, never consented to his desire to disobey the Father. In other words, Jesus' most basic desires that led to all his choices were always characterized by obedience to God.

This also means that ambivalence is not itself sin. To experience a desire to disobey God while also experiencing a desire to obey God is not immoral. Often, we think so, especially as Christians. We think that any desire to disobey God is sin. Yet, Jesus demonstrated that this is not the case. Instead, sin and being sinners is our moral condition at a much deeper level that leads to even the most imperceptible of our choices. In other words, if we do not choose to act externally upon our desire to disobey God, we still may be disobeying God, because we are choosing to be sinners at a much deeper and less obvious level than our choice to act externally.

Such is both the complexity and the depravity of our inner moral condition. On the one hand, we may sense an ambivalence within us, a desire to disobey God and a desire to obey God. On the other hand, these cannot be labeled as either immoral or moral respectively. In other words, just because we desire to disobey God does not make us immoral, and just because we desire to obey God does not make us moral. Instead, it is “the spirit’s consent” to continue to be a person who fundamentally desires to disobey God that makes us immoral. In other words, when the spirit consents and agrees with our fundamental desire to disobey God, we not only commit immorality, but we also are immoral. However, Kierkegaard is implying that both the “spirit” and our fundamental desire to disobey God are inner aspects of our humanity that are actually out of our control. God initially creates us with not only a spirit that is fundamentally oriented towards rebelling against Him, but also with rebellious desires in the fabric and infrastructure of our being. Then, if and when He so chooses, God reorients our spirit so that we fundamentally are obedient to Him, not in the sense that we are morally perfect, but in the sense that our spirit’s desire is no longer to disobey God. It is now desirous of obeying God. However, the infrastructure and fabric of our being remain rebellious towards God while our “spirit” wants to obey God. The result is that we believe the truth of the biblical message, but this is the only good choice that we consistently make, and the reason that we do is because God has promised to cause us to do so. Nevertheless, in the midst of our persevering belief, we do sin. We choose to follow the disobedient desires of the fabric of our being, because the fabric of our being never changes this side of eternity. It remains fundamentally hostile towards God, even after God changes our “spirit” and causes its fundamental desire to be obedient to God.

In addition, the “crucial point” is that “sin is despair...before God.” It is to God that all human beings are ultimately accountable. Therefore, all issues, including all moral issues, find their complete definition and explanation in the morally perfect God as the

origin and purpose of our existence. No question, especially no moral question, regardless of how trivial it is, has been completely answered until the answer includes how God is related to the question.

Kierkegaard also says that he does not want to go into the details of “particular sins” in his explanation in this book. He wants to provide simply a definition of sin that “embraces all forms” of sin and which can be tested “by posing its opposite: faith.” On page 14 of this book, Kierkegaard defined faith as: “in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it.” We see that he repeats the definition here, “that the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God.” Indeed, God is the power that establishes us, brings us into existence, and causes us to continue to exist. Thus, true biblical faith exists when a *self* finds its place of dwelling, repose, and safety in living honestly before its Creator, hiding nothing and admitting everything. A true realist, aware of and candid with God about his external surroundings and his internal nature, is a person of genuine, biblical faith.

Very often, however, it is overlooked that the opposite of sin is by no means virtue. In part, this is a pagan view, which is satisfied with a merely human criterion and simply does not know what sin is, that all sin is before God. No, *the opposite of sin is faith*, as it says in Romans 14:23: “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” And this is one of the most decisive definitions for all Christianity—that the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith. [82]

As already stated, human beings typically define and measure morality and sin in terms of actions and attitudes. For example, giving to the poor is moral, while stealing from the poor is sinful. In addition, humility is moral, while pride is sinful. Kierkegaard is pointing out that this approach to morality and sin is incorrect. Virtue, such as giving to the poor or humility, is not the opposite of immorality and sin. To think otherwise is to define morality “with a merely human criterion” that is superficial. Instead, sin is deeper than actions and attitudes so that “*the opposite of sin is faith*,” which exists in a person’s spirit in the midst of the moral depravity of the fabric of his being.

Therefore, the person of biblical faith has come to realize that he never escapes sin this side of eternity. Even when he is giving to the poor, he is still a morally depraved sinner. Even when he is humble before God, he is still a morally depraved sinner. In fact, as Jesus relates in the parable of the Pharisee and tax-collector in Luke 18:9-14, a person is most humble when he is most aware and repentant of his being a sinner, not when he is performing selfless, charitable actions. This is why the tax-collector was unwilling to lift his eyes to heaven while he prayed, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" The "opposite of sin is not virtue but faith." How often even Christians define humility and goodness in terms of actions such as a person's giving all that he possesses to the poor. Instead, the Bible defines humility and goodness in terms of repentance of one's moral depravity and embracing God's loving and undeserved mercy (cf. I Corinthians 13).

*Appendix. That the Definition of Sin Includes
the Possibility of Offense,
a General Observation about Offense*

The antithesis sin/faith is the Christian one that Christianly reshapes all ethical concepts and gives them one additional range. At the root of the antithesis lies the crucial Christian qualification: before God, a qualification that in turn has Christianity's crucial criterion: *the absurd, the paradox, the possibility of offense*. That this is demonstrated by every determination of what is Christian is extremely important, because offense is Christianity's weapon against all speculation.

In this little appendix, Kierkegaard is going to address the relationship between the proper definition of immorality, that it is always "before God," and what he calls "offense." The latter concept, "offense," is something that he describes in much greater detail in other writings.¹⁶ Nevertheless, he will provide us here with enough of a description to grasp it adequately for his brief purposes. We see that Kierkegaard associates "offense" with "the absurd" and "the paradox." He goes into greater detail regarding these latter

¹⁶ e.g., *Concluding Scientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, pgs. ?

two important concepts also in other writings.¹⁷ Nevertheless, like “offense,” in this appendix he will provide us with an adequate glimpse of what he means by Christianity’s absurd and paradoxical nature.

Kierkegaard begins this appendix by saying that “the antithesis sin/faith is the Christian one that Christianly reshapes all ethical concepts and gives them one additional range.” In the previous section, “Chapter 1. The Gradations in the Consciousness of the Self (The Qualification: ‘Before God’),” he pointed out that the existence of faith in God absolutizes sin and immorality, because it always makes sin something that is “before God,” who is the absolute and “infinite” reality of all of reality. In other words, it is impossible to appreciate either goodness or evil without bringing God into the discussion. Comparing human beings’ moral nature and behavior with God’s extends the arena of understanding morality to the very source of our existence, God, who Himself is morally perfect and pure. Comparing human beings’ moral nature and behavior with only other human beings’ is to limit the extent of the arena of understanding morality and impoverish our understanding of it. Therefore, Kierkegaard says that the “antithesis,” i.e. the two sides of the moral coin of sin and faith, “reshapes ethical concepts and gives them one additional range,” the range of our Creator, God.

By calling the combination of sin and faith an “antithesis,” Kierkegaard is saying that they oppose one another in a good way. Sin is our human moral depravity whereby we are fundamentally rebels against God. Faith is our human belief in God’s forgiveness and in His promise that we shall dwell in His eternal kingdom. Thus, sin and faith exist and work in opposition to one another—the former as rebellion against God, the latter as obedience to God. However, notice that neither sin nor faith can be properly defined without reference to God. Thus, Kierkegaard says that the combination of sin (rebellion against God) and faith (biblical belief in God) reshapes “ethical” and moral “concepts” by

¹⁷ e.g., *Concluding Scientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, pgs. ?, and *Fear and Trembling*, pgs. ?

molding them into a form that does not allow any human being to escape God's presence. God is always there both outside the creation and within the creation so that we are all constantly and eternally accountable to God for our moral nature and behavior.

In addition, sin and faith give "ethical concepts...one additional range" by extending them beyond merely human opinion about what constitutes good and evil so that they require us seek God's opinion on such matters. Kierkegaard calls this "the crucial Christian qualification" that is "[a]t the root of the antithesis" of sin and faith. Certainly, it is true that the very words "sin" and "faith" call to mind the word "God." While our modern world attempts to use the word "faith" without reference to God, e.g., "Keep the faith," it is very difficult to use the English word "sin" without thinking of the Bible and God. Thus, "the crucial Christian qualification: before God" naturally is "[a]t the root" of "the antithesis sin/faith."

Kierkegaard goes on to say in this first paragraph that the "qualification" of "before God" has "Christianity's crucial criterion: *the absurd, the paradox, the possibility of offense.*" He will go on to explain these concepts in the appendix. However, before he does, he comments that every aspect of Christianity demonstrates that the qualification "before God" includes the criterion of "*the possibility of offense.*" In Kierkegaard's understanding of Christianity, "offense" is the very weapon of the biblical truth that strikes down and relativizes mere human conjecture and "speculation." In other words, the fact that Christianity is offensive to human beings is not its weakness but its strength. When philosophers speculate about the nature and meaning of reality (as Kierkegaard is using the word speculate or "speculation" here), they come to the wrong conclusion. They also do not want to embrace Christianity's explanation of reality, because they are offended by it. We might be tempted to think that the problem is with Christianity, that we need to modify its message and make it more attractive to people so that they will be

less likely to reject it and be offended by it. However, Kierkegaard claims that the offensive nature of Christianity and the biblical message is their strength and not their weakness. The “offense” of Christianity is Christianity’s greatest weapon against mere philosophical speculation about the nature and meaning of reality that does not properly take into account the evidence that God has provided us. Kierkegaard will now explain how this is the case.

In what, then, lies the possibility of offense here? It lies in this, that a human being should have this reality [*Realitet*]: that as an *individual* human being a person is directly before God and consequently, as a corollary, that a person’s sin should be of concern to God.

In the first place, “the possibility of offense” exists because each and every “*individual* human being” lives his life “directly before God,” whether or not each and every “*individual* human being” admits it. Kierkegaard says that the logical result is that God is always and eternally concerned with each and every “*individual*” human being’s moral condition and actions. However...

The idea of the individual human being—before God—never enters speculation’s mind. It only universalizes individual human beings fantastically into the race. That, in fact, was also the reason a disbelieving Christianity made out that sin is sin and that whether it is directly before God or not makes no difference at all. In other words, it wanted to get rid of the qualification *before God* and therefore worked out a higher wisdom that, curiously enough, however, was neither more nor less than what higher wisdom most often is: the old paganism. [83]

If people think about reality without properly taking God into account, i.e., if they engage in mere speculation, Kierkegaard says that they miss the point about the most important aspect of human existence, that each “*individual* human being” lives his life “before God.” Instead, under speculation’s tutelage, people look at human beings merely as a collective group with little reference to their true individuality before God. In Kierkegaard’s words, they “universalize human beings fantastically into the race.” Even Christians, or so-called Christians, do the same. Kierkegaard calls this latter group

“disbelieving Christianity.” They use all the labels and tools of Christianity, but they are not genuinely Christians. They lack the proper inwardness and are still fundamentally rebellious towards God, because they are following the path of “speculation’s mind” by focusing on the human race’s collective, earthly well-being rather than each individual’s eternal well-being before God.

Therefore, no matter what “disbelieving” group we are talking about, whether philosophers, scientists, members of other religions, or false Christians, the people in these groups want to lump individual human beings into a collective whole. When they do this, they believe that good is equally virtuous and evil is equally heinous whether or not God is taken into account when evaluating them. In our day, such people love to talk about the “common good,” that they define in material and earthly terms, i.e., in external terms. The common good is food, shelter, clothing, health care, etc. for every human being in the world. While certainly all these are important aspects of human existence, they are not ultimately “good.”

Jesus demonstrated this important fact when He responded to the devil who was strongly suggesting that He needed to turn stones into bread in order to satisfy His hunger. Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 8:3 and said, “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). Jesus meant that God ultimately creates what He wills for even Him, the Messiah, and if God creates poverty and starvation for Him, then this, biblically speaking, is “good.” We may be inclined to think that this applies only to Jesus, because He had a special role within human history. However, Kierkegaard is recommending that we also apply this definition of “good” to all other members of the human race. Therefore, to measure all actions according to whether or not they enhance the material and earthly lives of the human

race is to contradict the Bible and Jesus, while also misunderstanding the biblical concept of “good.”¹⁸

Kierkegaard claims that the ultimate reason that people want goodness to be equally good and evil to be equally evil, regardless of whether it is God or man alone who evaluates it, is because they want “to get rid of the qualification *before God*.” In other words, they want to get rid of God. They may talk about God. They may even think that they worship God, but ultimately they hate God and love only themselves. In other words, this is simply another form of human narcissism whereby people are thinking more about themselves and their making themselves feel good for their own selfish reasons than about God and pleasing God. Kierkegaard is obviously being sarcastic when he says that these people have “worked out a higher wisdom” than that of the biblical message. They think that they are smart and that they have come up with a perspective on reality and human life that is so wise and enlightened, when, actually, their wisdom is “neither more nor less than what higher wisdom most often is: the old paganism.” Human speculation is “higher wisdom,” because it avoids what it considers to be lower wisdom—the stupidity and foolishness of disgusting Christianity.

There is so much talk about being offended by Christianity because it is so dark and gloomy, offended because it is so rigorous etc., but it would be best of all to explain for once that the real reason that men are offended by Christianity is that it is too high, because its goal is not man’s goal, because it wants to make man into something so extraordinary that he cannot grasp the thought.

If all one hears from Christians is a message of hell and damnation, then Kierkegaard says that it is easy to be offended by it, “because it is so dark and gloomy.” Or, if all one hears from Christians is how good a person must be, including being a regular church attender, constantly engaged in fervent prayer, sacrificially giving to others, then Kierkegaard says that it is also easy to be offended by Christianity,

¹⁸ See Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s explanation of the three temptations of Jesus in the chapter “The Grand Inquisitor” of *The Brothers Karamazov*.

“because it is so rigorous, etc.” Yet, none of these is what Kierkegaard believes to be the really offensive nature of Christianity. Instead, it is that fact that Christianity “is too high, because its goal is not man’s goal.” While man wants to make the present world into something extraordinary and wants to pursue, for example, the common earthly good of the entire human race as the highest goal, God “wants to make man into something so extraordinary that he cannot grasp the thought.” In other words, God’s goal for individuals is so much higher than any goal that human beings can envision for the whole race. Indeed, no human being can fully understand or appreciate God’s goal for each *individual*. We only come close by encountering Christianity in its right form.

A very simple psychological exposition of the nature of offense will also explain and show how very foolishly we have conducted ourselves in defending Christianity in such a way that the offense has been removed, how in stupidity or with effrontery we have ignored Christ’s own instructions, which frequently and so concernedly caution against offense; that is, he personally points out that the possibility of offense is there and must be there, for if it is not supposed to be there, if it is not an eternal, essential component of Christianity, then it certainly is so much human nonsense on the part of Christ to be concerned and to go around cautioning against it instead of removing it. [83,84]

Kierkegaard next wants to offer us an illustration that demonstrates how foolish is “disbelieving Christianity” when, because of a lack of either intelligence or humility, it tries to make Christianity attractive by eliminating its most offensive aspect. He says that such efforts ignore Jesus’ own view of the nature of the biblical message. Jesus cautioned people against being offending by Him and His message. Obviously, He would not issue this caution if the offensive nature of the message were not always there and if it were not important that the offensive nature always be there. As a result, Kierkegaard concludes that the offensive nature of Christianity is “an eternal, essential component” of it. Otherwise, “it certainly is so much human nonsense on the part of Christ to be concerned and to go around cautioning against [the offensive nature of Christianity] instead of removing it.” And now the illustration...

If I were to imagine a poor day laborer and the mightiest emperor who ever lived, and if this mightiest emperor suddenly seized on the idea of sending for the day laborer, who had never dreamed and “in whose heart it had never arisen” that the emperor knew he existed, who then would consider himself indescribably favored just to be permitted to see the emperor once, something he would relate to his children and grandchildren as the most important event in his life—if the emperor sent for him and told him that he wanted him for a son-in-law: what then? Quite humanly, the day laborer would be more or less puzzled, self-conscious, and embarrassed by it; he would (and this is the humanness of it) humanly find it very strange and bizarre, something he would not dare tell to anyone, since he himself had already secretly concluded what his neighbors near and far would busily gossip about as soon as possible: that the emperor wanted to make a fool of him, make him a laughingstock of the whole city, that there would be cartoons of him in the newspapers, and that the story of his engagement to the emperor’s daughter would be sold by the ballad peddlers. This plan for him to become the emperor’s son-in-law simply would have to take on an external reality very soon so that the day laborer could be certain in some substantial way of whether the emperor was indeed in earnest about this, or whether he only wanted to pull the poor man’s leg, make him unhappy for his whole life, and ultimately send him to a madhouse; for present here is the *quid nimis* [excess] that can so very easily turn into its opposite. A little favor—that would make sense to the laborer. It would be understood in the market town by the esteemed, cultured public, by the ballad peddlers, in short, by the 5 x 100,000 people who lived in that market town, which, to be sure, with respect to population, was even a very large city, but a very small one with respect to having an understanding of and sense for the extraordinary. But this, this plan for him to become a son-in-law, well, that was far too much.

It would be difficult for me to improve on Kierkegaard’s illustration and explanation, but I will at least bring it into a more modern setting. Simply put, what if the President of the United States, the most powerful man in the world, first sent for a migrant farm worker, who has emigrated from a small, distant, and uneducated foreign village. Of course, the farm worker would be incredibly flattered, and he would look forward to telling his children and his grandchildren about this “most important even in his life” of meeting the President of the United States.

Then, what if the President asked the farm worker to marry his daughter? While the farm worker would again be incredibly flattered, he would also be “puzzled, self-conscious,” and even a little “embarrassed.” In addition, the farm worker does not dare tell anyone else about the President’s request, because he knows that “his friends and neighbors near and far would busily gossip about him as soon as possible,” thinking that

the President simply wants “to make a fool out of him, make him the laughingstock of the whole” world, and “that there would be cartoons of him the in the newspapers,” because it simply does not make any sense that the most powerful man in the world would want one of the lowliest men in the world for a son-in-law.

Indeed, probably the only way that the migrant farm worker would not go crazy trying to grasp what it will be like to experience a transition from his lowly position as an anonymous, migrant farm worker to the exalted position of the President’s son-in-law, is if this “plan for him to become” the President’s son-in-law were “to take on an external reality very soon,” i.e., that the wedding were to happen *tout de suite*. Otherwise, the thought of what the President has requested is too “extraordinary.” While the farm worker maybe thinks that, certainly, anything in life is possible, nevertheless, “this plan for him to become a son-in-law [of the President of the United States], well, that [is] far too much.”

Now suppose, however, that the plan dealt not with an external reality but an internal one, so that facticity could not provide the laborer with certainty but that faith itself was the only facticity, and thus everything was left up to faith, whether he had sufficient humble courage to dare to believe it (for brash courage cannot help unto *faith*). How many day laborers are there who would have this courage? The person lacking this courage would be offended; to him the extraordinary would sound like a gibe at him. He would then perhaps honestly and forthrightly confess: Such a thing is too high for me, I cannot grasp it; to be perfectly blunt, to me it is a piece of folly. [84,85]

Kierkegaard now asks us to imagine that the President’s goal for the farm worker is not something immediately *external*, such as marrying his daughter tomorrow, but is something external in the distant future with the farm worker’s carrying around a particular *internal* mark that is the condition for eventually acquiring the external promise in the distant future—for example, that the man have faith now that the President will make him his son-in-law in three years after he has spent this time working in the fields under the hot sun and earning barely enough to keep himself alive.

Therefore, rather than the farm worker's acquiring certainty in the very near future about the President's fulfilling his promise, he has to wait, thus requiring that he exercise "humble courage to dare to believe" that the President will faithfully make him his chief counselor in three years. Kierkegaard says that "humble courage" is the only kind of appropriate courage, because "brash courage cannot help unto *faith*." Here, he alludes to biblical faith that cannot arise out of pride and arrogance, but only out of humility and meekness.

Kierkegaard asks, "How many [farm workers] are there who would have this courage," who are willing to interact with such a lofty idea of marrying the President's daughter in three years, that they humbly believe that the President's promise will come true? Instead, Kierkegaard states that most farm workers would consider the promise so extraordinary and outlandish that they would think that the President is mocking them. Indeed, they "would be offended" by the promise and would say to themselves, "Such a thing is too high for me, I cannot grasp it; to be perfectly blunt, to me [becoming the President's son-in-law in three years] is a piece of folly."

And now, what of Christianity! Christianity teaches that this individual human being—and thus every single individual human being, no matter whether man, woman, servant girl, cabinet minister, merchant, barber, student, or whatever—this individual human being exists *before God*, this individual human being who perhaps would be proud of having spoken with the king once in his life, this human being who does not have the slightest illusion of being on intimate terms with this one or that one, this human being exists before God, may speak with God any time he wants to, assured of being heard by him—in short, this person is invited to live on the most intimate terms with God!

If becoming the President's son-in-law now or in three years seems like "a piece of folly" to the farm worker, what about the idea that is true of "every single individual human being," that no matter his station in life, "whether man, woman, servant girl, cabinet minister, merchant, barber, student or whatever," he "exists *before God*." Certainly, this "individual human being" would be "proud of having spoken with the

[President] once in his life, this human being who does not have the slightest illusion” of how outlandish it is even to think of “being on intimate terms” with the [President]. Now, in addition, he considers the fact that he “exists before” his Creator. In fact, he “may speak with God any time he wants to,” and he can be certain that God will always hear him. Consequently, Kierkegaard says that “this person is invited to live on the most intimate terms with God,” even while he may never become intimate with the President of the United States, the most powerful man in the world!

Furthermore, for this person’s sake, also for this very person’s sake, God comes to the world, allows himself to be born, to suffer, to die, and this suffering God—he almost implores and beseeches this person to accept the help that is offered to him! Truly, if there is anything to lose one’s mind over, this is it! Everyone lacking the humble courage to dare to believe this is offended. But why is he offended? Because it is too high for him, because his mind cannot grasp it, because he cannot attain bold confidence in the face of it and therefore must get rid of it, pass it on as a bagatelle, nonsense, and folly, for it seems as if it would choke him. [85,86]

Not only does every individual human being exist “before God,” but God has chosen to exist before every individual human being. God has come into the world as a man, the man Jesus of Nazareth, the Jewish Messiah. In addition, God, i.e., Jesus, suffered and died, thus experiencing the same hardships that all human beings experience. God also “implores and beseeches” every “person to accept the help” that He offers him by Jesus’ being his advocate at the final judgment and appealing to God the Father for eternal mercy on his behalf. A farm worker’s marrying the President’s daughter is a lofty goal, requiring great humility and appreciation. How much higher and more humbling is the goal of acquiring God’s eternal mercy and the promise of life in the Kingdom of God through His help as demonstrated by Jesus’ death and resurrection? Kierkegaard exclaims, “Truly, if there is anything to lose one’s mind over, this is it!” In fact, “[because] it is too high for [us], because [our] mind[s] cannot grasp it, because [we] cannot attain bold confidence in the face of it,” we, therefore, “must get rid of it” and “pass it on” as a

thing of very little importance, indeed, as something not only to be ignored but also to be aggressively rejected.

For what is offense? Offense is unhappy admiration. Thus it is related to envy, but it is an envy that turns against the person himself, is worse against oneself to an even higher degree. The uncharitableness of the natural man cannot allow him the extraordinary that God has intended for him; so he is offended. [86]

As a result of all this discussion and the illustration of the day laborer and the king [the farm worker and the President], Kierkegaard draws the conclusion that offense “is unhappy admiration.” The farm worker certainly admires the fact that the President has offered him his daughter’s hand in marriage, and, yet, he is quite offended by the offer, because he cannot believe that the offer is true. Consequently, he is actually unhappy and angry about the whole affair. In the same way, “every individual human being” who lacks the necessary humble courage glumly rejects God’s offer of mercy and eternal life. Indeed, angry and dissatisfied, he refuses to believe that God’s offer is true.

The degree of offense depends on how passionate a man’s admiration is. The more prosaic people, lacking in imagination and passion and thus not particularly given to admiration, are also offended, but they limit themselves to saying: Such a thing I just can’t understand; I leave it alone. They are the skeptics. But the more passion and imagination a person has—consequently, the closer he is in a certain sense (in possibility) to being able to believe, N.B., to humbling himself in adoration under the extraordinary—the more passionate is his offense, which finally cannot be satisfied with anything less than getting this rooted out, annihilated, trampled into the dirt. [86]

Kierkegaard is saying that the intensity of a person’s feelings of being offended by the biblical message is directly proportional to how much he admires God’s offer. If, on the one hand, he is a “prosaic” person, who, in other areas of life, is quite boring and dull, then he will be less offended, or at least less passionately offended, by God’s offer of mercy and eternal life. This person simply says that he really does not understand what God is talking about and ignores what God is saying, although there are still

elements of unhappiness and anger within him. Kierkegaard calls him a skeptic, a person who is given to pessimism and doubt about most things in life.

If, on the other hand, the offended person is more passionate about the mundane things of life, then he will also be “more passionate” in “his offense.” Yet, ironically, the more passionate a person is in his feelings of being offended by God’s offer of mercy and eternal life, the “closer he is in a certain sense...to being able to believe” the biblical message. Kierkegaard can claim this because he believes that faith itself is “an infinite passion for the infinite,”¹⁹ so that, as he has stated here, even people who are offended by God’s offer and reject it at least admire it. Thus, faith is nothing other than passionate “adoration” of the “extraordinary,” i.e., fervent devotion to God’s astounding offer of help to unworthy sinners by providing them both with an advocate, Jesus the Messiah, at the judgment and with eternal life.

Therefore, if the offended human being is a person of great passion in other areas of his life, then the degree of passion that he feels against the biblical message will also be great. Thus, while admiring the repugnant, or, better said, while being disgusted by the admirable, he “finally cannot be satisfied with anything less than getting [the offense] rooted out, annihilated, [and] trampled in the dirt.” He must completely expunge God’s grace and mercy from his life. Consequently, he will use any technique of his liking to escape the offense of the biblical message, even the brilliant technique of joining Christendom in its grand scheme of modifying the biblical message in order to remove the offense of Christianity. As a result, he can claim to be a Christian and use the tools of Christianity such as the Bible, while rejecting Christianity.

To understand offense, it is necessary to study human envy, an area that I present beyond the examination requirements and fancy myself to have studied thoroughly. Envy is secret admiration. An admirer who feels that he cannot become happy by abandoning himself to it chooses to be envious of that which he admires. So he speaks another language, wherein that which he actually

¹⁹ *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, pg. ?

admires is a trifle, a rather stupid, insipid, peculiar, and exaggerated thing. Admiration is happy self-surrender, envy is unhappy self-assertion. [86]

Kierkegaard claims that, by understanding “human envy,” we will be able to understand this concept of being offended by Christianity. Apparently, Kierkegaard has carefully and thoroughly examined “human envy” and considers himself an expert. He says that envy is “secret admiration,” that arises when a person believes that he can never possess that which he admires and highly resents the fact that he will never have it. Therefore, he envies “that which he admires.” He desperately longs for it, but, for whatever reason, he cannot and will not pursue it and obtain it. Consequently, he craves the forbidden fruit so-to-speak, and, yet, he pretends as though he does not. Publicly and outwardly, he talks about the item he craves as though it were nothing, a “trifle, a rather stupid, insipid, peculiar, and exaggerated thing.” Privately and inwardly, he aches to satisfy his longing to get his hands on it, for he feels as though he cannot live without it.

Thus, Kierkegaard concludes that admiration and envy are radically different from one another. Admiration is “happy, self-surrender,” while envy is “unhappy self-assertion.” In other words, the person who genuinely admires something commits himself wholeheartedly and joyfully to obtaining it in the best and most moral way possible, and he actually remains fundamentally content even if he never acquires it. In contrast, the person who envies something gives himself wholeheartedly and disgruntledly to convincing others publicly that he considers it of little consequence, while he himself secretly covets it.

It is the same with offense, for that which between man and man is admiration/envy is adoration/offense in the relationship between God and man. The *summa summarum* [sum total] of all human wisdom is this “golden” (perhaps it is more correct to say “plated”) mean²⁰: *ne quid nimis* [nothing too much]. Too

²⁰ “mean” = average, the quotient of the sum of several quantities and their number; cf. Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*; Kierkegaard owned twenty-two sets and single works of Aristotle in Greek, Latin, German, and Danish.

little and too much spoil everything. This is bandied about among men as wisdom, is honored with admiration; its exchange rate never fluctuates, and all mankind guarantees its worth. Now and then there is a genius who goes a little way beyond this, and he is called crazy—by sensible people. but Christianity makes an enormous giant stride beyond this *ne quid nimis* into the absurd: that is where Christianity begins—and offense. [86,87]

After describing the contrasting concepts of “admiration” and “envy” that exist in human relationships and in regard to earthly items, Kierkegaard states that they are like “adoration” and “offense” that exist in man’s relationship with God and in regard to the heavenly items of mercy and eternal life. He also claims that the wisest idea that human beings have invented is the “golden’ mean,” i.e., the valuable average that avoids any extreme. For example, if we take the numbers 1 and 10 as two opposites or extremes, their mean or average is $1+10$ divided by 2, or $5\frac{1}{2}$. Similarly, if we take “admiration” and “envy” as two opposites or extremes, their mean or average is perhaps casual interest that does not succumb to either extreme but falls in approximately the middle.

Kierkegaard calls this great wisdom of man, i.e. the “mean” or average, the *ne quid nimis*, which is Latin for “nothing too much.” In other words, man believes that he is so wise by avoiding the extremes of both “admiration” and “envy,” and that this is the proper approach, taking the middle road, in every situation in life. If we have too much of one thing, e.g., admiration, or too much of its opposite e.g., envy, then we spoil our experience. The height of human wisdom, *ne quid nimis* [nothing too much], leads us to proceed down the middle path between the two extremes, in this case, half way between “admiration” and “envy.” Now, rather than ruining our experience, we (and the rest of mankind with its human wisdom) feel as though we are doing the right thing.

Kierkegaard goes on to say that this supposed exalted human wisdom of always taking the middle road “is bandied about among men” as the best approach to life. All one has to say is, “Everything in moderation,” and everyone solemnly nods his head in agreement. Once in a while, Kierkegaard says, a “genius,” or supposed genius, goes

outside the boundaries of the mean and the average, and he is labeled as “crazy” by the rest of mankind, i.e., by “sensible people” who really understand life and reality.

Kierkegaard is implying that the greatest “genius” and craziest person in human history, who blew the doors right off the sensible concept of the always taking the middle road, was Jesus of Nazareth, the Jewish Messiah. Indeed, the whole biblical message and, thus, Christianity, which is the culmination of the biblical message, “makes an enormous giant stride beyond the *ne quid nimis* [nothing too much] into the absurd.” We recall that above, in Part One, C, B., b., β (*In Despair to Will to Be Oneself: Defiance*), Kierkegaard intimated that the absurdity of Christianity is not that it is irrational, but that it is remarkable and astounding. In other words, Christianity is not difficult to believe because it is nonsensical. It is difficult to believe because it seems too good to be true. Is God really so loving and merciful that He graciously and freely grants forgiveness and eternal life to morally depraved and rebellious human beings? Yes, but this is truly remarkable. Indeed, as Kierkegaard claims, the wonderfully astounding nature of Christianity is exactly what makes it offensive and repugnant to prideful and arrogant men who want to take all the credit for their accomplishments.

Now we see how extraordinarily stupid (so that there can still be a remnant of something extraordinary) it is to defend Christianity, how little knowledge of human nature it manifests, how it connives even if unconsciously, with offense by making Christianity out to be some poor, miserable thing that in the end has to be rescued by a champion.

The bottom line in what Kierkegaard is saying here is that it makes no sense at all (notice the irony) to defend Christianity by explaining how much it makes sense. In other words, people do not need to be convinced that Christianity is defensible and makes sense in order to believe that it is true. They already know that it makes sense and is true. What people need is to overcome their own pride and foolish repugnance towards the beauty of God’s love and mercy. Thus, those who spend their whole time defending

Christianity by trying to convince others that it is logical, historically justifiable, and true do not understand “human nature.” They do not understand that our problem is not our minds *per se*, but our hearts and wills. We are inwardly rebellious towards God and unwilling to embrace the truth of His mercy and promise of eternal life.

Subsequently, Kierkegaard also says that defending Christianity is to conspire with those who would want to encourage others to be offended by it, as though human beings should remain offended by it. Thus, Christianity gets turned into “some poor, miserable thing that in the end has to be rescued by a champion.” Rather than Christianity’s standing on its own as the one and only champion of all religions, philosophies, and ideologies, the act of defending Christianity implies that it needs an intellectual *human* champion who can outwit all objectors. Poor God. He really needs our masterful and brilliant help, because He is so incapable of carrying out His own eternal plans and purposes.

Therefore, it is certain and true that the first one to come up with the idea of defending Christianity in Christendom is *de facto* a Judas No. 2: he, too, betrays with a kiss, except that his treason is the treason of stupidity. To defend something is always to disparage it. Suppose that someone has a warehouse full of gold, and suppose he is willing to give every ducat to the poor—but in addition, suppose he is stupid enough to begin this charitable enterprise of his with a defense in which he justifies it on three grounds: people will almost come to doubt that he is doing any good. As for Christianity! Well, he who defends it has never believed it. If he believes it, then the enthusiasm of faith is not a defense—no, it is attack and victory; a believer is a victor. [87]

This last paragraph is perhaps one of the most profound in all of literature. From his discussion, Kierkegaard draws the conclusion that the person within the church community who decides that defending Christianity is a most important pursuit is none other than a second Judas, a betrayer of Jesus and Christianity. However, rather than betray Jesus out of a desire to make money, i.e., for thirty pieces of silver,²¹ he betrays it out of stupidity, because he misunderstands human nature, i.e., the depth of people’s

²¹ cf. Matthew 26:15

moral depravity and the fact that every person knows that Christianity is true and wonderful.

Kierkegaard also claims that to “defend something is always to disparage it.” Why should I defend a Smith and Wesson .44 Magnum? To do so is to imply that it is weak and worthless. However, everyone knows that it is powerful and extremely effective in stopping a violent and malicious attacker. In other words, a Smith and Wesson .44 Magnum is its own defense.

Similarly, Kierkegaard asks about the person with “a warehouse full of gold,” who also wants to give it all away to the poor. Suppose that this person “is stupid enough to begin this charitable enterprise of his with a defense in which he justifies it on three grounds.” For example, suppose that he feels it necessary to state publicly that poor people exist, and this is his defense for giving his gold to them. Then, he adds that it is morally good to give to the poor. And, finally, he states that he abhors seeing people starve and be deprived of the necessities of life. What will people think of him?

Kierkegaard says that they will “come to doubt that he is doing any good.” Why does he have to begin his endeavor by defending it and stating the obvious? In other words, people will only become suspicious of his motives and whether or not they can label as good what he is doing. If this person has to trumpet his reasons for doing good, is he really doing good? And are his reasons truly valid? Kierkegaard is saying, probably not.

Well then, what about Christianity? Why should I defend the biblical message, i.e., Christianity? Like defending a Smith and Wesson .44 Magnum, defending Christianity is to imply that it is weak and worthless. However, everyone knows that it is powerful and the only effective means to rescue a person from God’s eternal condemnation. In other words, Christianity is its own defense. Nevertheless, even Kierkegaard has intimated that God must miraculously change a person’s heart by His grace in order for this person to cease to be arrogantly offended by Christianity and, instead, to believe and embrace

it. Thus, not only has God made Christianity its own defense, so that it does not need human beings to defend it, but God is also the only one who, ultimately, can cause an offended human being to believe it.

Therefore, Kierkegaard continues by saying that “he who defends [Christianity] has never believed it,” because to feel that one must defend it is to feel insecure about it and to doubt whether or not it is true. Ironically, belief itself is actually “not a defense.” It is a frontal and aggressive “attack” on falsehood and the world of rebellion against God. Even beyond this, Kierkegaard says that it is a “victory,” and the “believer is a victor.” Kierkegaard may be thinking of 1 John 5:4, “And this is the victory that conquers the world—our belief” (my translation). All one needs to “defend” Christianity and attack the world’s unbelief is to believe it—because everyone knows that it is true and, yet, is unwilling to admit its veracity. Indeed, a person’s belief in Christianity always wins the battle against the world’s unbelief and being offended by Christianity, not by causing everyone else to believe in Christianity, but by demonstrating that God, by miraculously changing this person’s heart and causing him to believe, has won him over to the truth. As Kierkegaard goes on to say...

So also with Christianity and offense. The possibility of offense is very appropriately present in the Christian definition of sin. It is this: before God. A pagan, the natural man, is very willing to admit that sin exists, but this “before God” that actually makes sin into sin, this is too much for him. For him (although in a way different from that pointed out here) it makes much too much of being human; make it a little less, and he is willing to go along with it—“but too much is too much.”

In conclusion, Kierkegaard states that the offensive element of Christianity is “present in the Christian definition of sin.” This element is the simple and yet profound concept: “before God.” Every human being, except perhaps a complete sociopath, is “very willing to admit” that immorality and evil exist in the world. Certainly, all societies, cultures, and human beings have some standard of morality so that they recognize that

the opposite of good exists to some degree. However, people do not want to include the criterion “before God” in their definition of morality. Yet, as Kierkegaard points out, it is this criterion that “makes sin into sin” and good into good. In other words, good and evil do not really make sense if God is not a part of the definition of morality.

However, for the “pagan, the natural man,” and for the Christian charlatan, “this is too much.” To include God the way that He should be included in understanding morality is to make “too much of being human.” After all, the unbeliever says, we can be human beings without being created by God. For example, we can be human beings who have evolved from other organisms and, ultimately, from non-organic material, thus making it much more comfortable to talk about ourselves while leaving God out of our understanding of reality. In this way, we make being human “a little less,” and, thus, we find the mean or average. We are neither one extreme, *individual* human beings before God, nor the other extreme, non-existent human beings. We are nice, middle of the road human beings in the universal, world-wide community of the human race, who find a comfortable way to navigate Christianity’s offense, because “too much is too much” and never will do for us.

CHAPTER 2. THE SOCRATIC DEFINITION OF SIN

Sin is ignorance. This, as is well known, is the Socratic definition, which, like everything Socratic, is an authority meriting attention. But with regard to this point, as with so much that is Socratic, men have come to feel an urge to go further. What countless numbers have felt the urge to go further than Socratic ignorance—presumably because they felt it was impossible for them to stop with that—for how many are there in any generation who could persevere, even for just one month, in existentially expressing ignorance about everything. [87,88]

Earlier in the book (Part One,C,B,a), Kierkegaard referred to the famous Greek philosopher Socrates (ca. 400 B.C.). Now, he is going to draw more extensively from Socrates’ understanding of reality. In this chapter, he will describe how this ancient

philosopher's definition of sin was more accurate than not only that of the philosophers of his day, but also that of the Christian preachers, who purportedly are teaching from the Bible, which they believe to be the only inerrant and authoritative source of truth. In particular, Kierkegaard will again refer to the German philosopher Hegel and to the churchmen of the Danish State Church.

He begins with the "Socratic definition" of evil—that sin is ignorance. There are two reasons why this definition may surprise us. First, it may be because we are used to thinking of sin and morality as actions, not knowledge, as referring to what we do with our bodies, not to ideas that show up in our minds, or, to put it more accurately according to Socrates, not to ideas that do *not* show up in our minds. For example, if I use my body to murder a man, then we would all agree that this action is sin. In contrast, is it appropriate to think of sin as my simply not knowing what to do in a particular situation? What if I have never learned even the basics of morality? Should I really be accused of committing a sin if I choose to murder someone out of sheer ignorance? This hardly seems fair or just. However, in typical detailed fashion, Kierkegaard will expand our understanding of morality to include the lack of knowledge by discussing various nuances of knowledge and understanding. In other words, Kierkegaard will make an important and biblical distinction between knowledge that is strictly intellectual and knowledge that involves the human will, our choice-making mechanisms.

The second reason why we may be surprised by the Socratic definition of sin—sin is ignorance—is as a result of our familiarity with another concept in Socrates' philosophical system. Modern philosophers speak of the concept of "Socratic ignorance." Kierkegaard even uses this phrase in his opening paragraph, but he is not referring to Socrates' definition of sin. In other words, when using this phrase, modern philosophers and Kierkegaard are not accusing Socrates of being sinful according to his own definition of evil, but they are referring to his declaring that he did not know better than

other people. Indeed, this wise, ancient philosopher had the humility to state that he was ignorant of all things and, therefore, always seeking the truth. In fact, he believed that a human being's awareness of his own lack of knowledge of the world was the beginning of wisdom. Socrates explains why he follows this particular path in philosophy in Plato's dialogue *Apology* (meaning: providing a proper defense for one's actions, not saying that one is sorry for what one has done). This dialogue is an account of Socrates' trial in Athens after he had been accused of subverting the youth. The Greeks had an important temple in Delphi where there was a woman who spoke on behalf of the gods. A close friend of Socrates traveled to Delphi and asked the woman, "Who is the wisest man?" She answered, "No one is wiser than Socrates." Socrates then explains to the court,

When I heard the answer, I said to myself, What can the god mean? and what is the interpretation of this riddle? for I know that I have no wisdom, small or great. What can he mean when he says that I am the wisest of men? And yet he is a god and cannot lie; that would be against his nature. After a long consideration, I at last thought of a method of trying the question. I reflected that if I could only find a man wiser than myself, then I might go to the god with a refutation in my hand. I should say to him, "Here is a man who is wiser than I am; but you said that I was the wisest." Accordingly I went to one who had the reputation of wisdom, and observed to him - his name I need not mention; he was a politician whom I selected for examination - and the result was as follows: When I began to talk with him, I could not help thinking that he was not really wise, although he was thought wise by many, and wiser still by himself; and I went and tried to explain to him that he thought himself wise, but was not really wise; and the consequence was that he hated me, and his enmity was shared by several who were present and heard me. So I left him, saying to myself, as I went away: Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is - for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows. I neither know nor think that I know. In this latter particular, then, I seem to have slightly the advantage of him. Then I went to another, who had still higher philosophical pretensions, and my conclusion was exactly the same. I made another enemy of him, and of many others besides him....therefore I asked myself on behalf of the oracle, whether I would like to be as I was, neither having their knowledge nor their ignorance, or like them in both; and I made answer to myself and the oracle that I was better off as I was.²²

In this context, we can see that Socrates considers that ignorance is wisdom, or, to put it in the form in which Kierkegaard stated the Greek philosopher's definition of sin,

²² The Project Gutenberg eBook of *Apology* by Plato, translated by Benjamin Jowett, page 39

wisdom is ignorance. Therefore, it appears that we have a contraction. On the one hand, Socrates has said that sin is ignorance. On the other hand, he has said that wisdom is ignorance. Consequently, if we are familiar with the latter concept within Socrates' philosophical system, we would be surprised by his definition of sin for it appears to claim that ignorance is both sinful and wise. However, just as Socrates always seemed to be playing with his Greek interlocutors in Plato's dialogues, he is also playing with us. Yes, sin is ignorance, if someone does not know the right thing to do. In addition, wisdom is ignorance, because a person's admission of being ignorant is a mark of humility that leads him on a never-ending journey of seeking truth, the most valuable and worthwhile journey that a human being can take.

By first stating the Socratic definition of sin, sin is ignorance, Kierkegaard is drawing from another of Plato's dialogues *Protagoras*, where the title refers to the person with whom Socrates is discussing the concept of virtue, particularly political virtue. We should remember that our word politics comes from the Greek *polis*, meaning city, because this was the primary socio-economic community for the ancient Greeks. They, like other ancient peoples, had organized themselves into city-states. Therefore, it was the city, the *polis*, that required an appropriate *political* theory and resultant human government in order to preserve law and order.

At one point in Socrates' and Protagoras' conversation, they are discussing a poem by a fellow Greek, Simonides. Socrates claims that Simonides' purpose in his poem is to refute another poet, Pittacus, who has said, "Hard is it to be good." Simonides changes the statement slightly and proposes that the more correct way of saying this is, "Hard is it to become good." In other words, it is impossible to *be* good, i.e., morally perfect, while it is simply difficult to *become* good, to pursue moral perfection. Thus, Simonides is pointing out that It takes great effort to grow in goodness as a human being, even if it is

only relative goodness in comparison to the moral perfection of God. Indeed, Socrates asserts that only God is perfectly good, a truth that, certainly, Christians would affirm.

Socrates continues discussing Simonides' poem and proposes that the interpretation of another statement by him is a matter of punctuation. Simonides has written, "But him who does no evil, voluntarily I praise and love." This is the way Socrates interprets him, not by thinking that Simonides was saying, "But him who does no evil voluntarily, I praise and love," whereby the comma is moved from being after *evil* to being after *voluntarily*. "Indeed," Socrates says to his audience, "Simonides was not so ignorant as to say that he praised those who did no evil voluntarily; for no wise man, as I believe, will allow that any human being errs voluntarily, or voluntarily does evil and dishonorable actions; but they are very well aware that all who do evil and dishonorable things do them against their will." For our purposes of better understanding Kierkegaard in this chapter, this is the key statement by Socrates in *Protagoras*—that no human being willingly does evil. All sin is done against the will. Then why does a person sin?

Socrates' answer to this question comes a little later in the dialogue while Protagoras and he are discussing the difference between courage and confidence. First, Socrates points out that the opinion of the rest of the world is that a man's knowledge of the right thing to do may be overwhelmed by his anger, pleasure, pain, love, or fear. The second word, "pleasure," is a bit tricky. Socrates has already obtained Protagoras' agreement that a good life is a pleasant life, free from pain. Therefore, does it really make sense to say that a man's knowledge of what is right is overwhelmed by pleasure and the pleasant? Is not this the same as saying that a man's knowledge of goodness is overwhelmed by goodness? Since both Socrates and Protagoras have agreed that the good life is a life of pleasure and happiness, properly speaking, as opposed to a life of pain and sadness, their opinion appears to contradict the opinion of the rest of the world. The world says, a man's knowledge of the right thing to do may be overwhelmed by

pleasure. Socrates and Protagoras have said, goodness is pleasure. Therefore, for someone to do evil because his knowledge of goodness has been overwhelmed by his desire for pleasure is to say that he has been overwhelmed by his desire for goodness. Since this is a contradiction, Socrates demonstrates the error of the opinion of the rest of the world.

Consequently, Socrates takes the discussion in another direction and argues that a person does what he knows is evil because he has wrongly measured the pleasurable and painful consequences of his choice. It is this concept of measuring that forms the foundation of Socrates' reasoning, and he carefully and explicitly points out the difference between the "art of measuring" and the "power of appearance." The latter is deceptive, while the former brings wisdom.

Probably from our own experiences, we can agree with Socrates that some consequences appear more pleasurable and less painful than they really are. Therefore, if a person is deceived by appearances, he will choose evil when he ought to do good. In order to prevent such deception from occurring, he should employ the proper art of measuring so that he grasps the true consequences of his choices. Then, his knowledge corresponds accurately to reality, and he can appropriately realize that evil results in less pleasure and greater pain than he originally believed.

In other words, the precise measurement of potential pleasure and pain involves the correct knowledge of life with all its possible choices and their consequences. As a result, the art of measuring is necessary to make the right choice, because, if someone chooses evil (and greater pain) over goodness (and greater pleasure), it is due to his lack of proper knowledge, specifically, the knowledge of measuring. This is why Socrates is able to conclude that sin is ignorance and that no one knowingly rejects goodness and chooses evil. If a person has the proper knowledge of measuring the consequences of his actions, then, certainly, he cannot help but choose goodness over

evil. Conversely, if a person is ignorant of the actual consequences of his choice to do evil, then, while thinking that his choice will bring pleasure when, instead, it will bring pain, he will naturally choose to do evil. Thus, it was his ignorance that caused his sin, so that sin is ignorance. Such is Socrates' argument to Protagoras. However, Kierkegaard will explain that Christianity does a better job than Socrates of defining sin by making an important distinction between Greek knowledge/understanding and biblical knowledge/understanding.

In the first paragraph of this chapter, Kierkegaard states not only the "Socratic definition" of sin, that "sin is ignorance," but also that this definition is worthy of discussion since Socrates has been considered down through history to be an authority on the subject of reality. However, he also claims that, rather than staying within the boundaries of Socrates' view of human knowledge, that it is limited and should always be in flux as people pursue truth, philosophers and others have chosen to go beyond these boundaries, or, at least, assert that they can and are. They have felt it necessary to profess that they know the truth, that they even have completed their explanation of reality (e.g., Hegel with his "system" or churches with their doctrinal statements). Kierkegaard suggests that hardly anyone in his (and certainly our) modern world would be willing, like Socrates, to say for a month (or even a minute?) that he is ignorant of everything.

As I have pointed out, such a statement by Kierkegaard makes Socrates sound as though he is contradicting himself. On the one hand, the ancient Greek philosopher asserted unequivocally that he was ignorant of all things. This was his *modus operandi* in life. By claiming to know nothing, he was always learning from his interlocutors and growing in wisdom. On the other hand, in *Protagoras*, Socrates asserts that sin is ignorance. How can his pursuit of wisdom be based on a good thing, ignorance, and sin be the very same thing, ignorance? Here, Kierkegaard (and Socrates) demonstrates the

possible subtle difference between two meanings of the same word. On the one hand, it was a good thing for Socrates to say humbly that he did not know all there is to know about reality. On the other hand, it was also a good thing for him to define sin as the lack of knowing how to measure consequences properly. The first kind of ignorance is foundational for pursuing wisdom. The second kind is foundational for defining sin.

By no means, therefore, shall I dismiss the Socratic definition on the grounds that one cannot stop there, but with Christianity *in mente* [in mind], I shall use this Socratic definition to bring out the latter in its radicality—simply because the Socratic definition is so genuinely Greek. And here, as always with any other definition that in the most rigorous sense is not rigorously Christian—that is, every intermediate definition—its emptiness becomes apparent. [88]

Kierkegaard has no plans to disregard Socrates' definition of sin by following modern philosophers and preachers, who claim, either explicitly or implicitly, that Socrates was wrong in his assertion that man cannot know reality completely and accurately, i.e., that "Socratic ignorance" is a sham. Thus, other philosophers and Kierkegaard's own Danish State Church preachers have seemingly formulated explanations of our existence as human beings that they believe to be full and precise. Hegel has written his "system," and preachers unwaveringly follow the doctrinal statement of the Lutheran church. In contrast, Kierkegaard will have in mind the Bible, which is our fullest and inerrant explanation of reality, and he will show that the Socratic definition of sin demonstrates just how revolutionary Christianity is in the midst of the importance of continuing to grow in and even change one's understanding of human existence. In other words, the Greeks, and particularly Socrates, were closer to knowing the truth of reality than modern philosophers and church preachers. Yet, Kierkegaard will also show that the Socratic definition of sin is only "intermediate." Even it falls short of accurately defining biblical sin and being "rigorously Christian" with the result that "its emptiness becomes apparent."

The defect in the Socratic definition is its ambiguity as to how the ignorance itself is to be more definitely understood, its origin, etc. in other words, even if sin is ignorance (or what Christianity perhaps would rather call stupidity), which in one sense certainly cannot be denied—is this an original ignorance, is it therefore the state of someone who has not known and up until now has not been capable of knowing anything about truth, or is it a resultant, a later ignorance? If it is the latter, then sin must essentially lodge somewhere else than in ignorance. It must lodge in a person's efforts to obscure his knowing. [88]

Kierkegaard's perspicacity always amazes me. Socrates' definition of sin, that it is ignorance, is correct, but it contains an inherent ambiguity. Does a person's ignorance originate at birth, and, subsequently, he remains incapable of knowing "anything about truth?" Or does a person's ignorance originate later in life—long after his birth and the early stages of his life where he really is incapable of grasping complex truths about God and reality? Kierkegaard says that if a person's ignorance originates after he becomes capable of knowing truth, then his sin must reside in something other than his ignorance. In other words, it lies somewhere else than in either his not knowing the truth or in his inability to know the truth. It lies, instead, in his desire and efforts not to know, i.e., in his own intentional endeavors "to obscure his knowing."

Given this assumption, however, that obstinate and very tenacious ambiguity comes up again: the question of whether a person was clearly aware of his action when he started to obscure his knowing. If he was not clearly aware of it, then his knowing was already somewhat obscure before he began doing it, and the question simply arises again and again. If, however, it is assumed that he was clearly aware of what he was doing when he began to obscure his knowing, then the sin (even if it is ignorance, insofar as this is the result) is not in the knowing but in the willing, and the inevitable question concerns the relation of knowing and willing to each other. [88]

Assuming the ambiguity in how ignorance arises—whether from an inability to know truth or from deliberately choosing not to know it, Kierkegaard says that this "obstinate and very tenacious ambiguity comes up again" when we ask the question of whether or not "a person was clearly aware of his action when he started to obscure his knowing." In other words, Kierkegaard is going back one step farther. When the person chose not to know the truth, was he consciously aware that he was making this choice, or was he

only subconsciously aware of it? “If he was not clearly aware of it, then his knowing was already somewhat obscure before he began” choosing not to know the truth. Therefore, we could go back even one more step. Did his present knowing become “somewhat obscure” because he had been “clearly aware” that he was obscuring his knowledge, or had he not been “clearly aware?” Again, if he was not “clearly aware,” then we could go back even one more step, and this progression continues *ad infinitum*.

“If, however, it is assumed that he was clearly aware of what he was doing when he began to obscure his knowing, then the sin...is not in the knowing but in the willing.” We will see that this is the “radicality” of Christianity, which, according to Kierkegaard, transfers the concern about the Socratic definition of sin—that sin is ignorance—from the realm of knowing to the realm of willing, from the mind to the will, from the human tool of the intellect to the human choice-making mechanism. Now, the obvious question is, what is the relationship between knowing and willing, between our minds and our wills?

With all such matters (and the questioning could go on for days), the Socratic definition really does not concern itself. Socrates was indeed an ethicist, the first (in fact, the founder of ethics, as antiquity unconditionally claims), just as he is and remains the first of his kind, but he begins with ignorance. Intellectually, he tends toward ignorance, toward knowing nothing. Ethically, he interprets ignorance as something quite different and begins with that. On the other hand, Socrates naturally is not an essentially religious ethicist, even less a Christian dogmatist. Therefore, he does not really enter into the whole investigation with which Christianity begins, into the *prius* [antecedent state] in which sin presupposes itself and which is explained in Christianity in the dogma of hereditary sin, the border of which this discussion will merely approach. [88,89]

Here, Kierkegaard says that the original Socratic definition of sin does not directly concern itself with the relationship between the mind and the will. Nevertheless, Socrates was concerned about the will. Indeed, as Kierkegaard points out, even “antiquity unconditionally claims” that Socrates was the “founder of ethics,” i.e., the first philosopher to care intimately and ultimately about moral issues, between right and wrong, good and evil and willfully making the choice to do the former. In other words,

Socrates' admirers in the ancient Greek world acknowledged that he had a great concern about living rightly, about doing the right thing in each circumstance in order to act properly as a human being.

However, Socrates "begins with ignorance," not the will. Thus, Kierkegaard points out that "[i]ntellectually, [Socrates] tends towards ignorance, toward knowing nothing." I mentioned this above, the concept of "Socratic ignorance," that Socrates humbly claimed to know nothing so that he was always growing in his understanding of reality. His opinion was that human beings should always be learning and never think that they have arrived at a complete and accurate description of reality. Yet, Kierkegaard also says that "[e]thically, [Socrates] interprets ignorance as something quite different and begins with that." In other words, Socrates uses the word "ignorance" slightly differently within the context of ethics where he defines sin as ignorance.

In addition, Kierkegaard continues to point out that Socrates, because of his less than accurate definition of sin, does not speak of ethics and morality within the context of God and the Bible as Christianity does. Consequently, Socrates does not ask the all-important question of how man's tendency to choose evil over good entered into the world. In other words, he does not address the issue of "hereditary sin" that has traditionally been a part of Christianity. Kierkegaard says that he will not dive into this subject too deeply but will discuss only "the border" of it.

Therefore, Socrates does not actually arrive at the category of sin, which certainly is dubious for a definition of sin. How can this be? If sin is ignorance, then sin really does not exist, for sin is indeed consciousness. If sin is being ignorant of what is right and therefore doing wrong, then sin does not exist. If this is sin, then along with Socrates it is assumed that there is no such thing as a person's knowing what is right and doing wrong, or knowing that something is wrong and going ahead and doing wrong. Consequently, if the Socratic definition is sound, then there is no sin at all. [89]

Kierkegaard's conclusion all along has been that Socrates' definition of sin is not the proper definition. Therefore, Socrates "does not actually arrive at the category of sin." He

gets close to understanding sin, but the simple statement “ignorance is sin” cannot be relied upon to describe sin accurately. We must go further and analyze this statement in more detail. (Note: in this case, it seems appropriate “to go further than Socratic ignorance,” not because human beings are so wise and independently capable of knowing, as philosophers and pastors assume, but because the Bible extends the definition of sin beyond the Socratic). Why is this the case—that we analyze the statement “ignorance is sin” in more detail? Because, if sin is merely not knowing the right thing to do, then “sin does not exist” as a moral issue. By definition, or, at least, according to Christianity and the Bible, to sin means to act immorally. Thus, when Kierkegaard says that “sin does not exist” if the definition is merely “ignorance is sin,” he means that sin *per se* does not exist. Because sin is a moral issue and not merely an intellectual issue, Socrates’ definition does not go deeply enough into the nature of human beings, even though sin is “indeed consciousness,” i.e., involving the mind.

Saying it differently, Kierkegaard points out that, if sin is sheer ignorance of the right thing to do, then, like Socrates, we can deduce “that there is no such thing as a person’s knowing what is right and doing wrong, or knowing that something is wrong and going ahead and doing wrong.” The reason for this is that “no wise man...will allow that any human being errs voluntarily, or voluntarily does evil and dishonorable actions,” as Socrates says in *Protagoras*. Consequently, the Greeks believed that a person does what is wrong simply because he does not know what is the right thing to do. It is not because he willfully chooses to do what is wrong.

However, if Socrates is correct in his definition of sin and people never willfully do the opposite of what they know is good and right, then there is no such thing as biblical sin. The reason for this is that, as Kierkegaard goes on to say, Christianity is all about confronting people with the immoral choices that they make, while, all along, they know the right thing to do.

Note that, Christianly, this is quite in order, in a deeper sense altogether correct; in the interest of Christianity it is *quod erat demonstrandum* [that which was to be demonstrated]. It is specifically the concept of sin, the teaching of sin, that most decisively differentiates Christianity qualitatively from paganism, and this is also why Christianity very consistently assumes that neither paganism nor the natural man knows what sin is; in fact, it assumes that there has to be a revelation from God to show what sin is. The qualitative distinction between paganism and Christianity is not, as a superficial consideration assumes, the doctrine of the Atonement. No, the beginning must start far deeper with sin, with the doctrine of sin—as Christianity in fact does. What a dangerous objection it would be against Christianity if paganism had a definition of sin that Christianity would have to acknowledge as correct. [89,90]

Thus, Kierkegaard states that his analysis of the Socratic definition of sin, that sin is ignorance and, therefore, does away with sin, is “quite in order” when we compare it with Christianity. Indeed, a proper understanding of Christianity necessarily demonstrates this shortcoming on the part of Socrates. Kierkegaard goes on to say that it is the very “concept of [biblical] sin” that sets Christianity apart from “paganism.” While paganism certainly errs in its worship of false gods, it more fully errs in its shallow understanding, i.e., misunderstanding, of sin, which is true of all other religions and ideologies that, by definition, do not subscribe to and agree with the Bible.

The word that Kierkegaard uses to describe the nature of the difference between Christianity and paganism is “qualitatively.” With its biblical definition of sin, Christianity provides a *qualitative* difference between itself and all other religions and ideologies. In order to explore this word further, let us consider how we can compare the word “qualitative” with “quantitative.” The qualitative difference between two things involves their substance or makeup. The quantitative difference involves their number, i.e., counting how many there are of them.

For example, if I have four apples and you have two, then the quantitative difference between your apples and mine is two, while there should be no qualitative difference between them, because your apples are substantively apples just as my apples are also. This is to say that the organic makeup of your apples is the same as that of mine.

However, if I have four apples and you have four oranges, then, there is no quantitative difference between what I have and what you have, but there is now a great qualitative difference. The substance and makeup of apples is radically different from that of oranges.

Kierkegaard is saying that Christianity and paganism are like apples and oranges, so that there is a radical substantive and qualitative difference between the two perspectives on reality. In fact, Kierkegaard is claiming that this essential difference exists because the two have such disparate definitions of sin. No doubt, a pagan would count the number of a person's external sins in the same way as would a Christian. In other words, there would be no *quantitative* difference, externally speaking. However, according to Christianity, the very essence of sin, i.e., its moral, psychological, and spiritual makeup, is completely different from the pagan perspective, because the Bible provides a much different and deeper understanding of the moral nature of mankind.

Indeed, as Kierkegaard states, "Christianity very consistently assumes that neither paganism nor the natural man knows what sin is." We must, as usual, be careful with the language that Kierkegaard is using. First, "the natural man" is an expression from the Bible, from the apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, where he states that the "natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1 Corinthians 2:14, NAS95). For Paul, the "natural man" is any human being who is an abject rebel against God, because his heart and inwardness have not been changed by the Spirit of God. Thus, the "natural man" not only is unwilling to "accept the things" of God, such as the biblical truth, but also, as Paul says, "he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised." Here, we encounter the same ambiguity that Kierkegaard mentioned earlier in regard to the Socratic definition of sin. Is Paul saying that the "natural man" has no intellectual ability to grasp the fact that there is a God or

any other truths about God and reality, or is the natural man unwilling to acknowledge God and the truth of the Bible? Certainly, it is the latter, because Paul says elsewhere that every human being knows not only that there is a transcendent Creator, but also that he is eternally accountable to Him (cf. Romans 1:18-32). In other words, both the Bible and the very existence of this creation clearly proclaim God's existence. In addition, man's mind innately and inherently also proclaims to him that he is morally responsible for his choices before God. Therefore, no human being has a justifiable and valid defense before God for his immorality (cf. Romans 1:20). It is in this sense that Kierkegaard says that "Christianity very consistently assumes that neither paganism nor the natural man knows what sin is." In other words, the pagan and natural man are unwilling to acknowledge that they innately know the truth, that there is a transcendent God, that they are morally accountable to Him, and that they stand condemned before Him.

Thus, when Kierkegaard also says that Christianity "assumes that there has to be a revelation from God to show what sin is," he is speaking of the inward change that only God can bring about within rebellious human beings. In other words, the "revelation" is not simply an intellectual change. It is, even more fundamentally, an inward change. If God does not miraculously create this inward change within rebellious human beings, they remain slaves to their innate, inner moral depravity and cannot escape it.

Therefore, there are two possibilities. Perhaps, people do all they can to hide from their immoral condition and their accountability to God by claiming complete ignorance. In effect, they say to God, "Gosh, I never knew that I was supposed to love people *perfectly* and forgive them *perfectly*." Such is the innocent sounding defense that the "natural man" is tempted to offer to God. Or, perhaps, God has miraculously produced an inward change in people so that they are appropriately willing to admit their moral and eternal predicament. Thus, they can say with the apostle Paul in Romans 7, "The good

that I want to do, I do not do, but I choose to do the very evil that I do not want to do...

Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this human condition that causes me to deserve eternal condemnation” (my paraphrase of verses 19 & 24).

Regardless of one’s current mindset, no human being can avoid knowing that he is a sinner, on account of his having the *intellectual* knowledge of his immoral condition. Thus, every human being knows that he is morally responsible to God not only for this knowledge, but also for his immoral condition. However, people whose inwardness has not been changed by God do not “know” that they are sinners, in the sense that they are unwilling to acknowledge this fact and genuinely appeal to God for mercy, which, if they did, would be a demonstration of their authentic, biblical faith. “[T]here has to be a [miraculous] revelation from God to show [them] what sin is, resulting in their properly longing for God’s eternal mercy. In other words, there has to be a spiritual, inward change that only the transcendent God, who is writing the story of cosmic history, can supernaturally bring about.

Kierkegaard continues in the above excerpt by making a radical and, in most Christians’ opinion, heretical statement—that most people think that the “qualitative” and most important difference between Christianity and other religions is Jesus and his death on the cross on behalf of sinners. After all, does not the entire New Testament incessantly state that it is eternally imperative for a human being to believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior in order to be forgiven by God and to be granted eternal life? Yes, indeed, it does. But, by this persistent message focusing on Jesus, does the New Testament mean (and would the Old Testament agree) that such is the most important difference between a biblical worldview and all other perspectives on reality? Kierkegaard says, no, in spite of the New Testament’s teaching that Jesus’ death is not only unique in all the world but also necessary for our salvation from God’s eternal condemnation. Let us follow Kierkegaard’s line of reasoning and see where he leads us.

He says that the “[d]octrine of the Atonement” is not what primarily separates Christianity from other worldviews. To think so would be a “superficial consideration of Christianity.” Instead, the uniqueness of Christianity in all of human history is found in “the [biblical] doctrine of sin.” It is also true that, as soon as we say “biblical” doctrine of sin, we are in addition referring to the Old Testament that provides an equally profound and substantive definition of sin as the New Testament. Therefore, strictly speaking, it is not Christianity *per se* that is unique in all of human history. It is the biblical message, from Genesis through Revelation, that is. With this in mind, since the Old Testament is mainly about the Jews, the message of the New Testament that describes Christianity is nothing other than Judaism properly understood. Consequently, it is the “doctrine of sin” of Judaism/Christianity that is unique in all of human history.

Certainly, Christianity (and Judaism properly understood) would lose its unique status if its definition of sin were the same as that of paganism or any other religion or ideology. Kierkegaard says, in fact, that this would be “a dangerous objection...against Christianity.” In other words, there would be no good reason to believe in Christianity as opposed to believing in paganism, if their definitions of sin were identical—in spite of the uniqueness of Jesus as the final and eternal Jewish Messiah in human history. Consequently, “the beginning” of the explanation of the “qualitative” and substantive “distinction between paganism and Christianity...must start far deeper” than with Jesus and His atonement. It must start “with sin,” with Christianity’s understanding of man’s moral, i.e., immoral, condition before God.

What constituent, then, does Socrates lack for the defining of sin? It is the will, defiance. The intellectuality of the Greeks was too happy, too naïve, too esthetic, too ironic, too witty—too sinful—to grasp that anyone could knowingly not do the good, or knowingly, knowing what is right, do wrong. The Greek mind posits an intellectual categorical imperative. [90]

In the light of all that Kierkegaard has said about the Socratic definition of sin vs. Christianity's definition of sin, the question arises, what is lacking in Socrates' definition of sin? "It is the will, defiance." The problem with the ancient Greeks was that their definition of sin is only "intellectual" and not willful. It involves only the mind and not the human choice making mechanism. Because of this shortcoming, Socrates and his contemporaries of the 5th century B.C. erroneously did not believe that a person "could knowingly not do good" or could do evil in the midst of knowing what is evil. Kierkegaard calls Socrates and the Greeks "too happy, too naïve, too esthetic, too ironic, too witty," and, thus, "too sinful" in their perspective on morality and immorality. They were too optimistic about man's moral capabilities to the extent that their definition of sin was actually sinful. It did not take into account the will and its abject rebellion towards God, thus leaving out the all important ingredient of the human choice-making mechanism and man's moral depravity. In other words, sin does not originate in the mind and is not based upon knowledge, as though it could be described in terms of "an intellectual categorical imperative." Sin, more importantly, originates in the will and a person's basic moral nature and condition, thus exposing whether or not he possesses the humility to admit that he knows the truth about God and his own accountability before God. Indeed, this is the very point as Kierkegaard goes on to say.

The truth of this should not be disregarded, and it is undoubtedly necessary to underscore it in a time like this, which is running wild in its profusion of empty, pompous, and fruitless knowledge, to the point where now, just as in Socrates' time, only even more so, it is necessary for men to be Socratically starved a little. [90]

It is not enough to know what is true and right, as though such knowledge will result, with certainty, in a person's choosing good over evil. It is, instead, more eternally necessary for a person to face into his immoral condition in the midst of his knowing the right thing to do and being unwilling do it. Kierkegaard says that this point must be

emphasized in such a time as that in which he lives, because contemporary philosophers and theologians are “running wild” with their abundance of claiming to know the truth, even the biblical truth. While Hegel has stated unequivocally that he has described reality completely and accurately with his “system,” preachers within the Danish State Church declare that the Lutheran-based doctrinal statement that they espouse and continue to teach Sunday after Sunday in their sermons is likewise a complete and accurate description of the biblical message, thus providing the body of knowledge that all human beings are called by God to possess in order to obtain eternal salvation.

However, Kierkegaard’s perspective on both Hegel’s and the contemporary churchmen’s understanding of reality is that it is “empty, pompous, and fruitless.” Their understanding lacks not only accuracy but also the humility of Socrates who, at least, was willing to say that he did not know everything. Consequently, Kierkegaard says that it would be good for his fellow philosophers and theologians to feel Socratic starvation, so to speak, of knowledge. By genuinely and humbly starving for knowledge, they would admit that they know nothing about everything. Therefore, they would hold on to their ideas loosely so that they could describe how they are constantly changing their understanding of reality as they continue to discover the errors in their thinking, a process that never ends this side of eternity. Their “system” and their doctrinal statement would always be in flux.

It is tragic-comic, all these declarations about having understood and grasped the highest, plus the virtuosity with which many *in abstracto* know how to expound it, in a certain sense quite correctly—it is tragic-comic to see that all this knowledge and understanding exercises no power at all over men’s lives, that their lives do not express in the remotest way what they have understood, but rather the opposite. [90]

Kierkegaard’s evaluation of the philosophers and Christian preachers of his day is that their lives are “tragic-comic.” On the one hand, it is certainly a tragedy that they are

so far away from the truth. On the other hand, it is also comical that they claim to know the truth, and yet they do not know it.²³ They claim that they have “understood and grasped the highest,” the most important truth that a human being can know. They sincerely believe that they know what reality is along with the meaning of human existence. In addition, many of them, especially the pastors, are eloquent speakers, thus presenting their so-called Christian doctrine with unparalleled clarity and precision so that no one would deny that they certainly seem to know what they are talking about. Plus, “in a certain sense,” their knowledge and presentation of the Bible is correct. They boldly declare that God exists, that we are sinners, that Jesus is the God-man who, as the Son of God, died for our sins and rescues us from God’s judgment, that we are called to love our fellow man, etc. However, these artisans of Sunday morning sermons do not really *know* the truth. Consequently, their exposition of it is “*in abstracto*.” It lacks concrete existence in their lives. They are speaking the truth, but they are not living it.

Thus, it is both a tragedy and a comedy to watch how the “knowledge and understanding [of these pastors] exercises no power over” their lives. In other words, their actions betray the fact that their knowledge of the truth is merely intellectual and not also ethical. They know the truth, but they do not really understand it or live it. The real tragedy is that their lives display the opposite of correct understanding and knowledge of the biblical message. Therefore, they know its truth without actually understanding it, with the result that they act in direct opposition to the biblical message that they proclaim. Such is the tragedy of these pastors’ lives, especially if they, as so-called “Christians,” are defiantly unwilling to embrace the truth for the sake of eternal life.

On seeing this tragic-comic discrepancy, one involuntarily exclaims: But how in the world is it possible that they could have understood it? Can it be true that they have understood it? At this point, that old ironist and ethicist replies: Don’t ever believe it, my friend; they have not understood it, for if they had in truth

²³ Kierkegaard’s explanation of “comic” – the coexistence of two opposites side by side (cf. *Either/Or* (??))

understood it, their lives would have expressed it also, then they would have done what they had understood. [90]

Kierkegaard points out that, when we recognize that Christian preachers are not living out the truth that they are proclaiming, our natural, spontaneous, and involuntary reaction is to ask the penetrating question, “how in the world is it possible” for someone to understand the truth and, yet, not live it? Kierkegaard’s answer is to point to “the old ironist and ethicist,” Socrates himself, who would say, they do not actually understand the truth, in spite of their claiming to do so. If a person genuinely understands the truth, then he lives the truth, and vice versa. If a person lives the truth, then it is because he genuinely understands it. The two go hand in glove and are never mutually exclusive. Therefore, it is entirely possible for people to give the right verbal response to the question of what is Christianity, but then not live it. For example, they may rightly claim that God is love and that Jesus is Lord and Savior, but they themselves are unethical and unscrupulous because they not only lack grace, humility, love, and mercy, but they also defiantly refuse to face into their moral shortcomings.

Does this mean, then, that to understand and to understand are two different things? They certainly are, and the person who has understood this—but, please, note, not in the sense of the first kind of understanding—is *eo ipso* initiated into all the secrets of irony. To regard as comic someone who is actually ignorant of something is a very low form of the comic and is unworthy of irony. That men once lived who thought the earth stands still—and they did not know any better—has nothing particularly comic about it. Our age will probably look the same to an age having more knowledge about the physical world. The contrast is between two different ages; a deeper point of coincidence is lacking, but such a contrast is not an essential one and thus is not essentially comic, either. No, but when a man stands and says the right thing, and consequently has understood it, and then when he acts he does the wrong thing, and thus shows that he has not understood it—yes, this is exceedingly comic. [90,91]

Now, Kierkegaard explicitly states that there are two kinds of understanding. The first is when a person only pretends to understand what he knows. The second is when he really does understand what he knows and what he does not know. If a person understands in this second sense, by really grasping the truth so that it has become a

part of his very being and actions, then he has been “initiated into all the secrets of irony.” Because Kierkegaard defines irony as the subtle distinction between opposites,²⁴ he is saying that, when a person has clearly grasped truth, then he can tell the difference between the pretense of understanding something and the genuine understanding of it.

Therefore, to “regard as comic [ironic] someone who is actually ignorant of something is a very low form of the comic and is unworthy of irony.” In other words, it is not really comical when a person states what is wrong, but it is because he has never even been exposed to what is right. For example, Kierkegaard refers to people, such as the Greek astronomer Ptolemy, who believed that the earth remains stationary while the rest of the universe revolves around it. However, they simply did not know any different. They could clearly see that the sun moves across the sky from dawn until dusk, while the moon and stars do likewise from dusk until dawn. Because the ancient peoples did not feel as though they were moving, it certainly appeared to them as though the earth was standing still while everything else traveled around it. Thus arose the geocentric, Ptolemaic view of the cosmos that was even adopted as Christian doctrine in the medieval period until Copernicus suggested otherwise. However, can we blame Ptolemy for being defiant and unwilling to face into the obvious truth that the world is turning and revolving around the sun? Certainly not. Consequently, it is inappropriate for us to say that he had a comical and ironic view of the universe.

In addition, Kierkegaard comments that later generations will say the same thing about the knowledge and understanding of “the physical world” of his day. Indeed, would we think that it is entirely comic that people in Kierkegaard’s time believed that man cannot fly? No, because the “contrast is between two different ages” with two different quantities of information about reality. Therefore, when we hear people today declare that the world is flat, we can only smile and wonder why they want to be so comical and

²⁴ *Either/Or* again?

try to pull our leg. Thus, Kierkegaard would say that the difference between someone of his day who lack's belief in man's ability to fly and someone of our day who grasps the concept of plane travel "is not an essential" difference and "thus is not essentially comic, either."

In contrast, "when a man stands and says the right thing," and, just afterwards, "he does the wrong thing," then he "shows that he has not understood." For example, how amusing it would be for a man to say that airplanes exist and that it is possible for people to travel long distances on them, but he books passage for his family on the QEII from New York to Le Havre, France, because he tells his family that only ships exist. Indeed, as Kierkegaard says, "this is exceedingly comic." In fact, we all recognize that such a contradiction is exactly the nature of the material that comedians use to evoke a laugh from their audiences.

It is exceedingly comic that a man, stirred to tears so that not only sweat but also tears pour down his face, can sit and read or hear an exposition on self-denial, on the nobility of sacrificing his life for the truth—and then in the next moment, *ein, zwei, drei, vupti*, almost with tears still in his eyes, be in full swing, in the seat of his brow and to the best of his modest ability, helping untruth to be victorious. [91]

Here, Kierkegaard pokes fun at the Christian preacher of his day who is reading a commentary on a biblical passage that teaches the concept of "self-denial." The commentary and the Bible exhort him to care for and love his fellow human beings in a selfless manner. This preacher, who is probably preparing for his Sunday sermon, is so moved by what he is reading that he is "stirred to tears," and "not only sweat but also tears pour down his face." He may be sitting comfortably in the coolness of his church study, but this topic of denying oneself for the sake of others has him so worked up that he actually starts sweating as he begins to get excited about presenting this truth to his own congregation in the upcoming Sunday service.

Kierkegaard defines the concept of “self-denial” as “the nobility of sacrificing [one’s] life for the truth.” This faithful Christian pastor is passionately absorbing all sorts of wonderful and exalted ideas about giving up, just as Jesus did, even his physical life for the sake of the biblical message. Indeed, this man is moved to tears and sweat as he imagines himself following in the footsteps of the suffering of his Savior. Yet, how ironic is it, Kierkegaard says, when this same man, affected so deeply and emotionally by an explanation of authentic, biblical love, i.e., God’s love, helps “untruth to be victorious.” What exactly does this contradiction look like?

It is exceedingly comic that a speaker with sincere voice and gestures, deeply stirred and deeply stirring, can movingly depict the truth, can face all the powers of evil and of hell boldly, with cool self-assurance in his bearing, a dauntlessness in his air, and in appropriateness of movement worthy of admiration—it is exceedingly comic that almost simultaneously, practically still “in his dressing gown,” he can timidly and cravenly cut and run away from the slightest inconvenience. [91]

It is not too difficult to figure out what person or persons to whom Kierkegaard is referring in this last paragraph—the Christian pastors and preachers of the Danish State Church in his day. “[W]ith sincere voice and gestures,” they come across as “deeply stirred” with the ability to communicate in a “deeply stirring” way to their congregations, “movingly” depicting the truth of the Bible with their well thought out illustrations. In this way, they face “all the powers of evil and of hell boldly, with cool self-assurance in [their] bearing” and complete and constant fearlessness in the familiar and dignified environment of the Sunday morning service within the four walls of their church. They have become an expert in performing the respected and honored responsibilities of a pastor, “worthy of admiration.”²⁵

Then, when the service is over and everyone has left the building, one of these preachers is just about to take off his clerical robes, what Kierkegaard comically calls his

²⁵ cf. the knight of infinite resignation in *Fear and Trembling*

“dressing gown,” and someone appears at the door of the church who is in immediate need of attention. Perhaps, one of the pastor’s congregants has also invited him for lunch, and he must hurry in order to be punctual. However, what if the needs of this unexpected and late congregant will take up the whole rest of the day? Well, the pastor feels conflicted. Does he help this person now, or does he tell the man he has a previous appointment and head over to a delicious meal at the home of the family who has invited him? Just this last hour, this man of God so eloquently and passionately proclaimed the biblical message about God’s love and sacrifice through Jesus’ death along with the importance of our following in Jesus’ footsteps by sacrificing ourselves for others. Now, though, without much hesitation, “it is exceedingly comic that almost simultaneously,...he can timidly and [cowardly] cut and run away from the slightest inconvenience.” Therefore, this shepherd of Jesus’ flock apologizes to this needy person and tells him that he should come back, perhaps on Tuesday, during his office hours that begin at such and such a time. And, then, he rushes off to lunch.

It is exceedingly comic that someone is able to understand the whole truth about how mean and sordid the world is etc.—that he can understand this and then the next moment not recognize what he has understood, for almost at once he himself goes out and participates in the very same meanness and sordidness, is honored for it, and accepts the honor, that is, acknowledges it. [91]

Here, Kierkegaard mentions how laughable it is that someone claims that he understands the most important and profound truth of the Bible about human beings, that we are all morally depraved and abject rebels against God—“that he can understand his and then the next moment not recognize what he has understood.” With his proper grasp of the biblical message, the Christian pastor carefully and confidently explains to his congregation “the whole truth about how mean and sordid the world is etc.,” and “then the next moment” this very same person does not fully acknowledge “what he has understood.”

What Kierkegaard means is that, by means of this pastor's measured, ecclesiastical performance, he confidently claims that he grasps and believes the message of God's love and salvation through Jesus Christ. In addition, everyone knows that he has been to seminary where he has learned all the correct Christian doctrine that has been held by the Church for hundreds of years. Consequently, his congregation trusts him. He has been taught by the finest theologians in their Christian nation. Then, this morning he has preached the Word of God with great passion and eloquence, and they have all learned what it means to be a Christian, for, indeed, they are all Christians.

However, "[it] is exceedingly comic that [this wonderfully educated pastor] is able to understand the whole truth about how mean and sordid the world is...and then the next moment not recognize what he has understood, for almost at once he himself goes out and participates in the very same meanness and sordidness." He treats certain people with contempt. He grants them no mercy or grace. He shuns and ostracizes them in order to keep himself and his congregation pure and unsullied by the moral and doctrinal corruption in the world. And the very sad part is that he "is honored for it, and accepts the honor." He even "acknowledges" that his congregants are absolutely correct to admire him for his harsh and cruel treatment of others who do not conform to his and their standards of doing church. The man who showed up at the church door in need of help after the morning service should know that his situation is best handled during office hours during the week. The person who begins to stray outside the boundaries of accepted church doctrine should know that the pastor and elders of his church are the authoritative spokesmen for Jesus and the sanctioned protectors of the faith. Therefore, they should submit to their elders and be guided in their understanding of the Bible by them. The pastor and elders even cite Hebrews 13:17 as the biblical basis for their authority, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this

would be unprofitable for you” (NAS95). Obviously, there is a proper way of doing church, and the pastor and elders know what it is. Therefore, the unexpected man in need and the doctrinally errant so-called Christian are wrong and must conform to the accepted mores of the church. In addition, it is only right that the pastor be honored for his wonderful sermon and proper care for the congregation this morning by being fêted with lunch at the home of one of his congregants. But...

When I see someone who declares he has completely understood how Christ went around in the form of a lowly servant, poor, despised, mocked, and, as Scripture tells us, spat upon—when I see the same person assiduously make his way to the place where in worldly sagacity it is good to be, set himself up as securely as possible, when I see him then so anxiously, as if his life depended upon it, avoiding every gust of unfavorable wind from the right or the left, see him so blissful, so extremely blissful, so slap-happy, yes, to make it complete, so slap-happy that he even thanks God for—for being whole-heartedly honored and esteemed by all, by everyone—then I have often said privately to myself: “Socrates, Socrates, Socrates, can it be possible that this man understood what he says he has understood?” [91,92]

Now, Kierkegaard offers his own example of this pastor’s “meanness and sordidness.” He is just as interested in pursuing vigorously the approval of his fellow human beings as any worldly person is. He “declares he has completely understood how Christ went around in the form of a lowly servant, poor, despised, mocked, and, as Scripture tells us, spat upon.” He has also preached to his congregation that God has called us Christians to the same lowly life as Christ. However, instead, Kierkegaard sees this same pastor “assiduously make his way to the place where in worldly sagacity it is good to be.” In other words, he watches this preacher of the humble Christ do all he can to climb to the top of the social ladder. He is friends with everyone, especially the wealthy and influential people in his community and in his church. This pastor’s goal is the same as any worldly person, to set himself up “as securely as possible”—financially, materially, and socially.

In addition, this highly educated and articulate Christian teacher of self-sacrifice does all he can to avoid “every gust of unfavorable wind from the right or the left” that would cause him discomfort and inconvenience in his life. As a result, he is “so blissful, so extremely blissful, so slap-happy.” He overflows with great joy in the midst of his circumstances, especially while he hobnobs with all the other respected dignitaries of society. He slaps them on the back for being such honored and respected people, and they return the favor. He “even thanks God...for being whole-heartedly honored and esteemed by” everyone. As Kierkegaard observes this well-positioned, much-revered, and greatly loved Christian pastor, he says to himself privately, “Socrates, Socrates, Socrates, can it be possible that this man understood what he says he has understood?”

This is how I talked—indeed, I have also wished that Socrates was right, for it seems to me as if Christianity were too rigorous, and in accordance with my own experience I cannot make such a person out to be a hypocrite. No, Socrates, you I can understand; you make him into a joker, a jolly fellow of sorts, and fair game for laughter; you have nothing against but rather even approve of my preparing and serving him up as something comic—provided I do it well. [92]

In this manner, Kierkegaard has talked to himself and appealed to Socrates when he has observed the worldly pastor and teacher of the Bible. In addition, he would love to have Socrates be right in his definition of sin, that it is merely an intellectual ignorance and not a willful ignorance, that the pastor simply does not know any better. Then, Kierkegaard would not have to wonder if the pastor is “a hypocrite” and willfully defying God while claiming to understand His truth and message of love and sacrifice.

If Socrates is right, then the definition of sin is not “too rigorous.” It is not like that of Christianity. In other words, if Christianity is wrong in its definition of sin so that sin is not as stringent and demanding, then we can all laugh playfully about the pastor as a sinner so to speak. He is merely a jokester, “a jolly fellow of sorts, and fair game for laughter.” Like the modern person who denies that the earth is round when there is so much evidence to the contrary, this pastor denies Jesus’ own words of the importance of

following him in his suffering and rejection by the world—when there is so much biblical evidence to the contrary.

Consequently, if Christianity is wrong so that the definition of sin is much less demanding than the Bible asserts it to be, then the pastor is only a comedian. Just as we smile playfully when we hear someone say that the earth is flat, we do likewise when we see the pastor act contrary to what he claims to understand. We even poke fun at him, and he can do the same to us when he sees us act contrary to what we claim to understand about the Bible. On the other hand, if Christianity is right and the definition of sin is entirely rigorous, then the pastor's actions in the light of God's justice and eternal condemnation are no laughing matter.

Socrates, Socrates, Socrates! Yes, we may well call your name three times; it would not be too much to call it ten times, if it would be of any help. Popular opinion maintains that the world needs a republic, needs a new social order and a new religion—but no one considers that what the world, confused simply by too much knowledge, needs is a Socrates. Of course, if anyone thought of it, not to mention if many thought of it, he would be less needed. Invariably, what error needs most is always the last thing it thinks of—quite naturally, for otherwise it would not, after all, be error. [92]

Kierkegaard continues to cry out to Socrates, if doing so would only help diminish the tragic comedy of the willful sinner against God. He also points out that, when people think of the overarching problems in the world, they typically conclude that all that is needed to solve them is some new institution—a new government (democracy vs. dictatorship), a new economic system (socialism vs. capitalism), a new church (non-denominational vs. denominational), a whole new religion (anything vs. Christianity), or the institution of no religion at all, i.e., atheism. However, Kierkegaard claims that what the world needs is another Socrates, someone who challenges the world in regard to all its so-called “knowledge.” Indeed, the world is awash in “knowledge,” to the extent that it is “confused simply by too much knowledge.” Therefore, what the world needs is a Socrates, who would, by his questions and ignorance, encourage people to realize that,

ultimately, institutions and a new this or that, all of which man creates to solve his problems, only end up demonstrating how ignorant man is. He never solves his problems. He only creates new ones that show how little he really knows about reality.

Therefore, “what error needs most is always the last thing it thinks of.” Yet, this is to be expected, because people who are in error, by definition, will always think erroneously—until the truth dawns on them miraculously. In other words, they cannot escape their erroneous thinking simply by continuing to think. They must be rescued from their error by the inward work of God who leads them to admit that they do not know what to think and, therefore, need His help as their transcendent Creator in order to think and act rightly. Nevertheless, at this stage of Kierkegaard’s presentation, he is simply saying that it would be great if people just humbled themselves and admitted that they do not know as much as they think they know.

So it could very well be that our age needs an ironic-ethical correction such as this—this may actually be the only thing it needs—for obviously it is the last thing it thinks of. Instead of going beyond Socrates, it is extremely urgent that we come back to this Socratic principle—to understand and to understand are two things—not as a conclusion that ultimately assists men in their deepest misery, since that annuls precisely the difference between understanding and understanding, but as the ethical conception of everyday life. [92]

As Kierkegaard proceeds, he suggests that the people of his day need “an ironic-ethical correction such as” the one that he is describing, whereby another Socrates challenges them in regard to the correctness of their knowledge and consequent actions. Do they really know the truth, and are they actually living it? Or are they simply claiming to know the truth by having gone “beyond Socrates,” i.e., by having convinced themselves that they really can know reality completely and accurately as described in their “system” (Hegel) or in their doctrinal statement (the Danish State Church).

The real irony is that, while thinking they know and are acting upon the truth, they have actually failed to grasp the truth, which has led them to live unethically. Thus, they

need the “Socratic principle” whereby they realize and acknowledge that there are two kinds of understanding, one where people speak confidently of what is true while not actually knowing the truth, and the other where people not only speak of the truth but also actually grasp it with their minds. Kierkegaard admits that the latter kind of understanding, being only Socratic understanding and not complete biblical understanding, may not be “a conclusion that ultimately assists men in their deepest misery.” Their “deepest misery” and their most profound problem stem from their moral depravity that results in eternal despair. These, however, are issues that are not resolved simply within the limits of the “Socratic principle.” Nevertheless, to face into one’s lack of the second kind of understanding is to make a great ethical leap towards solving the greatest problem that any human being has. In other words, for Socrates, the basis of ethics is the recognition of one’s inherent and ongoing ignorance that leads to a definite and selfless humility. In other words, as soon as people say they know how to solve mankind’s problems through such and such a method, they have gone “beyond Socrates” and need to “come back to this Socratic principle.”

The Socratic definition works out in the following way. When someone does not do what is right, then neither has he understood what is right. His understanding is purely imaginary; his declaration of having understood is false information; his repeated protestation that he will be hanged if he has not understood puts him far, far along on the most roundabout way. But then the definition is indeed correct. If someone does the right thing, then he certainly does not sin; and if he does not do what is right, then he did not understand it, either; if he had really and truly understood it, it would quickly have made him a Chladni figure for his understanding: ergo, sin is ignorance. [92,93]

Once again, Kierkegaard describes the essence of Socrates’ definition of sin. It boils down to someone’s not really having understood what is right, and, therefore, he does the very opposite, that which is wrong. In other words, sin is simply a matter of the intellect, not of the will. His lack of knowledge prevents him from doing what is right. He is only ignorant of the moral thing to do, even if he thinks that he understands morality.

This is to say that his “understanding is purely imaginary,” and “his declaration of having understood is false information.” No, he has not understood what is the right thing to do. Otherwise, according to Socrates, he would do it, because no one does what is wrong voluntarily.

Nevertheless, this person protests aggressively that he really has understood what is good and moral, and Kierkegaard claims that such adamant confidence “puts [the person] far, far along [on the road to authentic belief] on the most roundabout way.” At least, he is talking about his ability to understand and, therefore, is consciously aware of the possibility of being wrong, even while he publicly states categorically to the contrary.

Then, Kierkegaard reiterates that the Socratic definition of sin says that a person who “does the right thing” is certainly not sinning. However, it also says that “if he does not do what is right, then he did not understand it, either.” He did not intellectually grasp the right thing to do. It was a matter of his mind and not his will. Therefore, according to the “Socratic principle,” sin is strictly “ignorance” and not a defiant choice.

But wherein is the definition defective? Its defect is something the Socratic principle itself realizes and remedies, but only to a certain degree: it lacks a dialectical determinant appropriate to the transition from having understood something to doing it. In this transition Christianity begins; by taking this path, it shows that sin is rooted in willing and arrives at the concept of defiance, and then, to fasten the end very firmly, it adds the doctrine of hereditary sin—alas, for speculation’s secret in comprehending is simply to sew without fastening the end and without knotting the thread, and this is why, wonder of wonders, it can go on sewing and sewing, that is, pulling the thread through. Christianity, on the other hand, fastens the end by means of the paradox. [93]

Kierkegaard continues to search for the defect or error in Socrates’ definition of sin. He says that the “Socratic principle” itself, that states that there are two kinds of understanding, one whereby a person says he understands and truly does, and one whereby a person says that he understands but actually does not, is a good beginning towards finding the defect.

However, it is only a beginning. What Socrates' principle lacks is what Kierkegaard calls "a dialectical determinant appropriate to the transition from having understood something to doing it." This is his fancy way of saying "the will." In other words, Socrates was not adequately taking into account the human choice-making mechanism as a possible cause for someone's not doing what is right. Certainly, a person may do what is wrong because he lacks the knowledge of the right thing to do. However, a person may do what is wrong because he voluntarily chooses not to do the right thing, even while knowing the right thing to do. Such is the defect in Socrates' definition of sin—that it does not adequately take into account the human will.

Kierkegaard says that this is also where Christianity steps in and provides a better, more accurate, and more profound definition of sin. Christianity addresses "the dialectical determinant appropriate to the transition from having understood something to doing it." For example, the Bible describes human beings in such a way as to place sin within a person's will, where his choice-making mechanism resides. The will is the "dialectical determinant" of the transition from a person's understanding morality to his actually doing or not doing it. In the final analysis, existentially speaking, his choice determines the nature of the relationship between his understanding and his actions. If he chooses to do what he thinks he understands, then his choice demonstrates that he truly understands what he is doing. If he chooses not to do what he thinks he understands, then his choice may not arise from his actually not understanding the right thing to do, the latter being the way that Socrates would explain his not doing it. Instead, his not doing what he thinks he understands could arise from his unwillingness to do what he understands, the latter being the way that Christianity would explain his not doing it, i.e., because even if he knows what is right, he is a defiant rebel against God. Thus, his choosing not to do what he thinks he understands "shows that sin is rooted in willing and arrives at the concept of defiance." In other words, if a person is unwilling to

do what he knows is right, and especially what he knows is right before God, then he is defiantly disobeying God. This, very rigorously, is how Christianity defines sin.

Plus, Kierkegaard points out that Christianity “adds the doctrine of hereditary sin,” that every human being since Adam and Eve, except for Jesus the Messiah, inherits so to speak the natural and fundamental orientation of a heart rebelliously turned away from God and morality. Kierkegaard also says that this doctrine “fasten[s] the end very firmly,” which is to say that Christianity does not go beyond Socrates and speculate ad infinitum why people commit immorality and evil. Christianity does not keep asking, “Why, why, why...?” It knows specifically and clearly why. The answer is that no human being can escape being born a rebel against God and, at some level of his being, remaining a rebel against God throughout his whole life.

Thus, there need be no speculation about why people commit evil and horrendous violence and perversion against one another. Indeed, the Bible presents a rather bleak picture of man’s moral condition, except that of Jesus of Nazareth. Of course people commit evil, and this is where we begin our analysis of any human choice. Speculative philosophy may recognize that a person is unwilling to do what he knows is right, but when it asks why this is the case, it never finds a complete and satisfying answer that is foundational for understanding all human beings. Only Christianity provides the right answer—“hereditary sin,” that all human beings are morally depraved and are naturally inclined towards evil, which also brings us to Christianity’s paradox.

In pure ideality, where the actual individual person is not involved, the transition is necessary (after all, in the system everything takes place of necessity), or there is no difficulty at all connected with the transition from understanding to doing. This is the Greek mind (but not the Socratic, for Socrates is too much of an ethicist for that). And the secret of modern philosophy is essentially the very same, for it is this: *cogito ergo sum* [I think therefore I am], to think is to be (Christianly, however, it reads: according to your faith, be it unto you, or, as you believe, so you are, to believe is to be). Thus it is evident that modern philosophy is neither more nor less than paganism. But this is not the worst possible situation—to be in kinship with Socrates is not too bad. But the

totally un-Socratic aspect of modern philosophy is that it wants to delude us into believing that this is Christianity. [93]

If we are talking about an ideal person, i.e., one who does not actually exist but whom we use for argument's sake, then the transition from understanding to choosing is a necessary thing. The transition has to take place, because we are also talking about human beings who must make choices on the basis of the effect that their circumstances have on them. For example, according to Hegel's system of philosophy, everything takes place out of sheer historical necessity. People are simply swept along in the current of the river of history, and nothing will prevent them from making the choices that historical, social, economic, etc. factors determine that they make. However, Kierkegaard claims that such a perspective on reality cannot have in mind an "actual individual person." Instead, we are talking about "pure ideality," a fantasy world.

Kierkegaard says that the concept of the ideal person who makes choices out of "necessity" goes back as far as the ancient Greeks. However, this concept is not what Socrates had in mind, because he "was too much of an ethicist for that." Kierkegaard means that Socrates gave more credit to the moral aspect of human beings than, for example, Hegel, who idealized human beings and made them merely another mechanical element within the machine-like system of reality.

Then, referring to "the secret of modern philosophy," Kierkegaard says that it is the same as "the Greek mind," so that both are characterized by Descartes' famous statement "*cogito ergo sum* [I think therefore I am]." Thus, Descartes, Hegel, and the ancient Greeks (except for Socrates) have all concluded that thinking and our minds are what make a person truly human. By slightly modifying this notion, Kierkegaard takes Descartes' statement *cogito ergo sum* and interprets it "Christianly," that "it reads: according to your faith, be it unto you, or as you believe so you are, to believe is to be." In other words, Christianity's claim is that belief as an act of the will, not just the mind, is

what makes a person truly human. Kierkegaard is referring specifically to the story of Jesus' healing two blind men. Before He heals them, He asks them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They answer him, "Yes." Then Jesus says to them, "It shall be done to you according to your faith" (Matthew 9:29). In other words, it was not the men's vast speculative knowledge of reality that led to Jesus' healing them. It was their specific belief in his ability from God to do so. Thus, in Kierkegaardian terms, Jesus basically said to them, "What truly makes you human is your authentic faith."

We would have to go to Kierkegaard's book, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, to read his specific definition of faith, that it is to have an "infinite passion for the infinite"²⁶. This is to say that what makes a human being truly human is his facing into his need for God's mercy and longing for it in order to acquire eternal life. Therefore, regardless of what else a human being *thinks* and regardless of how much Descartes is convinced that his *thinking* is what defines him as a human being, Kierkegaard disagrees and suggests that a person's coming to grips with the moral and eternal aspects of his existence is what makes him an authentic human being.

Consequently, modern philosophy, whether that of Descartes (1596-1650), Hegel (1770-1831), or any other person who does not base his understanding of reality solely on the Bible is "neither more nor less than paganism." Indeed, modern philosophy is paganism without the overt polytheism, because it ignores God and the basic biblical message of human depravity and God's mercy. Therefore, if modern philosophy were "to be in kinship with Socrates" and, at least, define sin as ignorance, then this would not be too bad. However, if modern philosophy chooses to describe the essence of humanity as that which is far from biblical, if it chooses to point simply to human beings' ability to think or to our being so affected by the historical reality going on all around us that we

²⁶ Concluding Postscript to Unscientific Postscript, pg.

make our choices strictly out of necessity, then modern philosophy is radically in error, especially in that “it wants to delude us into believing that this is Christianity.”

In the world of actuality, however, where the individual person is involved, there is this tiny little transition from having understood to doing; it is not always quick, *cito citissime* [very quick], it is not (if I, lacking philosophical language, may speak German) *geschwind wie der Wind* [fast as the wind]. Quite the opposite, this is the beginning of a very longwinded story. [93,94]

In contrast to “pure ideality,” Kierkegaard says that, now, we must consider the real “world of actuality.” In the real world, there are individuals who actually live life within the vicissitudes and exigencies of their human existences. This is to say, since Kierkegaard is considered the father of existentialism, that the one necessary thing that human beings must do is exist and choose to exist. They cannot escape the fact that they are who they are by the design of the transcendent Creator, God. For example, they cannot become transcendent like God. Also, they must live within the confines of their minds, their emotions, their bodies, and their wills. Therefore, “where the individual person is involved, there is this tiny little transition from having understood to doing.” Kierkegaard is being sarcastic. In actual life, the transition from understanding to doing is huge, particularly if a morally depraved human being, which is what each of us is, chooses to do the right thing. The German philosopher G.W. Lessing even called this transition “a great, ugly ditch,” over which he found himself unable to cross.²⁷

As a result of the vastness of this “tiny little transition” from understanding to doing, Kierkegaard goes on to say that the “little transition...is not always quick, *cito citissime* [very quick]” or “*geschwind wie der Wind* [fast as the wind].” Indeed, the situation is quite the opposite. The knowledge of the right thing to do “is the beginning of a very longwinded story” that the existential and morally depraved human being will want to

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draw out for as long as possible—basically, until he can justify doing the wrong thing instead.

In the life of the spirit there is no standing still [*Stilstand*] (really no state [*Tilstand*], either; everything is actuation); therefore, if a person does not do what is right at the very second he knows it—then, first of all, knowing simmers down. Next comes the question of how willing appraises what is known. Willing is dialectical and has under it the entire lower nature of man. If willing does not agree with what is known, then it does not necessarily follow that willing goes ahead and does the opposite of what knowing understood (presumably such strong opposites are rare); rather, willing allows some time to elapse, an interim called: “We shall look at it tomorrow.” During all this, knowing becomes more and more obscure, and the lower nature gains the upper hand more and more; alas, for the good must be done immediately, as soon as it is known (and that is why in pure ideality the transition from thinking to being is so easy, for there everything is at once), but the lower nature’s power lies in stretching things out. Gradually, willing’s objection to this development lessens; it almost appears to be in collusion. And when knowing has become duly obscured, knowing and willing can better understand each other; eventually they agree completely, for now knowing has come over to the side of willing and admits that what it wants is absolutely right. And this is how perhaps the great majority of men live: they work gradually at eclipsing their ethical and ethical-religious comprehension, which ethically is a diversion. [94]

In this paragraph, Kierkegaard describes the “longwinded story” of the dialectical component of the transition from knowing the right thing to do to doing the opposite, the immoral thing. It is a somewhat slow and, yet, deliberate process. First, Kierkegaard points out that spiritual and moral life is dynamic. There is no place of complete rest or standing still. Human beings are always moving, either towards morality or away from it. Thus, “if a person does not do what is right at the very second he knows it,” then, first, his knowing of the right thing to do begins to disappear—conveniently, as far as his will and immoral nature are concerned. Next, there is the question of how his will assesses the value of what he knows to be the right thing to do. The problem, according to Kierkegaard, is that a person’s will is just above “the entire lower nature of man” that includes his moral depravity. Nevertheless, if a person’s choice-making mechanism, his will, does not agree with what his mind knows as the right thing to do, “it does not necessarily follow” that he chooses to do the opposite. Indeed, “such strong opposites

are rare,” in Kierkegaard’s opinion. Instead, the person waits a while. He says out-loud, “We shall look at [this issue] tomorrow.” He rationalizes to himself that there is no sense in making a hasty decision about what one is going to do, even when one knows what action would be appropriate and moral.

However, as a result of waiting to make a decision and as a result of man’s “lower nature,” his knowledge of what is the right thing to do conveniently begins to disappear. In fact, the person’s “lower nature gains the upper hand more and more.” Kierkegaard’s conclusion regarding the certainty of the gradual disappearance of the person’s understanding of the good is that “the good must be done immediately as soon as it is known.” If a person waits too long to do what he knows is right, then he will not do it at all.

The importance of immediate action is also why the ideal view of man works so well in this context. Because the ideal person acts out of strict necessity, the transition from knowing the right thing to do to doing it happens spontaneously and immediately, even mechanically. This is to say that there is nothing that prevents knowledge from becoming action in the ideal man. He is, after all, ideal. However, “the lower nature’s power lies in stretching things out,” in prolonging the decision as much as possible. Such procrastination affords a person’s resistance to doing the right thing a wonderful opportunity to grow and grow until any initial objection that he may have felt to violating his moral sensibilities evaporates into thin air. In fact, his choice-making mechanism “almost appears to be in collusion” with the lower nature and, thus, with his natural rebellion against morality.

Thus, when knowledge of the right thing to do becomes completely lost, “knowing and willing can better understand each other.” Since, according to Christianity, a person naturally is unwilling to do the right thing, he eventually agrees with his mind that the right thing no longer is the right thing. At a time before, he honestly believed that it was.

Now, however, so much time has elapsed that he believes the opposite. The knowledge of the right thing has faded into the sunset of his procrastination, and the knowledge of the wrong thing has become the knowledge of the right thing. In this way, the will's hesitancy has become the mind's conviction. Kierkegaard says that "this is how perhaps the great majority of men live." Their minds and their wills work together to suppress the truly ethical and moral, even if their moral knowledge is biblical and religious. They creatively generate some sort of effective diversion for themselves in order to avoid the ethical and moral.

Nevertheless, with all this we have still gone no further than the Socratic principle, for Socrates would say: If this happens, it just shows that a person such as this still has not understood what is right. This means that the Greek mind does not have the courage to declare that a person knowingly does wrong, knows what is right and does the wrong; so it manages by saying: If a person does what is wrong, he has not understood what is right. [94,95]

After all his explanation of "the lower nature of man," Kierkegaard says that he has still progressed "no further than the Socratic principle" in describing what is going on inside a person who acts immorally, even though this person claims that he knows what is right. Indeed, Socrates would explain the situation by claiming that the "person such as this still has not understood what is right." In other words, "the Greek mind does not have the courage to declare that a person knowingly does wrong, knows what is right and does the wrong." The Greeks lacked the fortitude to face into their moral depravity and conclude that man's nature, his entrapment in rebellion against the one true God, leads him to choose immorality over morality, even when he knows and understands the good and the right. Thus, the Greeks would declare: "If a person does what is wrong, he has not understood what is right," because, if he understood it, then, of course, he would naturally choose goodness over evil.

Absolutely right. And no *human being* can come further than that; no man of himself and by himself can declare what sin is, precisely because he is in sin; all his talk about sin is basically a glossing over of sin, an excuse, a sinful watering

down. That is why Christianity begins in another way: man has to learn what sin is by a revelation from God; sin is not a matter of a person's not having understood what is right but of his being unwilling to understand it, of his not willing what is right. [95]

Here, again, we can recognize and appreciate Kierkegaard's perspicacity in regard to the human condition. He says that it is absolutely correct that each and every "*human being*" will claim that "sin is ignorance," and that, if people simply understood what is the right thing to do, then they would naturally and necessarily choose to do the right thing. In other words, if all human beings were properly educated (because, after all, is not a great education the most valuable acquisition of any human being), then all human beings would choose right over wrong. Therefore, all that people need in order to overcome evil is to have good teachers teach them what is good, because people are basically good and have only the potential for evil, rather than the other way around. In addition, people are naturally attracted to goodness and repulsed by evil. This, according to Kierkegaard, is the thinking of any "*human being*," because all human beings are in the same condition. They are "in sin" and, therefore, blinded by their rebellion towards God.

This means, and mark this statement of Kierkegaard carefully, that "no man of himself and by himself can declare what sin is, precisely because he is in sin." With this statement, we are privy to Kierkegaard's tremendous insight into reality—because of his having studied the Bible! There are two profound presuppositions and assumptions that form the foundation of the statement that "no man of himself and by himself can declare what sin is, precisely because he is in sin." The first assumption is that the Bible, which teaches this concept about man, is the only inerrant and authoritative source of truth about reality. Even though Kierkegaard does not explicitly state this assumption here, it seems clear to me from all his writings that he holds to it. The second presupposition is that God is the Creator of all reality at every moment of reality's existence. This

assumption includes the fact that God has created sinful human beings and their sin with such a deep and *self-deluding* nature that no human being ever thinks completely clearly and accurately about morality—except Jesus the Messiah and the biblical authors when they were writing their documents.²⁸ If sin, by definition, is immorality, and every human being is naturally immoral and enslaved to immorality, then any attempt on any human being's part to define sin and immorality is contaminated by his innate sin and immorality. Thus, Kierkegaard says that “no man of himself and by himself can declare what sin is, precisely because he is in sin.” He continues: “all [this human being's] talk about sin is basically a glossing over of sin, an excuse, a sinful watering down” of sin. Apart from God's graciously moving them to turn away from their rebellion against Him, human beings will continuously and intentionally lie and deceive themselves into making up and believing falsehood in order to hide from their moral depravity and to convince themselves that they really do know truth when, by definition, they do not. Consequently, even Socrates was immersed in his own sin and, therefore, incapable of providing more than a watered down version of the proper definition of sin.

“That is why Christianity begins in another way.” And what way is this? A “man has to learn what sin is by a revelation from God.” He has to learn that “sin is not a matter of a person's not having understood what is right but of his being unwilling to understand it, of his not willing what is right.” Sin is not ignorance. Sin is abject rebellion against God on the part of willful human beings who defiantly choose to disobey Him. Only God, by His grace, can open up a person's mind to grasp the true nature of his immoral condition and move him to be willing to accept the proper definition of sin. Otherwise, the person will defiantly reject and run from the proper definition. In other words, every “*human being*” is hostile to truth and will use any excuse that works for him to avoid truth.

²⁸ inerrancy

Socrates actually gives no explanation at all of the distinction: not *being able* to understand and not *willing* to understand; on the other hand, he is the grand master of all ironists in operating by means of the distinction between understanding and understanding. Socrates explains that he who does not do what is right has not understood it, either; but Christianity goes a little further back and says that it is because he is unwilling to understand it, and this again because he does not will what is right. And in the next place it teaches that a person does what is wrong (essentially defiance) even though he understands what is right, or he refrains from doing what is right even though he understands it; in short, the Christian teaching about sin is nothing but offensiveness toward man, charge upon charge; it is the suit that the divine as the prosecutor ventures to bring against man. [95]

Getting back to the important distinction that Kierkegaard has made, there is “understanding,” and then there is “understanding,” with a slight (actually profound) nuance separating the two meanings of this word. There is one kind of lack of understanding, whereby a person is unable to understand. There is the other kind of lack of understanding, whereby a person is unwilling to understand, even if he not only is able to understand but also actually does understand.

Kierkegaard says that Socrates “gives no explanation at all of [this important] distinction” between the two understandings. Instead, Socrates “is the grand master of ironists in operating by means of the distinction between” them. Therefore, Socrates only “explains that [a person] does not do what is right” simply because he “has not understood it.” Does Socrates mean the first kind of understanding, that the person is unable to understanding morality in this situation, or does he mean the second kind, that a person is unwilling to understand? This is why Kierkegaard calls Socrates an ironist, because we do not know exactly what meaning he intended. He left it up to his listeners to ponder this question.

On the other hand, Christianity is more explicit and clear on this subject. “Christianity goes a little further back and says that it is because [the person] is unwilling to understand” the good and the right, “and this again because he does not will what is right.” Thus, for Christianity, sin is definitely a matter of the will and not simply of the

mind. In addition, Christianity goes so far as to say that “a person does what is wrong... even though he understands what is right.” This is the nature of human defiance towards God. Certainly, it may be that a person is unwilling even to understand morality. However, what if a person truly and intellectually understands what is the right thing to do, but goes ahead and does what is wrong? In this case, the person “refrains from doing what is right even though he understands it” and is guilty of the grossest defiance and rebellion against God.

Indeed, how many people, already steeped in moral depravity and untouched by God’s grace, really want to hear this explanation of sin? The only answer, from Kierkegaard’s and the Bible’s perspective, is, none. In fact, human beings not only reject truth, but they also are offended and annoyed by it. Thus, “the Christian teaching about sin is nothing but offensiveness toward man, charge upon charge.” Let us imagine, as Kierkegaard suggests by his language, that God is a prosecuting attorney in the courtroom of His own judgment, then what really annoys man is “the suit [read, criminal charge] that the divine as the prosecutor ventures to bring against” him because of his defiant unwillingness to do what is right.

But can any human being comprehend this Christian teaching? By no means, for it is indeed Christianity and therefore involves offense. It must be believed. To comprehend is the range of man’s relation to the human, but to believe is man’s relation to the divine. How then does Christianity explain this incomprehensibility? Very consistently, in a way just as incomprehensible: by revealing it. [95]

Now, we enter into an area of Kierkegaard’s writings where I believe that he has mostly been misunderstood, the area of his epistemology, his theory of knowledge, especially as it relates to Christian faith or belief. I have asked other students of Kierkegaard if they think that he believed that truth is inherently rational. Because of statements like the one above, that Christianity is “incomprehensible” to man, they invariably answer, no. Certainly, this opinion of Kierkegaard is understandable, since he

described Christianity as “the absurd,” a “paradox,” and he wrote of the necessity of making a “leap of faith.”²⁹ Why not conclude that Kierkegaard believed that Christianity does not make sense, that it is irrational? Include his words in the above paragraph, that a human being cannot “comprehend” the Christian teaching of man’s moral depravity, because it “involves offense,” and that, as a result, Christianity “must be believed,” and it would seem only reasonable to conclude that Kierkegaard saw Christianity as an irrational leap of faith. In other words, by pitting belief against comprehension, it sounds to our modern ears as though Christian faith is something that a person does without rationally understanding God or the reality that He has created. No wonder, then, that a “rational” scientific approach to life seems more practical and wise than an “irrational” religious approach to life, when, in actuality, the situation is the exact opposite.

In fact, I believe not only that a biblical approach to life is the height of rationality but also that Kierkegaard held the conviction that truth is inherently rational, that in order to believe that anything is true, a human being must also believe that it makes sense. Otherwise, it does not make sense to believe that truth is true and a person should not believe that it is true, or else he is going down the path on which our moral depravity wants to take us, the path of error and lies in order to hide from the truth. Then why does Kierkegaard sound as though he is setting rational truth in conflict with belief and faith? Because of what he also mentions in the above paragraph, the necessity of God’s “revealing” truth to a human being in order for this human being to understand it in such a way that he is willing to believe it and obey it.

Just as Kierkegaard has spoken of two kinds of understanding, one where a person is intellectually incapable of grasping an idea, and one where a person is unwilling to believe an idea that he knows is true, so also does this distinction enter into our discussion of the relationship between “comprehension” and faith (or belief). It could be

²⁹ *Fear and Trembling, CUP*

that God “reveals” the truth to a sinful human being because this rational person is incapable of grasping the irrational ideas that correspond to the truth. In other words, the human being must become convinced that truth is true *even though it does not make sense*, and God is the only one who can convince him.

However, this is not what neither Kierkegaard nor the Bible mean by the concept of revelation. What they mean is that God causes a person, who is fundamentally hostile to biblical truth while understanding it and knowing that it is true, to be willing to embrace the truth, believe it, and live his life on the basis of it. In addition, the truth is rational and makes sense. Human beings are not offended by biblical truth because it is irrational. They are offended by it because it requires that they acknowledge their moral depravity and appeal to God for mercy, which are the two things that their pride and arrogance will not permit them to do.

Therefore, the absurd and paradoxical nature of truth is not in its inherent irrationality. It is in its offensive nature to man. Human beings think that biblical truth is “absurd” because they are offended by it, not because it is irrational. Human beings reject truth as a paradox because they are insulted by it, not because they think that it does not make sense, regardless of how vociferously they protest to the contrary. For example, people argue that God does not exist because we cannot see God or perform a scientific experiment to prove His existence. So, it really makes more sense to say that reality has always existed or came from nothing than to say that a transcendent Creator has made it? The concept of a Creator is offensive to the pride of man, not to the inherent logic of man. If $1+1=2$ were not necessary to believe in order to buy food, then man would rebel against this mathematical statement just as much as he rebels against the idea of his moral depravity. Such is the rebellion and defiance of the human condition.

Kierkegaard goes on in this paragraph to say that, on the one hand, to speak of comprehension, i.e., of understanding strictly in intellectual terms, is to speak of reality from a limited and human perspective. On the other hand, to speak of belief, i.e., of God's having overcome a person's rebellion and defiance and having caused him to be willing to embrace the truth of reality, is to speak of reality from a divine perspective, which a human being can do only if God has worked miraculously within him. Therefore, Christianity explains the "incomprehensibility" of truth by speaking of something "just as incomprehensible" to morally depraved human beings, by referring to necessity of God's "revealing" truth to them. Unless He does, they simply will not believe, and, in their rebellion, they do not want to believe. Thus, the "incomprehensibility" of truth is actually man's unwillingness to comprehend it, not his inability to comprehend the irrational.

Therefore, interpreted Christianly, sin has its roots in willing, not in knowing, and this corruption of willing affects the individual's consciousness. This is entirely consistent, for otherwise the question of the origin of sin would have to be posed in regard to each individual. [95,96]

Kierkegaard's conclusion from the distinction he has made between understanding and understanding, as well as between comprehension and belief, is that Christianity teaches that "sin has its roots in willing, not in knowing." Consequently, the corruption of the human will "affects the individual's consciousness." He means that the depravity of the will influences what kind of understanding a person has. We could ask, does man's immoral condition make him unable to understand truth? Or does it make him unwilling to understand truth? It is the latter, and we can see that a person's will does affect his understanding. It is just a matter of what kind of understanding we are talking about.

In addition, Kierkegaard says that this effect "is entirely consistent, for otherwise the question of the origin of sin would have to be posed in regard to each individual." In other words, if man's moral depravity, that is common to every man, did not directly affect each person's willingness to understand reality by making him hostile to God and

truth, then we would have to search inside each individual for a unique reason unique as to why he chose to do wrong when he knew what was right. Instead the “origin of sin” is universal to all of humanity. It is man’s innate moral depravity.

Here again is the mark of offense. The possibility of offense lies in this: there must be a revelation from God to teach man what sin is and how deeply it is rooted. The natural man, the pagan, thinks like this: “All right, I admit that I have not understood everything in heaven and on earth. If there has to be a revelation, then let it teach us about heavenly things; but it is most unreasonable that there should be a revelation informing us what sin is. I do not pretend to be perfect, far from it; nevertheless, I do know and I am willing to admit how far from perfect I am. Should I, then, not know what sin is?” But Christianity replies: No, that is what you know least of all, how far from perfect you are and what sin is. —Note that in this sense, looked at from the Christian point of view, sin is indeed ignorance: it is ignorance of what sin is. [96]

Again, Kierkegaard describes the “mark of offense” of Christianity, which is to say that he explains why authentic Christianity, not the Christianity of the Church, is distasteful to all human beings. It is because “there must be a revelation from God to teach man what sin is and how deeply it is rooted.” However, man is too proud to receive this particular instruction from God.

As Kierkegaard goes on to say, “the natural man, the pagan, thinks like this: ‘All right, I admit that I have not understood everything in heaven and on earth. [Therefore, if] there has to be a revelation [and instruction from God], then let it teach us about heavenly things [for example, who the angels are and what they are like]; but it is most unreasonable [notice this word] that there should be a revelation informing us what sin is.’” Man is not offended by God’s instructing him about certain things, such as what kind of beings exist in heaven. He is offended by God’s instructing him about sin. Man says that it is “most unreasonable” that God would think it necessary to instruct him about his immoral condition. In other words, it does not make sense to man that God would dare to teach him about morality. Notice, man does not say that the irrationality of God’s instruction is because the information is irrational, as though God is requiring him to

believe that which does not make sense. Instead, man is implying that the irrationality of God's instruction lies in his unwillingness to learn from God about his immoral condition.

The natural man, the pagan, says: "I do not pretend to be perfect, far from it; nevertheless, I do know and I am willing to admit how far from perfect I am. Should I, then, not know what sin is?" This man is offended by God's presumption that he needs instruction about something that he already knows, specifically the extent of his immoral condition. Thus, he claims to know enough about his sin that he can appropriately speak to God about it. However, this man is lying. In fact, his moral depravity is actually leading him to lie. Therefore, Christianity is right when it replies: "No, that is what you know least of all, how far from perfect you are and what sin is." The biblical assessment of man's understanding of himself is that man says, "I am basically good with only the potential for evil," which is a complete and total lie, and every human being knows it deep down within himself.

As a slight aside, when we analyze this situation, we have to say that human beings are unwilling to believe the truth, regardless of how much it makes sense. And, indeed, it does make sense. Biblical truth is as rational as $3+2=5$. We would hope that no aeronautical engineer tries to design a commercial airplane by using mathematical formulas that do not make sense, or with answers to these formulas that are wrong. Who would dare to fly in such a plane? If airplanes are not designed with rational, mathematical formulas, then they will crash. Thus, it only makes sense that the truth of an airplane is rational. Is it too strange a thing to say also that the truth of our sin is rational? Therefore, in the same way that we would expect God, who himself is Rationality with a capital "R," to instruct us about airplanes with ideas that only make sense, so also would we expect Him to instruct us with ideas about our sin that only make sense. God is a Reasonable God, morality is a Reasonable concept, and sin is also. However, man's allergy to being instructed by God about his sin is due to his pride,

not to the difficulty of understanding sin. Indeed, it is man's sin that is the very cause of his not grasping the profundity of his sin. Sin does not want him to know itself. Sin wants to remain unknown.

Returning to Socratic terminology, Kierkegaard ends this paragraph by saying, "Note that in this sense, looked at from the Christian point of view, sin is indeed ignorance: it is ignorance of what sin is," because morally depraved human beings refuse to understand sin properly. They are intellectually capable of understanding sin, but they are willfully antagonistic towards doing so.

Therefore the definition of sin given in the previous section still needs to be completed as follows: sin is—after being taught by a revelation from God what sin is—before God in despair not to will to be oneself or in despair to will to be oneself. [96]

In the previous part of the book, Kierkegaard defined sin as—"before God in despair not to will to be oneself or in despair to will to be oneself." As a result of this discussion of Socrates and his definition of sin, Kierkegaard says that he must add something more to the proper definition of sin. He must add the words, "after being taught by a revelation from God what sin is..." Here, however, Kierkegaard is giving the word "revelation" a slightly different meaning [if this statement has been accurately translated from the original Danish]. Before, "revelation" included God's miraculous change within a sinful human being such that a person authentically believes the truth of God's revelation and instruction. Here, the word means simply God's providing enough information for human beings to recognize that they are morally accountable to God. This meaning does apply to all human beings, while the meaning that includes God's miraculously causing a rebellious human being to acknowledge his moral depravity and appeal to God for eternal mercy applies to only authentic believers. Thus, a person has not only understood what is right, but he has also really understood what is right. This is to say

that he has become *willing* to understand and has grasped the biblical definition of sin that is more rigorous than the Socratic definition of sin.

CHAPTER 3. SIN IS NOT A NEGATION BUT A POSITION

That this is the case is something that orthodox dogmatics and orthodoxy on the whole have always contended, and they rejected as pantheistic any definition of sin that made it out to be something merely negative—weakness, sensuousness, finitude, ignorance, etc. [96]

There are multiple words here in both the title of Chapter 3 and the first sentence that require explanation. First, what does it mean for sin not to be a “negation?” Second, once we have figured out how to understand “negation,” this should lead us to understand how sin is a “position” instead. Third, what are “orthodox dogmatics and orthodoxy?” Fourth, what is “pantheism,” and how does it differ from “orthodox dogmatics and orthodoxy.”

To begin, “negation” can mean either the absence of something or the opposite of something. For example, if I say that a vacuum is a negation, then, speaking simplistically, I can mean either that a vacuum is the absence of air or that it is the opposite of air. Notice though, that neither absence of air nor the opposite of air refers to there being, instead, absolutely nothing. Here, I am using “nothing” in its most literal sense—to mean the complete non-existence of anything. If there were no God and therefore no creation, then there would be nothing, and, in fact, this is the only way that there can be nothing, which, by the way, is a theological impossibility since God exists and cannot not exist. Getting back to my example, a vacuum is not the non-existence of anything, because it is still something.

For instance, we think of outer space as that which exists between the earth and the moon and beyond earth’s atmosphere. As a result, outer space lacks the gaseous substance that we call air. Yet, outer space is still something. It is simply a part of the

universe that is without air and without the physical material that comprises stars, planets, asteroids, etc.

I can now take this conclusion and formulate a statement of the “position” of a vacuum. This is to say that, after considering that a vacuum is a negation (it is the absence of or the opposite of air), I can now say that it is a position. Normally, we use the word position to refer to the location of an object. For example, the position of my computer is on the table. However, Kierkegaard is not using the word with this kind of meaning. He is not saying that sin has a position in the sense that it has a location. While, indeed, it has a position in this manner, i.e., within the human being who is committing sin, Kierkegaard is referring to what can be said positively about sin in the same way that we have spoken positively about a vacuum. We have considered that a vacuum, negatively speaking, is the absence or opposite of air. This is the negation of a vacuum. If “negation” means the absence of something or its opposite, then, in contrast, “position” means the presence of something or the same thing as it. Therefore, if we consider that a vacuum is the presence or the same as something other than air, such as open space, then we can also say that a vacuum is simply space. This is vacuum’s “position,” which is to say that this is what it is, as opposed to its “negation,” i.e., what it is not. A vacuum is not air, but it is open space. Thus, the vacuum that is beyond the earth’s atmosphere is what we call outer space, and it is clearly something that exists—albeit without any gaseous substance or hard, physical material as that of which it consists.

Kierkegaard takes these two words, “negation” and “position,” and titles the current chapter, “Sin is Not a Negation But a Position.” Using the ideas from the above discussion on a vacuum, we can say, if we are interpreting Kierkegaard correctly, that he means that sin is not simply the absence of something. Instead, it is the presence of something. For instance, sin is not simply the absence of moral strength or the lack of

knowledge (as discussed in the previous chapter, “The Socratic Definition of Sin”). Instead, sin is more precisely the presence of evil—and evil is definitely something, i.e., a *concrete* something just as a vacuum is a concrete something. Biblically speaking, sin is the fundamental moral orientation of a human being away from God, and it is the human being’s real, concrete choices to disobey God. In other words, these choices to do that what is immoral do not appear out of nowhere. They arise out of the very fabric of human beings’ existences, out of their very beings, and become a real and substantive part of who a human being is.

Why is Kierkegaard bringing up this issue? He says that “orthodox dogmatics and orthodoxy on the whole have always contended” that “sin is not a negation but a position.” By “orthodox dogmatics” Kierkegaard means that system of theology that has been accepted and made the longstanding tradition by the accepted authorities of the mainstream Christian church. He does not mention who these authorities are, but we can guess that they are, to mention only a few, the Church councils, well-known conservative theologians, the popes of the Roman Catholic Church, and the archbishops of the Orthodox Churches. By “orthodoxy” Kierkegaard means the same thing as “orthodox dogmatics.” Therefore, we see that Kierkegaard raises this issue because other Christian theologians have also done so during church history, and he believes that it is worth discussing in his current work on the subject of despair.

To say that authoritative and traditional theologians “have always contended” something is to imply that there has been an argument regarding an issue. In this case, Kierkegaard indicates that orthodox theologians “have always contended” that “sin is not a negation but a position.” With whom have Christian theologians argued about the proper definition of sin? Kierkegaard says that it has been with those who propound a “pantheistic” definition of sin.

Before we analyze and explain this competition between “orthodoxy” and pantheism, we should consider something important within the history of “orthodoxy.” It turns out that one of the most “orthodox” theologians and, probably, the person who started the conversation regarding the negative and/or positive nature of sin argued that sin is a negation and not a position, i.e., the very opposite of what Kierkegaard is saying here. This theologian was the revered Roman Catholic church father St. Augustine (A.D. 354-430), who wrote in the 11th chapter of his treatise *The Enchiridion*:

And in the universe, even that which is called evil, when it is regulated and put in its own place, only enhances our admiration of the good; for we enjoy and value the good more when we compare it with the evil. For the Almighty God, who, as even the heathen acknowledge, has supreme power over all things, being Himself supremely good, would never permit the existence of anything evil among His works, if He were not so omnipotent and good that He can bring good even out of evil. ***For what is that which we call evil but the absence of good?*** In the bodies of animals, disease and wounds mean nothing but the absence of health; for when a cure is effected, that does not mean that the evils which were present—namely, the diseases and wounds—go away from the body and dwell elsewhere: they altogether cease to exist; ***for the wound or disease is not a substance, but a defect in the fleshly substance,—the flesh itself being a substance, and therefore something good, of which those evils—that is, privations of the good which we call health—are accidents. Just in the same way, what are called vices in the soul are nothing but privations of natural good. And when they are cured, they are not transferred elsewhere: when they cease to exist in the healthy soul, they cannot exist anywhere else*** (emphasis mine).³⁰

On the one hand, we could construe Augustine as saying that evil is not actually something real. Instead, it is the absence of something real, i.e., of good. The reason that we could interpret Augustine this way is because he writes that a disease, and, therefore, by analogy evil, is not a “substance” but an “accident.” The substance of a person is what Augustine calls his “flesh,” and a disease or illness is merely an “accident” of this substance.

³⁰ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf103.iv.ii.xiii.html> - Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1, Volume 3; St. Augustine, *The Enchiridion, Addressed to Laurentius: Being a Treatise on Faith, Hope, and Love*, Chapter 11, “What is called evil in the universe is but the absence of good;” translated by Professor J. F. Shaw, Londonderry

Philosophers have used the two words “substance” and “accident” to refer to two aspects of something. For example, the substance of the table on which my computer sits is wood. Thus, the table’s essence is wood. In addition, a particular accident of the wood is that it is the color brown. The point is that it is possible to change the accident from brown to white, by painting the table, without changing the substance of the table, which is wood. Therefore, substance is the actual essence of something, while an accident is a property of this something that is not essential to its nature. We could say that woodness is the essence of the table, while it is brown in color, 2” thick, 36” long, etc. Again, the latter properties, the accidents, of the table could change while the substance and essence remains the same. Thus, a table’s substance is the very material of which it is made, e.g., wood, or steel, or plastic. A table’s accidents are that it is long or short, thick or thin, hard or soft, brown or white, etc.

We notice that Augustine describes a human being as having two different parts, a “flesh” and a “soul.” He also says that these two parts include both “substance” and “accidents.” He then uses our familiarity with the “flesh,” the physical human body, to explain similar characteristics of the “soul.” Speaking philosophically, Augustine says that a bodily illness, a disease, is not part of the “substance” of the human body, the “flesh.” Instead, it is merely an “accident,” while only health is a part of the “substance” of the body.

Augustine’s reasoning is based upon his belief that God, who Himself is “supremely and...unchangeably good³¹,” is the Creator of all that exists apart from Him so that those things what we ourselves consider to be good, such as health, are part of the very substance and essence of all things that God has made. For example, Augustine writes in Chapter 10 of *The Enchiridion* that all things that have been created by God “are not supremely and equally and unchangeably good, but yet they are good, even taken

³¹ Chapter 10

separately. Taken as a whole, however, they are very good, because their *ensemble* constitutes the universe in all its wonderful order and beauty.” We see that Augustine reasons that a good God can create only that which is good, even if it is not “unchangeably good.” In other words, he seems to be saying that anything that is contrary to goodness within the creation is not created by God, because a good God can create only that which is good, even if the good is changeably good.

Therefore, Augustine decides that the human body, the “flesh,” is good, because it has been created by God. As a result, only that which is good, e.g., health, can be and must be included in the “substance” of the body. Consequently, anything that is not good, e.g., disease, cannot and must not be considered an essential aspect of the human being. The only other category, philosophically, in which disease can be put is that of “accidents.” With this reasoning, Augustine concludes that disease is merely an accident and, therefore, not only something that can change with respect to the body, but also that can “cease to exist” once it leaves the body after it is cured of the disease.

This is also why Augustine says that an illness is “nothing but the absence of health.” Health is included in the substance of the “flesh,” but disease is merely an “accident.” The latter is a property of a human being in the same way that the color brown is a property of my table. Again, Augustine’s opinion is that illness is not an essential part of the essence of a human being, because the essence of a human being is his “flesh,” and, by definition, only that which is created by God, the supremely and unchangeably good Creator, can fall into the category of substance and essence. Thus only *healthy* flesh is good and can be said to have substance.

As we follow Augustine’s comments and thinking, we also find that he believes that only good things have substance and, therefore, real beingness within the creation. He states that, after diseases leave the body, they “cease to exist.” However, this cannot be true of health. It is always included in the human body that has been created by a good

God, even when disease has shoved it aside and dominated the “flesh” for the time being. In other words, the body and its concomitant health are both good and substantive. On the other hand, disease is only an “accident” and, therefore, lacks substance and essence. Indeed, Augustine says that “disease is not a substance.” For Augustine, this means too that, when a body is cured of disease, the disease does not “go away...and dwell elsewhere.” Instead, it ceases to exist altogether. Does this mean that Augustine believes that the disease becomes literally nothing. It would seem so. We can also assume that Augustine believed that *all* “accidents” cease to exist and become nothing when they no longer are invading the substances of which they are merely properties. And this would include evil with respect to the “soul.”

However, before we go on to consider evil in the soul, we should remind ourselves that Augustine is not using the word good in an ultimate sense (as I already mentioned above in the quote from Chapter 10 of *The Enchiridion*). While God is perfectly good, His creation is not. It is good and even very good when taken as a whole, but it is not as good as God. Consider also what Augustine writes in the Chapter 12 of *The Enchiridion*:

All things that exist, therefore, seeing that the Creator of them all is supremely good, are themselves good. But because they are not, like their Creator, supremely and unchangeably good, their good may be diminished and increased. But for good to be diminished is an evil. Although, however much it may be diminished, it is necessary, if the being is to continue, that some good should remain to constitute the being. For however small or of whatever kind the being may be, the good which makes it a being cannot be destroyed without destroying the being itself.³²

Augustine’s reasoning goes something like this. God, who is supremely and unchangeably good, has created good human beings, who are changeable. Therefore, unlike God’s goodness, the goodness of human beings can decrease. When it does, it is because evil has crept in and caused it to decrease. Nevertheless, some goodness of

³² <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf103.iv.ii.xiii.html> - Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1, Volume 3; St. Augustine, *The Enchiridion, Addressed to Laurentius: Being a Treatise on Faith, Hope, and Love*, Chapter 12, “What is called evil in the universe is but the absence of good;” translated by Professor J. F. Shaw, Londonderry

human beings is still there, since the human beings still exist. Indeed, the human beings would have to cease to exist altogether if their goodness was completely destroyed.

What does this say about evil that has crept in and decreased the human beings' goodness? It says that it cannot have the same level of existence as goodness. In fact, just as goodness cannot be destroyed unless human beings are destroyed, evil can be destroyed, since it is merely an "accident" and not a "substance."

If we consider that diseases are an evil in the human body, then this difference in level of existence for diseases and the human body is why Augustine says that diseases do not "go away from the body and dwell elsewhere," when the body is cured. Instead, "they altogether cease to exist." Obviously, Augustine was not thinking about germs that cause diseases. He probably did not even know about them. He was thinking only of the undesirable nature of being sick, that it is not something that one would want to consider as being a substantial part of reality, since God is substantially only good and healthy and not evil and sick.

Consequently, Augustine detects a contradiction in his own thinking.

"Yet, by saying that diseases "cease to exist" after a person's flesh is cured implies that the diseases did exist as part of the created reality. Therefore, even though Augustine is saying that a disease is merely an "accident," a property of the flesh that is not essential to the flesh, nevertheless, he is saying that it is still something. Disease might be the absence of health, which itself is a property that is essential to the nature of the flesh. However, disease is still something that is real. Thus, even Augustine was arguing that evil as analogous to disease is real. In other words, it is a "position" and not merely a "negation."

Augustine goes on to say that evil is similar to disease. The "vices in the soul are nothing but privations of natural good," just as diseases in the flesh are the lack of natural health. Thus, when the vices and evils of a person's soul are cured, they do not

go elsewhere. They simply cease to exist, because “they cannot exist anywhere else.” We remember that Augustine’s reasoning began with his stating that God is good, thus implying that only goodness can be an essential part of the fabric of the creation, while evil cannot. In addition, goodness manifests itself in the physical nature of man through the health of his physical being, his flesh, thus making health part of the essential nature of mankind, while goodness also manifests itself in the moral nature of man through the goodness of his soul, thus making goodness also a part of the essential nature of mankind. Thus, Augustine concludes that evil, like disease with respect to the flesh, is an accident of the soul and not an essential part of the soul, which only goodness can be. Therefore, goodness, being a part of the substance and essence of man, cannot cease to exist. However, evil, being merely an accident and not a part of man’s essence, his soul, can cease to exist.

To state otherwise, as Kierkegaard says, is to accept a pantheistic definition of sin. Pantheism is the belief that everything is God. However, if everything is God and we want God to be only good, then a strong tendency will be to deny the existence of anything bad, whether disease or evil. Thus, everything that is God is only good—because the bad does not exist, even if we experience the bad. In contrast, if we move towards a theistic definition of sin, then we will believe that God is completely separate from all the rest of reality that exists within the creation. In other words, there is God, who is uncreated and who transcends the creation, and there is the creation, that exists as a result of His creating activity. As a result, we can easily conclude that everything within the creation, including disease and evil, do actually exist and are real. Nevertheless, nothing within the creation is as real as God.

Usually, we think of sin as immorality. Notice the prefix “im” in this last word “immorality.” I mean that immorality consists of the word “morality” and the prefix “im.”

This prefix denotes the opposite or the negation of the word to which it is attached. Thus, “immorality” is the opposite of “morality” as impolite is the opposite of polite. For example, if we consider that love is moral, then the opposite of love, hate, is immoral. Consequently, we have discovered that immorality is the negation of morality. However, if immorality is sin, then sin is also a negation, the negation of morality.

Is Kierkegaard, therefore, wrong when he writes that “Sin is Not a Negation But a Position?” No, because “orthodox” theologians and he mean something different from what I do. He means that sin should not be defined strictly by saying what it is not. In other words, if we say that sin is not love, and we do not go on to say that sin can also be described as hate, then we are not properly defining sin. Sin is not simply the absence of love as a vacuum is the absence of air. It is also the presence of hate as a vacuum is the presence of non-gaseous and non-star/planet/asteroid material space, for example. Sin is not simply a negation—the opposite of morality. It is also a position—the presence of immorality. And both morality and immorality have real, existential, and substantial content. In this case, the essence of morality is love, and the essence of sin is hate.

This is why Kierkegaard claims that “orthodox dogmatics and orthodoxy on the whole have always contended” that sin is not simply the absence of good, but it is also the presence of evil. We would be remiss to speak of the “definition of sin” and think that it is sufficient that it be “made out to be something merely negative—weakness [read absence of strength], sensuousness [read absence of moral sensibility], finitude [read absence of infinity], ignorance [read absence of knowledge] etc.” No, “sin is not a negation but a position.”

Orthodoxy has perceived very correctly that the battle must be fought here, or, as in the preceding portion, here the end must be fastened very firmly, here it is a matter of holding back; orthodoxy has correctly perceived that when sin is defined negatively, all Christianity is flabby and spineless. That is why orthodoxy emphasizes that there must be a revelation from God to teach fallen

man what sin is, a communication that, quite consistently, must be believed, because it is a dogma. And, of course, paradox, faith, and dogma—these three constituents have an agreement and an alliance that are the surest solidarity and bulwark against all pagan wisdom. [96,97]

So it is with orthodoxy. Then, through a curious misunderstanding, a so-called speculative dogmatics, which was involved with philosophy in a dubious way, thought it could *comprehend* this qualification that sin is a position. But if this is true, then sin is a negation. The secret of all comprehending is that this comprehending is itself higher than any position it posits; the concept establishes a position, but the comprehension of this is its very negation. Aware of this up to a point, speculative dogmatics has nonetheless known no other recourse than to throw up a detachment of assertions at the point where a movement is being made—which is scarcely fitting in a philosophic science. With mounting solemnity each succeeding time, with ever more swearing and cursing, it is asserted that sin is a position and that to say that sin is merely a negation is pantheism and rationalism and God knows what else, but all of it something that speculative dogmatics renounces and abominates—and then a switch is made to comprehending that sin is a position. In other words, it is position only to some extent, not any more than can be comprehended. [97]

This duplicity on the part of speculation shows itself at another yet related point. The category of sin or how sin is defined is crucial for the category of repentance. Since the negation of negation is so speculative, the only possibility is that repentance must be the negation of negation—and thus sin becomes negation. —Incidentally, it would certainly be desirable if at some time a sober thinker would explain to what extent the purely logical, which is reminiscent of logic's first relation to grammar (two negatives affirm) and of mathematics—to what extent the logical has validity in the world of actuality, in the world of qualities, whether on the whole the dialectic of qualities is not something different, whether "transition" does not play another role here. *Sub specie aeterno modo* [under the aspect of eternity, in the mode of eternity] etc., there is indeed no spacing out at all; therefore everything *is*, and there simply is no transition. To *posit* in this abstract medium is *eo ipso* the same as to *nullify*. But to look at actuality in the same way borders on madness. *In abstracto* it may also be said: the *Perfectum* [perfect tense] follows the *Imperfectum* [imperfect tense]. But if in the world of actuality a person were to conclude from this that it follows of itself and follows immediately that a work he did not complete (*imperfectum*) was completed, he would certainly be crazy. It is the same with sin's so-called position if the medium wherein it is placed is pure thought; that medium is far too elusive for the position to be taken seriously. [97,98]

But all these matters do not concern me here. I steadfastly hold to the Christian teaching that sin is a position—yet not as if it could be comprehended, but as a paradox that must be believed. In my opinion this teaching is sound. If all attempts to comprehend can just be shown to be self-contradictory, then the matter will fall into proper perspective, then it will be clear that whether one will believe or not must be left to faith. —I can very well comprehend (and this is by no means too divine to be comprehended) that someone who by all means has to comprehend and can think only of what claims to be comprehensible will find this very meager. But if all Christianity turns on this, that it *must* be believed and not comprehended, that *either* it must be believed *or* one must be scandalized and offended by it—is it then so praiseworthy to want to comprehend? Is it such

great merit or is it not rather insolence or thoughtlessness to want to comprehend that which does not want to be comprehended? If a king decides he wants to be completely incognito, to be treated without exception as an ordinary man, is it then right to pay him royal homage because people generally consider it a greater honor to do so? Or is it not in fact an assertion of oneself and one's own thinking over against the king's will if a person does what he himself wants instead of submitting? Or, I wonder, would the king be pleased at the ever greater ingenuity such a person could show in according him the respect of a subject when the king did not wish to be treated that way—indeed, the ever greater ingenuity such a person could show in going against the king's will? —So let others admire and praise him who pretends to be able to comprehend Christianity. I consider it an outright ethical task, perhaps requiring not a little self-denial in these very speculative times, when all “the others” are busy comprehending, to admit that one is neither able nor obliged to comprehend it. Precisely this is no doubt what our age, what Christendom needs: a little Socratic ignorance with respect to Christianity—but please note, a little “Socratic” ignorance. Let us never forget—but how many ever really knew it or thought it—let us never forget that Socrates' ignorance was a kind of fear and worship of God, that his ignorance was the Greek version of the Jewish saying: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Let us never forget that it was out of veneration for God that he was ignorant, that as far as it was possible for a pagan he was on guard duty as a *judge* on the frontier between God and man, keeping watch so that the deep gulf of qualitative difference between them was maintained, between God and man, that God and man did not merge in some way, *philosophice, poetice* [philosophically, poetically], etc., into one. That was why Socrates was the ignorant one, and that was why the deity found him to be the wisest of men. —Christianity teaches that everything essentially Christian depends solely upon faith; therefore it wants to be precisely a Socratic, God-fearing ignorance, which by means of ignorance guards faith against speculation, keeping watch so that the gulf of qualitative difference between God and man may be maintained as it is in the paradox and faith, so that God and man do not, even more dreadfully than ever in paganism, do not merge in some way, *philosophice, poetice* [philosophically, poetically], etc., into one—in the system. [98,99]

That sin is a position can be made clear from only one side. The preceding section on despair constantly pointed out an escalation. This escalation is manifest partly in the intensification consisting in moving from being acted upon to conscious action. Both manifestations jointly indicate that despair does not come from the outside but from within. To the same degree it also becomes more and more established as a position. But according to the definition of sin as set forth, the self infinitely intensified by the conception of God is part of sin and is likewise the greatest possible consciousness of sin as an act. —This signifies that sin is a position; that it is *before God* is the definitely positive element in it. [99,100]

Moreover, the qualification that sin is a position implies in a quite different sense the possibility of offense, the paradox. That is, the paradox is the implicit consequence of the doctrine of the Atonement. First of all, Christianity proceeds to establish sin so firmly as a position that the human understanding can never comprehend it; and then it is this same Christian teaching that again undertakes to eliminate this position in such a way that the human understanding can never comprehend it. Speculation, which talks itself out of the paradoxes, snips off a little bit from both sides and thereby gets along more easily—it does not make

sin quite so positive—but nevertheless cannot get it through its head that sin is to be completely forgotten. But Christianity, which was the first to discover the paradoxes, is as paradoxical on this point as possible; it seems to be working against itself by establishing sin so securely as a position that now it seems to be utterly impossible to eliminate it again—and then it is this very Christianity that by means of the Atonement wants to eliminate sin as completely as if it were drowned in the sea. [100]

APPENDIX TO A

But Then in a Certain Sense Does Not Sin Become a Great Rarity? (The Moral)

In Part One it was pointed out that the more intensive despair becomes, the rarer it is in the world. But if sin is now despair qualitatively intensified once again, presumably this despair must be extremely rare. What a strange problem! Christianity regards everything as under sin; we have tried to depict the Christian point of view as rigorously as possible—and then this strange outcome emerges, this strange conclusion that sin is not to be found at all in paganism but only in Judaism and Christendom, and there again very seldom. [100,101]

Yet this is entirely correct, but in one sense only and in this way. To sin is: “after being taught by a revelation from God what sin is, before God in despair not to will to be oneself or in despair to will to be oneself”—and indeed, seldom is there a person who is so mature, so transparent to himself, that this can apply to him. But what is the result of this? Here one must take great care, for there is a special dialectical turn. The conclusion was not drawn that a person who is not in a more intensive state of despair is therefore not in despair. On the contrary, it was specifically shown that by far the great majority of men are in despair, but to a lesser degree. But there is nothing meritorious about being in despair to a higher degree. Esthetically it is an advantage, for esthetically there is concern only for vigor; but ethically the more intensive form of despair is further from salvation than the lesser form. [101]

It is the same with sin. Most men are characterized by a dialectic of indifference and live a life so far from the good (faith) that it is almost too spiritless to be called sin—indeed, almost too spiritless to be called despair. [101]

It is certainly true that there is no merit in being a sinner in the strictest sense of the word. But, on the other hand, how in the world can an essential sin-consciousness be found in a life that is so immersed in triviality and silly aping of “the others” that it can hardly be called sin, a life that is too spiritless to be called sin and is worthy only, as Scripture says, of being “spewed out.” [101]

This does not dispose of the matter, however, for the dialectic of sin simply ensnares in another way. How does it happen that a person’s life becomes so spiritless that Christianity seemingly cannot be brought to bear upon it all, just as when a jack (and Christianity’s elevating is a jacking up) cannot be used because

there is no firm ground but only marshland and bog? Is it something that happens to a person? No, it is his own fault. No one is born devoid of spirit, and no matter how many go to their death with this spiritlessness as the one and only outcome of their lives, it is not the fault of life. [101,102]

Nevertheless, it has to be said, and as frankly as possible, that so-called Christendom (in which all are Christians by the millions as a matter of course, and thus there are just as many—exactly just as many—Christians as there are people) is not merely a shabby edition of the essentially Christian, full of printer's errors that distort the meaning and of thoughtless omissions and admixtures, but is also a misuse of it, a profanation and prostitution of Christianity. In a little country, scarcely three poets are born in any one generation, but there are plenty of clergymen, many more than can obtain appointments. A poet is said to have a call, but in the opinion of most people (consequently of most Christians) passing an examination is sufficient qualification to become a pastor. And yet a true pastor is even more rare than a true poet; indeed, the world "call" originally belonged to the religious life. But in Christendom there is still a remnant of the notion that being a poet is something and that there is something to its being a call. However, in the eyes of most people (consequently of most Christians) being a pastor has been deserted by every elevating conception; it is, *in puris naturalibus* [without circumlocution], a way of making a living, devoid of the slightest mystery. "Call" signifies an official appointment; the expression "to receive a call" is used, but "to have a call"—well, that is used, too, about someone who has a call to give away. [102]

Alas, the fate of this word in Christendom is like an epigram on everything that is essentially Christian. The trouble is not that Christianity is not voiced (thus the trouble is not that there are not enough pastors) but that it is voiced in such a way that the majority eventually think it utterly inconsequential (just as the majority consider being a pastor no different at all from being a merchant, lawyer, bookbinder, veterinarian, etc. on weekdays). Thus the highest and the holiest things make no impact whatsoever, but they are given sound and are listened to as something that now, God knows why, has become routine and habit like so much else. So what wonder is it that they, instead of finding their own personal conduct indefensible, find it necessary to defend Christianity. [102,103]

A pastor certainly ought to be a believer. A believer! And a believer, after all, is a lover; as a matter of fact, when it comes to enthusiasm, the most rapturous lover of all lovers is but a stripling compared with a believer. Imagine a lover. Is it not true that he would be capable of speaking about his beloved all day long and all night, too, day in and day out? But do you believe it could ever occur to him, do you believe it would be possible for him, do you not think he would find it loathsome to speak in such a manner that he would try to demonstrate by means of three reasons that there is something to being in love—somewhat as the pastor proves by means of three reasons that praying is beneficial, because praying has become so cheap that in order to raise its prestige a little three reasons have to be adduced. Or the way the pastor—and this is the same, only even more ridiculous—proves with three reasons that to pray is a bliss that "passes all understanding." What a priceless anticlimax—that something that passes all understanding—is proved by three reasons, which, if they do anything at all, presumably do not pass all understanding and, quite the contrary, inevitably make it obvious to the understanding that this bliss by no

means passes all understanding., for “reasons,” after all, lie in the realm of the understanding. No, for that which passes all understanding—and for him who believes in it—three reasons mean no more than three bottles or three deer! —To go on, do you believe that a lover would ever think of conducting a defense of his being in love, that is, admit that to him it was not the absolute, unconditionally the absolute, but that he thought of it as being in a class with arguments against it and on that basis developed a defense; that is, do you believe that he could or would confess that he was not in love, inform against himself that he was not in love? And if someone were to suggest to a lover that he speak this way, do you not believe that the lover would consider him crazy; and if besides being in love he was also something of an observer, do you not think he would suspect that the person suggesting this to him had never known what love is or wanted him to betray and deny his love—by defending it? —Is it not obvious that the person who is really in love would never dream of wanting to prove it be three reasons or to defend it, for he is something that is more than all reasons and any defense: he is in love. Anyone who does it is not in love: he merely pretends to be, and unfortunately—or fortunately—he is stupid that he merely informs against himself as not being in love. [103,104]

But his is just exactly the way they speak about Christianity, these believing pastors; they either “defend” Christianity or transpose it into “reasons,” if they do not go further and tinker speculatively with “comprehending” it. This is called preaching, and in Christendom this kind of preaching and the fact that someone listens to it is even considered to be a great thing. This is precisely why Christendom (this is the proof of it) is so far from being what it calls itself that the lives of most men, Christianly understood, are far to spiritless to be called sin in the strictly Christian sense. [104]

B

The Continuance of Sin

Every state of sin is a new sin, or, to express it more precisely, as will be done in this next section, the state of sin is the new sin, is the sin. The sinner may consider this an overstatement; at most he acknowledges that each actual new sin is a new sin. But eternity, which keeps his account, must register the state of sin as new sin. It has only two rubrics, and “Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin”; every unrepented sin is a new sin and every moment that it remains unrepented is also new sin. [105]

This is the second major section of Part Two, “Despair is Sin,” and the last major section of the book. Kierkegaard has entitled this last section “The Continuance of Sin.” After a short introduction, he will use three chapters to make his points. As we see above, he starts the introduction to the discussion of this topic with the somewhat confusing statement, “Every state of sin is a new sin, or, to express it more precisely, as

will be done in this next section, the state of sin is the new sin, is the sin.” Usually, we think of an evil action, such as stealing someone’s money, as the very definition of sin. Therefore, when a thief commits a new crime, he has left the old sin of a previous crime behind, and he is committing a new sin. Thus, he moves from one sin to another so that every additional act of stealing is a new sin.

However, Kierkegaard proposes a new definition for the phrase “new sin.” He defines the “new sin” as the “state of sin.” Simply said, the “state of sin” is an ongoing, internal, and immoral condition of a human being, whether or not he is performing any external actions. Nevertheless, his external actions expose or reveal his internal condition. This immoral condition, that Kierkegaard also calls the “new sin,” persists inside a human being throughout his entire life on earth. It is a *state* of sin, so that, indeed, “the state of sin...is the sin.” In other words, Kierkegaard is claiming that a human being’s immoral, persistent, and internal condition is so profound that one can use not only the phrase that we typically reserve for an additional act of evil, i.e., “a new sin,” to describe the condition, but, indeed, we can assign the very phrase “the sin” to this condition.

Kierkegaard will use this whole last section of his book to explain further what he means.

In the meantime, he goes on to say that this opening sentence of his introduction will sound like “an overstatement” to the “sinner.” As I suggested above, the average person thinks of sin only in terms of actions, not in terms of an inner condition. Thereby, “he acknowledges that each actual new sin is a new sin.” However, Kierkegaard asserts that “eternity, which keeps his account, must register the state of sin as a new sin.” As we have seen in the rest of the book, “eternity” refers ultimately to God and the fact that He has designed human beings for eternal life beyond the present earth. In addition, “eternity, which keeps [the person’s] account,” implies that all human beings must go through an experience of being evaluated and judged by God before they can enter into eternal life. This judgment will result in either God’s granting a person mercy and

welcoming him into the eternal Kingdom of God or God's condemning the person and requiting him with eternal destruction. Kierkegaard is pointing out that the judgment will focus on a human being's "state of sin" and not on each individual act of sin.

Kierkegaard further explains his understanding of God and his judgment by saying that there are two principles on which God bases his relationship with human beings. The first principle comes from Romans 14:23, "Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." In this passage, the apostle Paul is describing two kinds of people, those with strong faith and those with weak faith. The former have a full and accurate understanding of the message of Jesus as the Messiah so that they realize that the ritual commandments of the Mosaic Covenant that God made with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai in Exodus 19ff. are not as important as the moral commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." However, those with strong faith and an accurate understanding of the biblical message are also tempted to look down on those with weak faith. This latter group of people improperly equate ritual commandments with moral commandments and are tempted to consider those with strong faith as sinning and condemned by God because they do not obey the ritual commandments of the Mosaic Covenant.

It is not clear, here, exactly how Kierkegaard understands this quote from Romans, but we will see that he probably is taking it in an all encompassing way. This is to say that "faith" itself is a state of being for human beings. In other words, either people have "faith," or they do not. If they have "faith," then Kierkegaard is saying that God accounts to them the absence of sin, i.e., forgiveness and its result of eternal life at the judgment. If they lack "faith," then God accounts to them only "the state of sin" and its result of eternal condemnation and destruction. Therefore, we can see that "faith" in the midst of "the state of sin" is the necessary overall condition for a human being in order to acquire God's forgiveness and eternal life.

The second principle, according to Kierkegaard, on which God bases his relationship with human beings is that “every unrepented sin is a new sin and every moment that it remains unrepented is also new sin.” To me, this sounds like a statement that the apostle John makes in his first letter, “If we are owning up to our sins, [God] is faithful and upright so that he forgives us our sins and cleanses us from all immorality” (1 John 1:9; my translation). In other words, when a human being is in a state of “faith,” his existence is characterized by his “owning up” to his sins, indeed, to his “state of sin,” from a position of a heart or inwardness that has been changed by God. Therefore, a person who does not *consistently* repent or own up to his sins and the deep, profound immoral condition within him is a person who lacks authentic “faith.” Consequently, in Kierkegaard’s words, “every unrepented sin” and every moment of lack of repentance and owning up to his immoral condition is a “new sin” that reveals that the person is merely in a “state of sin” without biblical “faith,” thus deserving God’s and eternity’s condemnation.

We are finding out that Kierkegaard’s main point in this section will be that sin is primarily a state of being, while it is secondarily a particular choice or action. This state of being he calls the “state of sin,” so that “[e]very state of sin,” i.e., every instance of a human being who is in a state of sin “is a new sin.” To assign the word “new” to a state of being sounds strange to us, but Kierkegaard is merely emphasizing the point that there really is nothing “new” about a human being’s sin. By virtue of the fact that “the state of sin” always exists, it is therefore “new,” because it is there every new moment of time.

As a result, every sinful human being is another example and instance of disobedience and rebellion against God. However, since this “state of sin” is the condition in which every human being finds himself, whenever we encounter another human being, we are coming face to face with a new instance of this “state of sin.” This,

of course, is true even in regard to ourselves. Every moment that we encounter ourselves anew, every moment that we are again aware of ourselves as individual existing human beings, we are also encountering our moral depravity in and of itself as a “new sin.” We do not have to go looking for a choice that we or another human being makes or an action that we or another human being performs in order to see a “new sin.” All we have to do is be aware once again of our existence, and the “new sin,” our moral depravity, is staring us right in the face.

In addition, “the state of sin” is sin itself. By virtue of the fact that the moral condition of human beings is sinful and evil, this condition can be considered itself to be “sin.” Similar to what was said above, we do not have to wait for a particular choice or act of disobedience towards God in order to view “sin.” It is right there in front of us, whenever we observe another human being, indeed, whenever we observe ourselves. The other human being and we are, indeed, “sin,” because his and our moral condition is sinful and evil. Both he and we are in a “state of sin.”

Kierkegaard naturally expects most sinful human beings to “consider this an overstatement,” because they acknowledge only “that each actual new sin [i.e., act of sin] is a new sin.” They consider people to be mostly good with the potential for evil, not evil with the potential for good. “But eternity keeps...account” of people, so that God and eternity look at the inward, moral condition of human beings and see that they dwell in a “state of sin,” even when they do not look as though they are sinning, i.e., when they are doing good, external, moral acts.

But how rare is the person who has continuity with regard to his consciousness of himself! As a rule, men are conscious only momentarily, conscious in the midst of big decisions, but they do not take the daily everyday into account at all; they are spirit of sorts for an hour one day a week—which, of course, is a rather crude way to be spirit. But eternity is the essential continuity and demands this of a person or that he be conscious as spirit and have faith.
[105]

Here we find Kierkegaard revealing the real problem, morally speaking, that human beings have. It is their unwillingness to deal honestly and completely with their moral depravity. There are very few people who continuously and consciously face into their “state of sin”—their inward, persistent, and immoral condition. Instead, most people are aware of only their immoral *actions*, thereby becoming conscious of their sin for a moment or two and, then, perhaps, repenting of it even before God. However, they soon willfully return to a mental position of ignoring their “state of sin.” It is only during those moments of “big decisions,” the decisions that are obvious to everyone, e.g., murder, stealing, etc., that people become aware of the fact that they have sinned.

Consequently, most people “do not take the daily everyday into account.” They do not face into their profound, immoral, and inner condition that is there everyday and all day long. They only superficially and on occasion display that they are spiritual beings, “for an hour one day a week,” e.g., at church on Sunday morning. Kierkegaard claims that this “is a rather crude way to be spirit,” because it lacks “the essential continuity” that God and eternity demand of being constantly aware of one’s immoral condition, an awareness that is possible only if a person has “faith” and certainly does not require going to church in order to have.

The sinner, however, is so much in the power of sin that he has no idea of its wholly encompassing nature, that he is lost and on the way to destruction. He takes into account only each particular new sin that seems to give him new impetus on the road to destruction, just as if he were not proceeding along that way the moment before with all the impetus of his previous sins. Sin has become so natural to him, or sin has become so much his second nature, that he finds the daily everyday to be entirely in order, and he himself pauses only for a moment each time he perceives new impetus, so to speak, from new sin. In his lostness, he is blind to the fact that his life has the continuity of sin instead of the essential continuity of the eternal through being before God in faith. [105]

This excerpt is one of the best explanations of the human moral condition that I have read outside the Bible. Kierkegaard is saying that the person who lacks genuine faith is a self-accepting victim of self-deception, because he is trapped in the clutches of the

power of his own moral depravity. He “is so much in the power of sin that he has no idea of its wholly encompassing nature.” In other words, he cannot see the forest for the trees. The person who lacks genuine faith has permitted his own internal, persistent, and immoral condition to “blind” him to the fact that he not only is deceiving himself in regard to his immoral condition, but also “is lost and on the way to [eternal] destruction.” The first verse of John Newton’s song “Amazing Grace” refers to this problem for a person who has become aware of it and then escaped the deceptive power of sin, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me; I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.”

The person who lacks biblical faith naturally and inappropriately “takes into account only each particular” instance of committing an immoral act, becoming momentarily aware that the existence of this new, sinful action “seems to give him new impetus on the road to destruction.” In other words, he is temporarily cognizant of at least this last immoral choice moving him along towards being eternally condemned by God.

Kierkegaard assumes, in addition, that this person has conveniently forgotten that “his previous sins” have also unavoidably propelled him in the direction of eternal “destruction.” This spiritual forgetfulness is caused by the fact that sin, especially the sin of hiding from his sinful condition, “has become so natural” to the person without faith that it is “second nature” to him. Thus, he also “finds the daily everyday to be entirely in order.” He believes wholeheartedly that he is not as evil as a mass killer. He has his sin in check, because he only occasionally does something immoral, and, perhaps, mildly immoral at that in comparison to the criminals about whom he reads in the newspapers. Thus, he has convinced himself that his daily behavior is quite good, which makes him a good person. In this way, his profound, immoral condition has become an acceptable state of orderliness to him. He has retained an acceptable level of control over his

external actions, thus turning his moral depravity into a good, normal, average, everyday life for himself—admired by both himself and others.

If he does encounter a new instance of a particular choice to commit sin, then “he himself pauses” for only a moment to recognize it and soon returns to ignoring his inward and immoral condition. Kierkegaard calls this a state of “lostness,” where the person “is blind to the fact that his life has the continuity of sin,” that he is stuck in the rut of inner immorality, regardless of how good his outward actions appear. The opposite of this, Kierkegaard says, is “the essential continuity of the eternal,” whereby a person is “before God in faith.” Thus, we see that “faith” is the essential, human ingredient for constituting the difference between a person who is immoral and eternally condemned and a person who is immoral and eternally forgiven.

“The continuity of sin”—but is not sin specifically the discontinuous? So here it is again, this view that sin is merely a negation, which like stolen goods can never be legitimized—a negation, a powerless attempt to establish itself, which, however, undergoing all the torment of powerlessness in despairing defiance, it is incapable of doing. Yes, this is how it is speculatively, but Christianly (this must be believed, since it is indeed the paradox that no man can comprehend) sin is a position that on its own develops an increasingly established continuity. [105,106]

Kierkegaard, once again, refers to the typical definition of sin, that sin is “the discontinuous” and occurs only every once in a while. Sin does not occur continuously and, therefore, “sin is merely a negation.” According to this inadequate definition, sin is the absence of good; it is merely not doing the right thing. For example, rather than acting in a loving way towards a person (this is the typical *and inadequate* definition of good), sin is harming and injuring him in some way. The result of this perspective is that most people would not include their condition of moral depravity in their definition of sin and understanding of themselves, especially since they have convinced themselves that they are good people because they perform kind acts towards others.

Kierkegaard likens this typical and inadequate definition of sin to “stolen goods.” Just as a person can never legitimize his possessing something that he has stolen, neither can he justify a definition of sin that refers to only people’s actions and not their inward state of immorality. Thus, to say that sin is merely the absence of a good *action* is to evacuate all the power out of sin in an unsuccessful attempt to establish its existence without subscribing to and endorsing its inward fullness. Kierkegaard says that this is to collaborate with despair and defiance towards God, thus hiding from the real issue, the person’s “state of sin.”

The biblical and Christian perspective on sin is that sin is not the absence of the good, but, instead, it is the uninterrupted existence of inward evil, “the state of sin.” It is not just an occasional evil choice or action. It is, instead, the presence of an evil and persistent condition within every human being except Jesus the Messiah, a condition that can be accepted as true only if a person is caused by God to believe it supernaturally. Otherwise, it conveniently remains a “paradox” and incomprehensible to the rebellious human being, in spite of the fact that it should make all the sense in the world³³.

The law for the growth of this continuity is not the same as the law for the increment of a debt or of a negation. For a debt does not grow because it is not paid; it grows every time it is increased. But sin grows every moment that one does not take leave of it. The sinner is so mistaken in regarding only each new sin as an increase in sin that, from the point of view of Christianity, the state of sin is actually greater sin than the new sin. There is even a proverb that says to sin is human but to remain in sin is of the devil; Christianly, however, this proverb surely must have a different interpretation. The cursory observation that merely looks at the new sin and skips what lies between, what lies between the two particular sins, is just as superficial as supposing that a train moves only when

³³ Kierkegaard is sometimes accused of having attacked human reason, being irrational, and thinking that only subjective experience and not objective reality and ideas is valid in determining truth. It was as though he regarded faith as an irrational leap into the nonsensical. However, I believe that this view misunderstands Kierkegaard’s intent merely to point out how miraculous faith is. Man’s rebellion against God leads him to reject the truth of the Bible as though it does not make sense to him. Therefore, when a person actually genuinely believes, it is because the light bulb comes on, and what he had refused to believe before, he now believes as a result of God’s miraculous work of changing him inwardly and causing him to believe. Thus, the sinful human being turns away from what made sense to him before because of his rebellion against God to what did not make sense to him before because of his rebellion against God. However, in the final analysis, Kierkegaard would never say that truth is irrational, only that it appears to be irrational on the basis of man’s behavior as a rebel against God.

the locomotive puffs. No, this puff and the subsequent propulsion are not what should be considered but rather the steady impetus with which the locomotive proceeds and which produces that puffing. And so it is with sin. In the deepest sense, the state of sin is the sin; the particular sins are not the continuance of sin but the expression for the continuance of sin; in the specific new sin the impetus of sin merely becomes more perceptible to the eye. [106]

We see in this paragraph a more detailed explanation of Kierkegaard's thinking on the subject of sin. He contrasts it first to a debt. A debt does not grow if a person fails to make a monthly payment. The actual amount of the debt remains the same, and the person simply owes a penalty in addition to that particular monthly payment. The only way that the debt can grow is if the note holder increases the principal amount of the debt, which would be a breach of contract.

Sin, on the other hand, "grows every moment that one does not take leave of it." In other words, the failure for any human being to become morally perfect means that the person is adding more unrepentant *time* to his "state of sin." Kierkegaard calls this the growth of sin. It is not as though the person's actual sin becomes greater. It is that the *time* that he remains in a "state of sin" and does transform himself into a morally perfect person increases. Thus, we see that Kierkegaard's definition of the "growth of sin" is not an *arithmetic* one like that of most people who believe that each additional act of sin increases their sin. Kierkegaard's definition is *chronologic*, i.e., it has to do with time and not with the acts of sin. The passing of time during which a person remains morally depraved constitutes his "growth of sin," indeed, the growth of the continuity of the sin within him.

Kierkegaard goes on to point out again that human beings are quite wrong in their viewing only each new act of sin "as an increase of sin," instead of acknowledging that the real problem is their "state of sin." Because of this lack of acknowledgement, "the state of sin is actually greater than the new sin." Even if a person were never to perform another outward act of sin, his sin is still increasing for the very reason that his internal

condition remains consistently immoral. Therefore, over time, a person's unwavering moral depravity is the very essence of sin that is increasing.

Kierkegaard also quotes a proverb, "To sin is human but to remain in sin is of the devil." He has been emphasizing the fact that "to remain in sin" is worse than any new, particular instance of sin. Therefore, this proverb heads in a better direction than the typical perspective on sin that sees it as merely outward actions. Yet, in order to correspond to the biblical message, this proverb "surely must have a different interpretation." Instead of saying "to remain in sin is of the devil," it should say "to remain in sin is human, just as much as, if not more than, 'to sin is human.'" In other words, once again, Kierkegaard is emphasizing that the morally depraved condition of human beings is worse than any new external action of sin.

There is also "the cursory observation" that looks only at each instance of sin and notices nothing in between them. This view of sin, Kierkegaard says, "is just as superficial as supposing that a train [in the 19th century] moves only when the locomotive puffs." Instead, a person should consider "the steady impetus with which the locomotive proceeds and which produces the puffing." In the same way, "the state of sin," not "the particular sins," is the "steady impetus" of the "continuance of sin." Indeed, "particular sins" are merely "the expression for the continuance of sin." They are the "puffs" and not "the continuance of sin" itself. What "the specific new [external act of] sin" does is make "the impetus of sin," the person's moral depravity, "more perceptible" and obvious "to the eye." Yes, it is true that if you want to see moral depravity, look at a human being's immoral actions. However, likewise and ironically, if you want to see moral depravity, look at only the human being. In other words, you do not have to see someone's sinful actions in order to observe their moral depravity. All you have to do is see the human being, because each one is in a continuous "state of sin." In fact,...

The state of sin is worse sin than the particular sins; it is the sin. Understood this way, the abiding and lingering in the sin is the continuance of sin, is the new sin. The common view is different, that the one sin gives birth to new sin. But it has a far deeper root, namely, that the state of sin is new sin. The line Shakespeare gives to Macbeth (III,2) is psychologically masterful: *Sundentsprossne Werke erlangen nur durch Sunde Kraft und Starke* [Works arising in sin gain strength and power only through sin]. In other words, deep within itself sin has a consistency, and in this consistency in evil itself it also has as certain strength. But such an observation is never arrived at by merely looking at the particular sins. [106,107]

We may find it difficult to grasp and agree with Kierkegaard's statement here, especially after hearing about or experiencing heinous and evil acts on the part of other people. He claims that the "state of sin is worse sin than the particular sins." In other words, no human action, no matter how evil and horrible, is worse than the human being's inward moral depravity, because the latter "is the sin," and indeed far more "the sin" than any of his evil actions. The remarkable yet profound logical inference from this line of reasoning is that the "state of sin" of the best behaved morally depraved human being is worse than the most evil actions perpetrated by any other human being.

If we understand sin in this way, then "the continuance of sin" is not the adding and compounding of immoral actions in a person's life, but, instead, it is "the abiding and lingering" in a state of moral depravity. "The common view" of sin is "different." Most people believe that one sinful action "gives birth" to another sinful action, so that a "new sin" is the most recent sinful action that was caused by a previous sinful action. However, Kierkegaard is saying that the "new sin" has "a far deeper root" than the previous sin. The root is, in fact, "the state of sin," so that the proper way to think of a person's moral depravity is that it actually is "the new sin," because it always exists. And something that always exists is, therefore, always "new." It is like the sun and its shining. The sun does not shine one moment, then pause, and then shine in the next moment so that this second moment is a "new" moment of shining. The sun always contains the hot gases and their combustion that cause each moment of shining. Thus, it can be said that

the constant combustion of hot gases is the “new” moment of shining, because this constant combustion always exists.

Kierkegaard considers the line in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* to express accurately the biblical view of sin, “Works arising in sin gain strength and power only through sin.” This is to say that “deep within itself sin” has a constant source of strength of evil and immorality, and this source is a human being’s moral depravity. However, one would never arrive at the conclusion that a human being is morally depraved simply by looking at his actions, because they do not completely reveal his inward immoral condition.

Most men probably live with all too little consciousness of themselves to have any idea of what consistency is; that is, they do not exist *qua* spirit. Their lives—either in a certain endearing childish naiveté or in shallow triviality—are made up of some action of sorts, some incidents, of this and that: now they do something good, and then something stupid, and then they begin all over again; now they are in despair for an afternoon, perhaps for three weeks, but then they are jolly fellows again, and then once again in despair for a day. They play along in life, so to speak, but they never experience putting everything together on one thing, never achieve the idea of infinite self-consistency. That is why they are always talking among themselves about the particular, particular good deeds, particular sins. [107]

Here, Kierkegaard delves even further into the fundamental problem among human beings. They are not sufficiently aware of what is going on inside of them to acquire a firm intellectual grasp of who they are consistently and without fail. If they did understand anything about their inner being, then, according to Kierkegaard, they would know that they “exist *qua* spirit,” i.e., in the capacity of spiritual beings. For example, animals are not aware of themselves to the extent that they contemplate what they are all about. However, human beings do have this capacity for self-contemplation. Therefore, not to use this capacity is to live more like an animal than like a human being. As Kierkegaard says, most people’s lives are made up of discrete and individual actions without any awareness or contemplation of their inner being and of any steady condition that more or less defines who they are. Most people hardly take into account anything

within themselves beyond their immediate emotions. They could not articulate a description of any persistent element of their humanness within them. Thus, they live strictly from one moment to the next. “[N]ow they do something good, and then something stupid, and then begin all over again; now they are in despair for an afternoon, perhaps for three weeks, but then they are jolly fellows again, and then once again in despair for a day. They play along in life, so to speak, but they never” put it all together and arrive at a clear understanding of who they really are as morally depraved human beings. To do so requires, in Kierkegaard’s words, “achiev[ing] the idea of infinite self-consistency,” grasping God’s purpose of having made us creatures and persons who are designed for the “infinite,” for eternity. It also requires grasping the fact that we are consistently and unavoidably in a “state of sin” and moral depravity. By focusing merely on external actions, most people can be found “always talking among themselves about [only] the particular.” The constant topic of their conversations is their actions and other people’s actions, whether good or bad. They love to talk about their own good actions and other people’s bad actions. The discussion of the former provides them with an all-important means of self-affirmation. The discussion of the latter provides them with an all-important means of experiencing drama. Certainly, we can recognize that our mass media thrive on the latter and its convenient resource of drama in order to satisfy the cravings of society.

Every existence that is within the qualification spirit, even if only on its own responsibility and at its own risk, has an essential interior consistency, and a consistency in something higher, at least in idea. Such a person has a great fear of any inconsistency, because he has an immense apprehension of what the result can be, that he could be torn out of the totality in which he has his life. The slightest inconsistency is an enormous loss, for, after all, he loses consistency. [107]

Now, Kierkegaard explains further what he means for a human being to live as a “spirit.” It is to have “an essential interior consistency.” This is to say that a person of

“spirit” is aware of something within him that always defines who he is, because it is always present. Kierkegaard, however, points out that there are fundamentally two different kinds of spirituality. For instance, on the one hand, a person may be engaged in being someone of “spirit” only on the basis of his “own responsibility and at [his] own risk.” This means that the person may be willing to look at only something within him of which he can take responsibility and the use of which puts him at risk only in regard to himself and the rest of the world. In other words, he is not thinking of how his inner being affects his relationship to his Creator, God. For example, he is aware of his ability as an athlete, an accountant, a student, a teacher, a businessman, or a politician. Clearly, this is an inward ability and quality, and he sets his mind to take responsibility for it. However, because he is thinking of only how this ability affects his existence within the present world and among his fellow human beings, he is putting himself at risk of succeeding or failing at the use of his ability on only a worldly level. At least, though, according to Kierkegaard, he is aware of more than his actions or emotions and has moved into the arena of being a person of “spirit.”

In addition, this worldly consistent person “has a great fear of any inconsistency, because he has an immense apprehension of what the result can be, that he could be torn out of the totality in which he has his life.” Let us imagine a professional football player who lives in fear of suffering a career-ending injury. Even if it were only an injury such that he would have to have surgery resulting in months and months of rehabilitation, he “has a great fear of [this] slightest inconsistency,” because it would constitute “an enormous loss, for, after all, he loses consistency,” the consistency of using his inward, athletic ability that gives him a tremendous sense of purpose, of meaning, and also of income.

In that very moment, the spell is perhaps broken, the mysterious power that bound all his capacities in harmony is diminished, the coiled spring is slackened; everything perhaps becomes a chaos in which the capacities in mutiny battle one

another and plunge the self into suffering, a chaos in which there is no agreement within itself, no momentum, no *impetus*. The enormous machine that in consistency was so tractable in its steely strength, so supple in all its power, is out of order; and the better, the more imposing the machine was, the more dreadful the tangled confusion. —The believer, one who rests in and has his life in the consistency of the good, has an infinite fear of even the slightest sin, for he faces an infinite loss. Immediate individuals, the childlike or childish, have no totality to lose; they always win and lose only something particular or something in particular. [107,108]

The very moment that the athlete experiences the career-ending injury, it is as though the magical spell under which he had been living as a star athlete, who had fed on the praise and admiration of the fans, is broken. The fame and honor had combined to produce “the mysterious power that bound all his [internal] capacities” together “in harmony.” Now, all of a sudden, this power is gone. He had been like a “coiled spring,” always ready to move into action and exert his efforts to their maximum when the “essential internal consistency” of his athletic ability was needed. Now, this “consistency” is gone, and “everything perhaps becomes a chaos” in which the remainder of his human, internal capacities “battle one another” and “plunge” him into even more suffering. The chaos that he is now experiencing as an injured and unused professional athlete leaves him with no “momentum” or “*impetus*” for life. “The enormous machine that in consistency was so tractable in its steely strength, so supple in its power, is out of order.” He is simply not himself anymore, and the change is obvious and awful. In addition, “the better, the more imposing the machine was, the more dreadful the tangled confusion.” As the saying goes, the bigger they are, the harder they fall. Because the best of the best are accustomed to being the best, when they lose their “essential internal consistency,” their lives can become an absolute mess. They no longer have the glue that held them together—emotionally, spiritually, and financially—and they are devastated.

Kierkegaard goes on to say, that, in a sense, this is true even for someone who is a person of “spirit” in a biblical sense. While a human being, who is a human being “*qua* spirit” on the basis of taking into account his inner, consistent ability as it pertains to only the present realm, demonstrates one possible level of spirituality, the authentic believer demonstrates the other possible level of spirituality. “The believer, one who rests in and has his life in the consistency of the good,” i.e., in his inward hope of eternal life and moral perfection in the eternal Kingdom of God, “has an infinite fear of even the slightest sin, for he faces an infinite loss.”

This may sound a bit confusing for anyone familiar with the biblical message that proclaims the immediate and free availability of God’s mercy and forgiveness for the “believer.” If the “believer” meets the necessary criterion of fundamentally desiring God’s mercy and, therefore, can never lose his salvation so to speak, why does he have “an infinite fear of even the slightest sin,” thus facing “an infinite loss?” I think that Kierkegaard understood this apparent contradiction. Therefore, he means only that the “believer” realizes that, if it were not for God’s unbounded mercy, he would be eternally lost on the basis of even one act of sin. Thus, this believer’s “infinite fear of even the slightest sin” is a fear of what could be if it were not for the overarching grace and mercy of God.

Returning to his discussion of people of the first level of spirituality, Kierkegaard labels them as “[i]mmEDIATE individuals” who are very “childlike or childish” in their approach to life, having “no totality to lose.” For example, the injured professional athlete may lose “something particular or something in particular,” but he can never feel as though he has lost everything, as long as he is still alive. In other words, the person of immediacy cares only about what benefit or feeling a particular act will produce at a particular moment. Therefore, if his action results in the loss of a happy feeling right now, then it is only now that he feels loss. As soon as he has the ability and opportunity to act

again according to his inner ability, then he can produce a happy feeling, and he is back on top of the world. Kierkegaard says that there is no comprehensive and eternal perspective for this person. Since he is willfully hiding from the *immoral* consistency within him, there is nothing that could cause him to feel a total and *eternal* loss in life. This kind of person “always win[s] and lose[s] only something particular” and momentary. The eternal simply does not figure into his understanding of himself and reality.

As it is with the believer in regard to the internal consistency of sin, so also with his opposite, the demonic person. The situation of the demonic person is similar to that of the alcoholic, who keeps himself in a perpetual state of intoxication out of fear of stopping and of resulting debility and its possible consequences if he were to be completely sober for one day. [108]

Now, Kierkegaard wants us to consider the person who is seemingly at the far end of the spectrum of evil, indeed, who could be called evil personified, to whom he applies the label “demonic person” or “demoniac.” Typically, we think of a “demoniac” as being possessed by a demon, by a supernatural spiritual being who is wholly evil. We read about such “demonic” persons in the accounts of Jesus in the Bible, where he cast out demons as part of the miracles that he performed in demonstrating that he is the Messiah. However, Kierkegaard does not mention any demons *per se* in his description of the “demoniac.” He seems to be speaking of simply a human being who is completely committed to sin and evil. In fact, this person is actually afraid of the good, because any good action would throw him off his “consistency” and make him a victim of “inconsistency.”

Kierkegaard begins this portion of his discussion by saying that the opposite of “the believer” is “the demonic person.” Yet, the two contrasting persons are similar in one important aspect. They both value “the internal consistency of sin.” One values it in order to avoid it and long for eternal mercy from God. The other values it in order to persist in it

to its greatest depth while intentionally ignoring the possibility of mercy from God. As a result, the “situation of the demonic person is similar to that of the alcoholic, who keeps himself in a perpetual state of intoxication out of fear of stopping and of resulting debility and its possible consequences if he were to be completely sober for one day” or, maybe, even one minute.

We notice that Kierkegaard blames the alcoholic’s and demoniac’s obsessions with alcohol and evil respectively on fear. Of what are they afraid? Kierkegaard says that it is the “resulting debility and its possible consequences.” How is sobriety debilitating? It undermines alcohol’s ability to dull the pain in a person’s life so that he has to feel that which he most definitely does not want to feel. He would rather feel the effects of intoxication than the effects of his pain. The same is true of the demoniac. He is counting on the persistence of evil to protect him from coming to grips with the true meaning of goodness before God. Therefore, he is afraid of God and, remarkably, of God’s mercy.

Indeed, there are examples of exactly the same attitude in a demoniac as in the good man, who, when sin is temptingly pictured to him in some of its alluring forms, implores: “Tempt me not!” Confronted by someone stronger in the good than himself, the demoniac, when the good is described by that one in all its sublimity, can plead for himself, can tearfully plead that that one will not speak to him, that he will not—as he phrases it—make him weak. [108]

Even though both the “demoniac” as a lover of evil and “the good man” as a lover of good value completely opposite aspects of morality, Kierkegaard is arguing that they are still quite similar. The “good man” is tempted by evil and does all that he can to avoid it. When confronted with the possibility of doing evil, he cries out, “Tempt me not!” On the other hand, the “demoniac” is tempted by goodness and does all that he can to avoid it. When confronted with the possibility of doing good, he, too, cries out, “Tempt me not!” The demonic person is afraid of good’s tempting him to become “weak” so that he would succumb to doing it. But how is it possible, fundamentally, for these two kinds of

persons, the “demoniac” and the “believer,” who are clearly different from one another, to be so similar?

Precisely because the demonic person has an internal consistency and is consistent in the consistency of evil, he also has a totality to lose. One single moment of inconsistency, one single dietetic imprudence, one single sidelong glance, one moment of looking at and understanding the whole thing or just a part of it in another way—and he perhaps would never be himself again, so he says. [108]

The similarity between the “believer” and the “demonic person” resides in their need for “internal consistency” and that they both have “a totality to lose.” The “believer” desires to be internally consistent by remaining repentant of his moral depravity. The “demoniac” desires to be internally consistent by remaining committed to evil. In fact, “[o]ne single moment of inconsistency” in the demonic person’s commitment to evil would spell disaster for the him. “[O]ne single dietetic imprudence, one single sidelong glance [at the temptation of goodness], one moment of looking at and understanding the whole thing [of the value of repentance and God’s mercy] or just a part of it in another way—and he would never be himself again, so he says.”

In other words, in despair he has abandoned the good; it cannot help him anyway, but it certainly could disturb him, could make it impossible for him ever again to achieve the full momentum of consistency, could make him weak. Only in the continuance of sin is he himself, only in that does he lie and have an impression of himself. [108]

Thus, Kierkegaard assumes that “the demonic person...has [completely] abandoned the good.” By virtue of his decision to remain in despair in regard to his eternal destiny, thereby giving up all hope of desiring and obtaining God’s mercy, he has wholly committed himself to evil. In his opinion, “[the good] cannot help him” as a human being. Indeed, “the good...certainly could disturb him, could make it impossible for him ever to achieve the full momentum of consistency” in the midst of his evil. He must remain

consistent in evil and avoid anything that “could make him weak” such that he would succumb to goodness.

The “demoniac” feels that he is himself “[o]nly in the continuance of sin.” He simply has no conception of himself otherwise. In his mind, he is an authentic and meaningful human being only when he is evil and pursuing evil. To be good, to pursue goodness, or just to desire God’s mercy would feel so foreign to him. It would take him out of his comfort zone and interrupt what he cares about most—consistency, but not just any consistency, only the consistency of evil.

But what does this mean? It means that the state of sin is what holds him together deep down where he has sunk, profanely strengthening him with its consistency. It is not the particular new sin that assists him (yes, this is dreadfully deranged!); rather, the particular new sin is merely the expression for the state of sin, which is actually the sin. [108]

The bottom line for the “demonic person” is that his “state of sin is what holds him together deep down” in the depths of his morally depraved psyche “where he has sunk.” He simply cannot imagine himself being any other way than he is, and his consistent commitment to evil is what strengthens his resolve to remain committed to evil. Therefore, it is not “the particular new sin” that aids him in his consistency of evil. What continually aids him is his “state of sin” only. Any one “particular sin” simply demonstrates to him that he *is* evil, but it is his *being* evil that most excites him. Any expression of his “state of sin,” i.e., any external act of sin, is worthless compared to his actual, perpetual, internal condition of moral depravity.

Therefore “the continuance of sin,” which is now to be discussed, does not mean the particular new sins as much as the state of sin, which in turn becomes the internal intensification of sin, a conscious remaining in the state of sin, so that the law of motion in intensification, here as everywhere else, is inward, in greater and greater intensity of consciousness. [108,109]

Kierkegaard concludes this section by reaffirming that “the continuance of sin...does not mean the particular [individual acts of] new sins.” Instead, it means “the state of sin,”

the state of moral depravity that is true of all human beings except Jesus the Messiah. Therefore, growth in sin is not adding more and more acts of sin to one's life. It is either simply the continuation of one's moral depravity regardless of whether or not a person is an authentic "believer," or it is "a greater and greater intensity of consciousness" of one's moral depravity that manifests itself, at one end of the spectrum, by repentance and appeal to God's mercy on the part of the believer and, at the other end of the spectrum, by a commitment to evil on the part of the "demonic person." In both cases, the "law of motion in intensification" is at play in the internal workings of the human being, making him more and more aware of his evil so that he either desires to turn away from it or to turn towards it. Kierkegaard will now expand on this discussion of the "continuance of sin."

A.

THE SIN OF DESPAIRING OVER ONE'S SIN

Sin is despair; the intensification is the new sin of despairing over one's sin. It is obvious, of course, that this is in the category of intensification; it is not a new sin in the manner of one who stole a hundred dollars and steals a thousand the next time. No, we are not talking about particular sins here; the state of sin is sin, and this is intensified in a new consciousness. [109]

Kierkegaard begins this section by pointing out that there is another new sin that is newer than the "new sin" of the last section, i.e., the state of sin. This newer sin is what he calls a "new consciousness" and is "the new sin of despairing over one's sin." In other words, while we learned in the previous section that the state of sin, i.e., a human being's moral depravity, is new sin in comparison to particular acts of sin, because the state of sin is always present, Kierkegaard is taking this issue of the "new sin" one step further. If a person's sinful condition can be called "new sin," then, certainly, a person's choice to continue to despair over his moral depravity is just as much "new sin."

Consequently, Kierkegaard says that a person who looks at his immoral condition and thinks that his situation is hopeless because he will never escape it is intensifying his immoral condition. The reason that we can call this an intensification of sin is because it is man's moral depravity that actually leads him not only to think that he is in a hopeless situation but also to choose to remain hopeless—all the while knowing intuitively that God's grace and mercy are available to him. Might not this be the ultimate definition of insanity, because it is the most irrational choice that a human being can make—to choose willfully to reject the greatest gift that a human being can receive, God's eternal mercy and eternal life? As a result, we can legitimately identify every human being as insane, because, apart from the inner working of God's miraculous grace, we all refuse to take advantage of God's free and available mercy.

Continuing with Kierkegaard's comments, in this case, the "intensification" of despairing over one's sin is the same as the escalation of sin itself. Thus, despairing over sin becomes simply "a new consciousness," i.e., a new manner of thinking about oneself that moves a person from recognizing that he is a sinner, indeed, a morally depraved sinner, to acknowledging that he has no genuine interest in escaping his immoral condition. It is one thing to *be* a sinner. It is another thing to *remain* a sinner by convincing oneself falsely that it is impossible to escape one's sin and its eternal consequences. How does this happen in supposedly rational and sober-thinking human beings? Because....

To despair over one's sin indicates that sin has become or wants to be internally consistent. It wants nothing to do with the good, does not want to be so weak as to listen occasionally to other talk. No, it insists on listening only to itself, on having dealings only with itself; it closes itself up within itself, indeed, locks itself inside one more enclosure, and protects itself against every attack or pursuit by the good by despairing over sin. [109]

Let us walk through Kierkegaard's thoughts here carefully, because they are nothing less than profound. (So what else is new?) Kierkegaard is saying that progressing from

being in a state of sin to despairing over being in a state of sin demonstrates that a person merely wants to be “consistent” within himself and with himself. He does not want to deviate from who he is on the inside, i.e., a sinner. Indeed, it is his state of sin, i.e., his sinful condition and thus his “new sin,” as Kierkegaard has called it in the previous section, that leads him to want to remain exactly where he is, morally speaking—morally depraved and deprived of the mercy of God.

Another way of saying this is that this person “wants nothing to do with the good,” i.e., with moral goodness and moral perfection that comes only as a gift of God in eternity through His mercy. This “internally consistent” person considers it a weakness, indeed an inhuman weakness, “to listen occasionally to other talk” about solving the problem of his moral depravity and acquiring the hope of being good in eternity. Thus, he is content with despairing over his sin, and this despair “insists on listening only to itself, on having dealings only with itself.” This person “closes up within” himself and “locks” himself “inside one more enclosure.” He is already locked within the room of the state of sin. Now, he wants to lock himself in a room within this room—in the room of despair. By doing so he believes that he can protect himself “against every attack...by the good” that would seek to conquer his “despairing over sin.” “[B]y despairing over sin,” he has fortified himself against any possibility that goodness and mercy will win the battle against his state of sin and rob him of the consistency of both remaining internally morally depraved and desirous of doing so.

It is aware of having burned the bridge behind it and of thereby being inaccessible to the good and of the good being inaccessible to it, so that if in a weak moment it should itself will the good, that would still be impossible. Sin itself is severance from the good, but despair over sin is the second severance.
[109]

Still personifying sin, Kierkegaard says that “[i]t is aware of having burned the bridge behind it and thereby being inaccessible to the good and of the good being inaccessible

to it.” Not only has the sinner in his state of sin cut himself off from the goodness of escaping his sin, but he is actually “aware of having burned” this bridge. He is aware of having made it humanly “impossible” for him to have any hope of ending his sinful condition and moral depravity. Because of this person’s willfully choosing to be so intransigent towards a solution to the gravest problem of his human existence, his “[s]in is” the first “severance” or disconnection “from the good,” i.e., God’s goodness and mercy, while his “despair over sin is the second severance.”

This, of course, squeezes the uttermost demonic powers out of sin, gives it the profane toughness or perverseness that must consistently regard everything called repentance and grace not only as empty and meaningless but also as its enemy, as something against which a defense must be made most of all, just as the good defends itself against temptation. [109]

As if moral depravity were not already sufficiently demonic simply because it is abject and wretched rebellion against our Creator, who is the very source of goodness and our forgiveness, Kierkegaard points out that intentionally choosing the more intense state of hopelessness “squeezes the uttermost demonic powers out of sin.” Sin is the lemon—bitter already. Despair is the lemon’s juice, squeezed out of the lemon and then drizzled all over the lemon itself, enhancing its bitterness. This choice to remain in a hopeless state, whereby a person is convinced that he will never achieve absolute goodness and God’s mercy, “gives [sin] the profane toughness or perverseness that must consistently regard everything called repentance and grace not only as empty and meaningless but also as its enemy.”

Man’s moral depravity is already obscene and repugnant in the eyes of God. Man’s despair and intentional choice to avoid God’s mercy is an even greater inward perversity. In other words, despair over sin is the apex and pinnacle of deviant behavior, because it “must consistently regard everything called repentance and grace,” i.e., the best of the best and everything that would allow it to escape eventually its immoral

condition and God's eternal condemnation, "not only as empty and meaningless but also as its enemy." There is a war going on, and the war is between man and God. Because of man's stubbornness, God has rightly become his greatest enemy. However, instead of waving the white flag and surrendering to One so gracious, merciful, and loving, man fights God to the bitter end in order to avoid having to repent and acknowledge his moral depravity before Him. Man rebels against even the thought of genuinely desiring to be a different person who is not morally depraved. Similarly, God has rightly become man's greatest enemy, because He is a God of justice. He cannot permit evil to go unrequited, unless He simply chooses to be merciful. In the midst of this war, man fights God to the bitter end, because he wants to avoid His grace, mercy, forgiveness, and the promise of eternal life along with being transformed into a morally perfect person. In other words, man rebels against any possibility of goodness, even repentance, within him and against any goodness, even mercy, from God.

Indeed, Kierkegaard says that despair sees both "repentance and [God's] grace...as something against which a defense must be made most of all." Just as a person who values goodness, morality, and God's mercy above all other commodities in the present world "defends [himself] against temptation," so also the person of despair and eternal hopelessness sees repentance and grace "as something against which a defense must be made most of all." Imagine a man, who is given the choice either to defend himself against a criminal who is threatening to break into his house, rape his wife, torture his children, and murder all of them or to defend himself against repenting of his moral depravity and obtaining God's free and eternal mercy, and he chooses to defend himself against the latter instead of the former. Would we not be likely to say that this man is crazy? He prefers to protect himself against the goodness of God than to protect himself against the evil of a murderer. And yet, this man is us (pardon my poor English here).

Each of us, as a morally depraved sinner, is more intent on rebelling against God than we are on protecting our families. Such is the perversity of man's immoral condition.

Interpreted this way, Mephistopheles (in *Faust*) quite properly says that nothing is more miserable than a devil who despairs, for here despair must be interpreted as a willingness to be weak enough to hear something about repentance and grace. To describe the intensification in the relation between sin and despair over sin, the first may be termed the break with the good and the second with repentance. [109]

Here, Kierkegaard refers to the German legend that was described by both Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) in England and Goethe (1749-1832) in Germany where the ambitious scholar Doctor Faust sells his soul to the evil spirit Mephistopheles, i.e., the devil. This evil spirit "quite properly says that nothing is more miserable than a devil who despairs." It is one thing to be a devil. It is another to be a devil who chooses to be hopeless. However, for this devil, Kierkegaard interprets his despair as the opposite of how he has interpreted it regarding man. A devil, by definition, is evil with no recourse for his evil. There is no reason for him to despair, because he is already irreversibly evil. Therefore, for a devil to despair is for him to exhibit "a willingness to be weak enough to hear something about repentance and grace." However, any exposure to the "good" concepts of "repentance and grace," with some thought that they might be beneficial to him, can only make a devil, who is irreversibly committed to evil, even "more miserable" than he already is. A devil, unlike a man, is permanently trapped in his immoral condition with absolutely no possibility or potential for repenting and obtaining God's mercy. Consequently, there can be no second break with repentance in the midst of the intensification of his misery through despair. To use a modern expression, "repentance" is not even in a devil's vocabulary.

In contrast, a human being does have the potential to acknowledge his moral depravity and escape God's eternal condemnation through His mercy. Therefore, for man, the intensifying movement from simply a state of sin to despair over his state of sin

constitutes two breaks or bridges that get burned by him. The first bridge that is destroyed is that which would connect him to goodness and morality. The second bridge that is destroyed is that which would connect him to repentance such that he would bring his sin before God and appeal to Him for mercy. Thus,...

Despair over sin is an effort to survive by sinking even deeper. Just as a balloonist ascends by throwing off weights, so the person in despair sinks by more and more determinedly throwing off all the good (for the weight of the good is elevating); he sinks, privately thinking, of course, that he is ascending—and he is indeed growing lighter. [110]

For a morally depraved person, Kierkegaard claims that repentance of his immoral condition in order to obtain God's eternal mercy is as repugnant as death—and maybe even more so than death. Therefore, in order to “survive” this horrible fate of dying, that is repentance, he must expend every ounce of energy so as to engage in despair over his sin. His despair over his sin means that he is “sinking even deeper” and deeper into cutting himself off from the good.

It is like a balloonist who finds himself stuck at one altitude and cannot rise any higher. Therefore, he starts jettisoning extra weight in order to lighten himself and gain more altitude. Man's sinful state of moral depravity causes him to be stuck at one altitude of evil and perversity. Yet, he desires to rise higher in his evil and figures out that the best way to do so is actually to sink lower in his evil by resolving to become hopelessly imprisoned in his state of sin. He firmly chooses to despair by jettisoning the weight of listening to anything having to do with God, His goodness, and His mercy. He then deceives himself into thinking that “he is ascending” into greater and greater genuine humanness, that “he is indeed growing lighter” and rising into the heights of the best of human experience. However, all he is doing is sinking into greater and greater depths of obscene, repulsive, and heinous evil. He mistakenly throws off the weight of

the good only to bring his balloon crashing down into the destruction of God's eternal condemnation.

Sin itself is the struggle of despair; but then, when all the powers are depleted, there may be a new intensification, a new demonic closing up within himself; this is despair over sin. It is a step forward, a heightening of the demonic, and of course an absorption in sin. It is an effort to give stability and interest to sin as a power by deciding once and for all that one will refuse to hear anything about repentance and grace. Nevertheless, despair over sin is conscious particularly of its own emptiness, that it has nothing on which to live, not even an idea of its own self.

Kierkegaard points out here that moral depravity by itself is simply the "struggle of despair." By this, I think he means that it is the struggle to despair. Sin can exist without despairing, but despairing cannot exist without sin. Nevertheless, sin's ultimately goal is to despair, to reach a state of hopelessness that has psychologically and spiritually cut itself off from any possibility of escaping evil and obtaining God's mercy. Thus, when sin has done all it can and "all its powers are [apparently] depleted," man finds another source of energy that is actually the same, in order to intensify his immoral state. There is "a new demonic closing up within himself," and he pushes beyond simply his state of sin to "despair over sin." Thus, he takes "a step forward" beyond sin to "a heightening of the demonic" within him and becomes even more absorbed in sin. His is "an effort to give stability and interest to sin as a [fundamental] power" within him "by deciding once and for all that [he] will refuse to hear anything about repentance and grace."

In spite of a person's entrenching himself in the perverse evil of hopelessness as a more extreme rebellion against God, he is, nevertheless, "conscious particularly of its emptiness." Kierkegaard means that the despairing person ultimately "has nothing" for which to live, and he knows it. He thought he might be able to live for himself, to live for a self that is true, authentic, and justified as a self that is genuinely human in rebellion against God. However, he does not even have "an idea of [his] own self," properly speaking. Kierkegaard has already helped us understand that a "self" is one who faces

honestly and repentantly into his moral depravity, thus acknowledging his eternal design and the availability of eternal life through God's grace and mercy. This genuine and biblical "self" is the only kind that can experience any legitimate degree of fullness and satisfaction in the present realm. Otherwise, a person will feel empty, even if he tries to hide from this feeling. Thus, the person who despairs over his sin actually is aware at a conscious level of what he is doing to himself, that he is an empty human being with nothing truly valid and reasonable for which to live.

Macbeth's lines (II,2) are psychologically masterful: *Von jetzt* (after he has murdered the king—and now despairs over his sin) *giebt es nicht Ernstes mehr im Leben; Alles ist Tand, gestorben Ruhm und Gnade* [For, from this instant, there's nothing serious in mortality; All is but toys, renown and grace is dead]. The masterful stroke is the double turn in the last words (renown and grace [*Ruhm und Gnade*]). By sin, that is, by despairing over his sin, he has lost all relation to grace—and also to himself. His selfish self culminates in ambition. He has now in fact become the king, and yet, in despairing over his sin and of the reality of repentance, of grace, he has also lost himself; he cannot even keep on going by himself, and he is no closer to enjoying his self at the height of his ambition than he is to grasping grace. [110]

Kierkegaard refers to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as an example of sin that progresses beyond merely itself to despairing over itself. After Macbeth kills the king to become king himself, a dreadful sin, he despairs over his sin by stating that there is actually nothing truly "serious" or meaningful anymore for which to live. Everything in life has become merely a trifle, a "toy," to the extent that important things such as "renown [fame] and grace" are dead and non-existent. Kierkegaard says that Shakespeare's "masterful stroke" in this statement "is the double turn in the last words (renown and grace [*Ruhm und Gnade*])." Because Macbeth has chosen to despair over his crime of regicide, "he has lost all relation to grace," i.e., God's forgiveness for his evil act and his evil condition. As a result, Macbeth has also "lost all relation...to himself," i.e., to his true self. Therefore, in this instance, Macbeth's "selfish self culminates in ambition. He has now in fact become king, and yet, in despairing over his sin and of the reality of repentance, of

grace, he has also lost himself.” He has lost any human possibility of his true, biblical self whereby he would appeal to God for mercy and receive forgiveness and eternal life. His ambition has driven him inescapably to kill the king and, then, to despair of his crime to the extent that he has become aware of his loss of love for life. “All is but toys, renown and grace is dead.”

As a result, “he cannot even keep going by himself.” He will need the distractions of creating a reign of terror and dragging the country into civil war (as the story goes). Finally, he will lose everything that might possibly bring meaning to his life, including life itself. As a result, “he is no closer to enjoying his self at the height of his ambition than he is to grasping grace”—all because he has taken the extra step of the “new sin” of despairing over his state of sin. Such are the awful ramifications in the present realm of man’s moral depravity.

In life (insofar as despair over sin is found in life, but in any case there is something that people describe as that) there are frequent misconceptions about this despair over sin, presumably because of a universal preoccupation with frivolity, thoughtlessness, and sheer triviality, and for this reason people as a rule become quite formal and deferentially take off their hats to any manifestation of something deeper. [110]

If there is one thing that we can always count on Kierkegaard to do in the midst of his 19th-century Danish society and the Lutheran State Church, it is to point out the two natural and evil responses that people have to their moral depravity—entertainment and religion. Thus, the first response that people make to their moral depravity is “universal preoccupation with frivolity, thoughtlessness, and sheer triviality.” People simply do not want to get genuinely serious about their sin in the midst of their rebellion against God. Therefore, they spend their life focused on anything that allows them to distract themselves from their moral accountability to God, and the more trivial, superficial, and

just plain foolish the thing is, the better as far as they are concerned. Recently, when a top ranked college football team, near the end of their season, lost a game that knocked them out of the running to play in the national championship game, the television cameras showed a group of the fans weeping in the stands. What? We human beings are so quick to weep over the loss of a football game, but we refuse to weep over our sin and the loss of eternal life if God were not willing to be gracious and merciful to us. How frivolous, thoughtless, and trivial.

The second response that people make to their moral depravity is to pretend that they are taking it seriously when someone does happen to bring up the subject in public, for example, on Sunday morning at church. When it is socially necessary, i.e., strictly for appearance's sake, "people as a rule become quite formal and deferentially take off their hats to any manifestation of something deeper" than the frivolous, thoughtless, and trivial issues to which they have been devoted during the week. Now, in church on Sunday morning, they feel it necessary to keep up appearances and look the part of being serious and solemn in regard to their sin. Yet, they are still just as willing to remain entrenched in not only their immoral condition but also their despair of their immoral condition.

Either in confused haziness about itself and its significance, or with a streak of hypocrisy, or by way of the craftiness and sophistry intrinsic to all despair, despair over sin is not averse to giving itself the appearance of being something good. Then it is supposed to be the mark of a deep nature, which therefore is so sensitive about its sin. [110,111]

Yes, the person is actually firmly rooted in his "despair over sin." However, either the person is confused about the real significance of this sin and his choice to put himself into a state of thinking that it is utterly hopeless for him to escape it, or he is quite content with claiming to have high moral standards, while his frivolous and trivial behavior betrays his hypocrisy. Or, third, he is quite crafty and fully intends to deceive

his fellow church members, a trait that is “intrinsic to all despair,” because despair, by definition, refuses to face into the truth. In any case, this person “is not averse to giving [himself] the appearance of being something good.” Indeed, “appearance” is really all that matters to him and to his “despair over sin.” This kind of despair merely wants to exhibit “the mark of a deep nature.” It has in mind that, as long as it can convince others that it “is so sensitive about its sin,” then it is happy. It has no intention of being genuinely repentant of sin.

For example, if a person who has been addicted to some sin or other but has successfully resisted temptation for a long time has a relapse and again succumbs to temptation, then the depression that sets in is by no means always sorrow over the sin. It can be something very different; for that matter, it may be a bitterness against Governance, as if it were responsible for his succumbing to temptation, as if it ought not to have been so hard on him, since he had successfully resisted temptation for such a long time. [111]

By virtue of our moral depravity, we human beings often find ourselves “addicted to some sin or other.” However, our moral depravity may not prevent us from hating our sin to a degree and doing all that we can to avoid it. Therefore, even in our immoral condition, we pursue avenues that will give us the strength to make better choices, and we certainly can get to the point whereby we have “successfully resisted temptation for a long time.” In this steadfastly human state, if a person “has a relapse and again succumbs to temptation,” Kierkegaard encourages us to realize that “the depression that sets in is by no means always sorrow over sin.” In other words, naturally immoral people, i.e., all human beings, who fail at fending off their sin after a lengthy reprieve from it, are not necessarily genuinely sorry for their failure, even though they display great anguish and sorrow over it.

Instead of biblical sorrow, the person may inwardly be experiencing something quite different. He may actually be angry with “Governance,” i.e., with God, blaming Him and making Him “responsible for his succumbing to temptation.” He believes that God “ought

not to have been so hard on him” either by pushing him into a situation where he failed to resist temptation or by withholding the strength necessary to resist it, especially “since he had successfully resisted temptation for such a long time.” Surely, he deserved to be shielded by God from temptation because of his long-term efforts to avoid it.

In any case, it is altogether effeminate straightway to regard this sorrow as good, not to be in the least aware of the duplicity in all passionateness, which in turn is a sense of the ominous that can make the passionate one understand later, almost to the point of madness, that he has said the very opposite of what he intended to say. [111]

Kierkegaard continues arguing that “it is altogether” a sign of weakness on our part if we were “to regard this sorrow as good,” because we would be overlooking the very strong possibility that the person is being quite duplicitous and deceitful. This possibility is based upon “the duplicity of all passionateness,” that all human beings are driven by their moral depravity to exhibit emotions that appear genuinely biblical when they are actually genuinely diabolical.

There is also “a sense of the ominous” here, because the deceitful nature of a person’s passions could still lead him eventually to grasp the fact that he really has acted the hypocrite. In fact, this conscious discovery could almost drive him mad. He has become aware of his duplicity and has a choice—to perpetuate it or give it up. He is hard-pressed to know what decision to make, and it almost drives him mad. What is he going to do with these two possible choices of either prolonging his deceitful game or turning to God, the one person who can help him eternally? His choice is to carry on the *deceit while appearing to turn to God by turning away from God.*

Such a person emphatically declares, perhaps in ever stronger terms, that his relapse plagues and torments him, brings him to despair, and he says: “I will never forgive myself.” This is supposed to show how much good there is in him, what a deep nature he has. It is a subterfuge. I deliberately used that stock phrase, “I will never forgive myself,” words commonly heard in this connection. And with this very phrase one can immediately straighten out oneself dialectically. He will never forgive himself—but now if God would forgive him this, well, he certainly could have the goodness to forgive himself. No, his

despair over the sin is a far cry from being a qualification of the good, is a more intensive qualification of sin, the intensity of which is absorption in sin—and it is this most of all when he is passionately repeating this phrase and thereby denouncing himself (the least of his considerations), when he “never will forgive himself” for sinning like that (for this kind of talk is exactly the opposite of the brokenhearted contrition that prays God to forgive). [111]

The choice this deceiver makes is to declare even more forcefully that he is absolutely crushed by his moral setback and that his conscience is wracked with shame and guilt, even to the point where now he is past forgiveness. He considers himself so evil that he cannot see any possible way that he can be forgiven, either by himself or by God. In his mind, his despair and hopelessness are so legitimately profound that, even “if God would forgive him this” relapse into the sin that he has successfully avoided for so long, he still could not forgive himself.

Kierkegaard points out that this person’s “despair over” his moral setback “is a far cry from the qualification of the good.” In other words, his anguish over his sin, that he and probably others consider to be such a profound mark of a biblically repentant man, is nothing more than a greater “intensive qualification of sin.” Everyone around him considers this man’s deep sorrow and guilt to be a greater “intensification of the good,” and, yet, they are the exact opposite. In fact, his refusal to forgive himself, which ultimately is a refusal to accept God’s forgiveness, is merely an “absorption in sin.” He is obsessed with his sin to the point of remaining unforgiven. Such an obsession demonstrates just how much more he is attracted to his sin than he is to goodness.

Kierkegaard also says that this deceiver is most absorbed in his sin “when he is passionately repeating this phrase and denouncing himself..., when he ‘never will forgive himself’ for sinning like that.” The truth of the matter is that “this kind of talk is exactly the opposite of the brokenhearted contrition that prays God to forgive,” that acknowledges that there is no sin so evil that God cannot forgive, except the sin of refusing to be forgiven by God.

The point is that during the time that he was successfully resisting temptation he appeared in his own eyes to be better than he actually was, he became proud of himself. It is to this pride's advantage that the past be altogether a thing of the past. But in this relapse the past suddenly becomes very much present again. His pride cannot bear this reminder, and that is the reason for his profound distress etc. But the distress clearly indicates a movement away from God, a secret selfishness and pride, and is a substitute for humbly beginning by humbly thanking God that he helped him to resist temptation for so long a time, acknowledging before God and himself that it is already much more than he deserved, and then humbling himself under the recollection of what he has been. [111,112]

The root of this man's problem is his pride. He earnestly believed that he was a better person, that, indeed, he was a good person when "he was successfully resisting temptation." As a result, he became proud of his moral accomplishment, and pride certainly seems to have a legitimate basis while the sin remains "a thing of the past." He genuinely felt as though it was his strength and his choices that prevented him from succumbing to temptation again, and he was proud of it. However, now he has been confronted so intensely with his sin and its power, that it is more powerful than all his best efforts and even his pride. His "relapse...suddenly" makes the past the "present again." However, his "pride cannot bear this reminder" of his inherent moral depravity, and this becomes "the reason for his profound distress etc. But the distress clearly indicates a movement *away from God,*" *not towards God* (emphasis mine). It demonstrates "a secret selfishness and pride." Instead of leading him towards authentic repentance, it "is a substitute for humbly beginning by humbly thanking God that he helped him to resist temptation for so long a time." Instead of being grateful for the time that he did not succumb to the temptation to sin and "acknowledging before God and himself that it is much more than he deserved," he beats himself up and pridefully declares to all who will listen that he does not deserve to be forgiven, even by a transcendent and merciful God. Rather than "humbling himself under the recollection of what he has been" and what he will always be—a morally depraved human being who

occasionally succeeds at resisting temptation by doing something good externally and who always requires and receives God's boundless forgiveness—he entrenches himself in his pride that denies God's goodness and his inability to please God apart from God's independently granting him mercy and forgiveness. If he cannot deserve God's forgiveness (an oxymoron as it is) and cannot deserve his own forgiveness, then he refuses to have both.

Here, as everywhere, is what the old devotional books explain so profoundly, so experientially, so instructively. They teach that God sometimes lets the believer stumble and fall in some temptation or other, precisely in order to humble him and thereby to establish him better in the good; the contrast between the relapse and the possibly significant progress in the good is very humiliating, the identity with himself very painful. The better a person is, the more acutely painful the particular sin naturally is, and the more dangerous is the slightest bit of impatience if he does not make the right turn. In his sorrow, he may sink into the darkest depression—and a fool of a spiritual counselor may be on the verge of admiring his deep soul and the powerful influence good has on him—as if this were of the good. And his wife, well, she feels deeply humbled by comparison with such an earnest and holy man who can sorrow over his sin in this way. His talk may be even more deceptive; he may not say: I can never forgive myself (as if he had previously forgiven himself sins—a blasphemy). No, he says that God can never forgive him for it. Alas, this is just a subterfuge. His sorrow, his cares, his despair are selfish (just like the anxiety about sin, which sometimes practically drives a man anxiously into sin because it is self-love that wants to be proud of itself, to be without sin), and consolation is the least of his needs; therefore the prodigious number of reasons that spiritual counselors prescribe for taking consolation merely makes the sickness worse. [112]

Kierkegaard has read some of the old theologians who understood God correctly, that sometimes He “lets the believer stumble and fall in some temptation or other, precisely in order to humble him and thereby to establish him better in the good.” We notice that the “good” is not that of resisting temptation and performing what is good outwardly speaking. It is a person's humbling himself before God in the midst of his not doing good externally and, instead, appealing to Him for mercy. The necessity of humility definitely makes “the relapse...very humiliating.” The man is embarrassed by his sin. Indeed, it is “very painful,” and, once again, facing into himself and who he really is as a morally depraved person is the most difficult thing that he has ever done in his life. The

guilt and pain that it produces is enough to motivate him to try to avoid it, in fact, to display his anguish by claiming that he can never be forgiven, which is blasphemy. And the “better [outwardly] a person is, the more acutely painful the particular sin naturally is.” We all like to think of ourselves as good, and we also want others to view us likewise. Therefore, the more we think of ourselves as good and the more that others consider us to be good, the more painful and humiliating will be our moral failures.

Now comes the “dangerous” moment, when “the slightest bit of impatience” could result in the person’s not making “the right turn.” He can either genuinely repent or genuinely refuse to be forgiven as he sinks “into the darkest depression.” Then, along comes “a fool of a spiritual counselor,” who admires the depth of this man’s sorrow over his sin, mistaking it for genuine faith and “the powerful influence good has on him—as if this were of the good.”

In addition, his wife, because of her own spiritual naiveté or foolishness, further contributes to the charade by feeling “deeply humbled by comparison with such an earnest and holy man who can sorrow over his sin in this way.” Her husband does not help the situation as he babbles on even more deceptively. He does not simply say, “I can never forgive myself.” He has to take his chicanery to the highest level and claims “that God can never forgive him.”

All “this is a subterfuge. His sorrow, his cares, his despair are selfish.” They are just “like the anxiety about [his] sin, which sometimes drives a man anxiously into” the sin of refusing to humble himself before God by genuinely appealing to Him for mercy, “because it is self-love that wants to be proud of itself,” even if it means being proud of the sin of thinking that he is without sin.³⁴

Finally, the last thing that this person needs is for a naïve spiritual counselor to come along and console him in his sorrow over his sin, as though his “sorrow” is genuine

³⁴ cf. Hebrews 6:4-6; 1 John 1:8-10

biblical sorrow. In fact, if this is what happens, it “merely makes the sickness worse.” Not only has this person succeeded in deceiving himself by thinking that he is doing the right thing when he sorrowfully claims that he is incapable of being forgiven by God, but he has acquired a strong ally, who, perhaps, has a reputation for being wise and helpful in such situations, and, yet, now is making matters only worse. This spiritual counselor is unwittingly encouraging the sick patient to enhance his illness by using sorrow to cover up more deceitfully his pride and refusal to accept God’s eternal mercy. This is all “the sin of despairing over one’s sin.”

B.

THE SIN OF DESPAIRING OF THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS (OFFENSE)

At this point the intensification of the consciousness of the self is the knowledge of Christ, a self directly before Christ. First came (in Part One) ignorance of having an eternal self, then knowledge of having a self in which there is something eternal. Then (in the transition to Part Two) it was pointed out that this distinction is included under the self that has a human conception of itself or that has man as the criterion. The counterpart to this was a self directly before God, and this constituted the basis for the definition. [113]

Kierkegaard reviews the progression in his analysis of despair. First, he spoke of the despair that arises out of a person’s moral depravity without this person being consciously aware of the fact that God has designed human beings for eternity. This person considers himself to be merely a temporal being so that the present existence is all there is for all human beings. Second, he described the despair that is in response to a conscious awareness of God’s eternal design of human beings, so that, in spite of this design, a person rejects God’s offer of eternal mercy and life and chooses to remain condemned by God. Third, Kierkegaard made the point that despair in either the person who is ignorant of his eternal design or the person who is aware of it exists even if this person uses himself as the criterion, the standard, for all his judgments and assessments of the reality in which he lives. Fourth, Kierkegaard moved to the final kind

of despairing human being, one who does consider himself as a human being who has been created by God and is accountable to God for his thoughts and actions—and yet rejects doing what is necessary, repentance, in order to avoid God’s eternal condemnation.

Now a self comes directly before Christ, a self that in despair still does not will to be itself or in despair wills to be itself. Despair of the forgiveness of sins must be traceable to the one or to the other formula for despair, despair in weakness or the despair of defiance: despair in weakness, which is offended and does not dare to believe; the despair of defiance, which is offended and will not believe. But here weakness and defiance are the opposite of what they usually are (since here the point is not just about being oneself but about being oneself in the category of being a sinner, thus in the category of one’s imperfection). Ordinarily weakness is: in despair not to will to be oneself. Here this is defiance, for here it is indeed the defiance of not willing to be oneself, what one is—a sinner—and for that reason wanting to dispense with the forgiveness of sins. Ordinarily defiance is: in despair to will to be oneself—a sinner—in such a way that there is no forgiveness. [113]

When a person becomes aware of the message of the New Testament, that Jesus of Nazareth is the Jewish Messiah (Christ) who will stand at the judgment and appeal to God for mercy on our behalf if we have been authentic believers in the present realm, he “comes directly before Christ.” This person can be either a person of “weakness” or of “defiance.” Either he can despair while not willing to be himself, a self of eternity who repents of his sin before God, or he can despair while willing to be himself, a self of eternity who refuses to repent of his sin before God. In the former case, that of “weakness,” the despairing person “is offended and does not dare to believe.” He is unwilling to believe. In the latter case, that of “defiance,” the despairing person “is offended and will not believe.” The subtle distinction that Kierkegaard is making is that it is not that the defiant person is *unwilling to believe*. He is *willing not to believe*. He defiantly chooses not to believe, while the weak person makes a seemingly weaker choice in being unwilling to believe.

However, now that the person has come “directly before Christ,” the terms “weakness” and “defiance” take on opposite meanings to what Kierkegaard had ascribed to them earlier. Now that he has explicitly introduced “the category of being a sinner,” i.e., “the category of one’s imperfection,” weakness switches its meaning. “Ordinarily weakness is: in despair not to will be oneself.” Now, though, this “weakness” becomes “defiance,” whereby the person “is indeed” in defiance” and is “not willing to be” himself. This is to say that he is “not willing” to be a “sinner—and for that reason wanting to dispense with the forgiveness of sins.” Consequently, to be unwilling to be a sinner is to be willing to reject Gods’ eternal forgiveness and mercy. But this sounds like defiance, and, indeed, it is, because defiance is “in despair to will to be oneself—a sinner—in such a way that there is no forgiveness.” In other words, if a person rejects forgiveness while being unwilling to be a sinner, which is a sign of “weakness,” then the person’s “weakness” has become “defiance,” because he now wills to be a sinner without eternal forgiveness.

A self directly before Christ is a self intensified by the inordinate concession from God, intensified by the inordinate accent that falls upon it because God allowed himself to be born, become man, suffer, and die also for the sake of this self. As stated previously, the greater the conception of God, the more self; so it holds true here: the greater the conception of Christ, the more self. Qualitatively a self is what its criterion is. That Christ is the criterion is the expression, attested by God, for the staggering reality that a self has, for only in Christ is it true that God is man’s goal and criterion, or the criterion and goal. —But the more self there is, the more intense is sin. [113,114]

God has made a tremendous “concession” to mankind. He has become a man, Jesus of Nazareth. And not only has He become a man, but his man, the “God-man” Jesus, suffered and died after being nailed to a cross and executed as a common criminal by the Romans and Jews. In addition, God did this through and with Jesus “for the sake of this self” that “comes directly before Christ” by encountering the message of

the New Testament to the effect that we are all sinners and need Jesus' advocacy at he judgment in order to obtain God's eternal mercy.

By coming "directly before Christ" in this manner, a person acquires a understanding of God, and "the greater the conception of God, the more self." In other words, the more a human being understands about God, the more he understands about himself. A person can understand himself to a great degree by understanding that God is our Creator and Judge. It also "holds true" that "the greater the conception of Christ, the more self." It is one thing to grasp the concept of God as Creator and Judge and by so doing to come to a certain level of understanding of oneself. It is another thing to grasp the concept of God as Jesus, the Christ (Messiah), and by so doing come to a greater level of understanding of oneself.

As Kierkegaard says, "[q]ualitatively a self is what its criterion is." The more a human being understands what it is for him to be a human being, the more he is a true "self." Therefore, because God has made the Christ, the king of the eternal Kingdom of God, the focus of all the created reality, then Jesus as the Christ and Messiah is "man's goal and criterion, or the criterion and goal." As an bit of an aside with my not knowing Danish and the Danish word that Kierkegaard used, our English word "criterion" comes from the Greek word "to judge." In other words, I think that Kierkegaard is saying that everything and its purpose and meaning in the creation must be judged in the light of Jesus as God's focal point for the creation. God has created all of reality for the purpose of making Jesus the ruler over it in eternity. As a result, Jesus as the Christ "is the criterion" by which all other things within the creation are measure and evaluated. Therefore, the more a person becomes aware of God's purposes for Jesus the Christ, "the more self there is," i.e., the more the person is aware of his own sinfulness and God's purpose of having Jesus stand at the judgment with us and appeal to Him for mercy if we have lived in the present realm with authentic belief. In this manner, sin

becomes more intense for a human being in the sense that he becomes more aware, understanding, and, hopefully, more willing to repent of his sin and moral depravity.

The intensification of sin can also be shown from another side. Sin was despair, the intensification was despair over sin. But now God offers reconciliation in the forgiveness of sin. Nevertheless, the sinner still despairs, and despair acquires a still deeper manifestation: it now relates to God in a way, and yet precisely because it is even further away it is even more intensively absorbed in sin. When the sinner despairs of the forgiveness of sins, it is almost as if he walked right up to God and said, "No, there is not forgiveness of sins, it is impossible," and it looks like close combat. Yet to be able to say this and for it to be heard, a person must become qualitatively distanced from God, and in order to fight *cominus* [in close combat] he must be *eminus* [at a distance]—so wondrously is the life of the spirit acoustically constructed, so wondrously are the ratios of distance established. In order that the "No," which in a way wants to grapple with God, can be heard, a person must get as far away for God as possible. The most offensive forwardness toward God is at the greatest distance; in order to be forward toward God, a person must go far away; if he comes closer, he cannot be forward, and if he is forward, this *eo ipso* means that he is far away. What human powerlessness directly before God! If a person is forward toward a man of rank and importance, he may very well be punished by being thrust far away from him, but in order to be able to be forward toward God, one has to go far away from him. [114]

Another way to understand the intensification of sin as described by a person's despair over the forgiveness of sins is to think in terms of how this person would communicate his stance to God. If a person is willfully choosing to reject God's offer of eternal forgiveness, on the one hand, he could communicate his choice to God explicitly by walking right up to Him and telling him to His face, "I am categorically rejecting your offer of forgiveness." This would place the person in such close proximity to God that we can imagine that his face is just a few inches away from God's face. Such a picture also indicates how adamant this person is in regard to refusing to accept from God His greatest gift—eternal forgiveness of sins. However, on the other hand, Kierkegaard is saying that this person also happens to standing infinitely away from God, so to speak. The reason that this is also the case is that the person who rejects God's forgiveness must make sure that he protects himself from anything about or from God that could persuade him to change his mind and actually accept God's forgiveness.

It would be like someone who wants to tell a very sick person who has a highly contagious disease that he does not want to catch his illness. If we picture the ill person quarantined in an airtight room with a six inch Plexiglas window, another person could walk up to the window with his face two inches away while the person inside has his face two inches away from the window on the other side. Then, because he is so adamant about never ever entering the room and risking getting sick, the person outside could yell through the glass, "I do not want your disease." However, this person has protected himself so well from the disease by remaining outside the Plexiglas window that he might as well be across the universe when it comes to how far he is away from the disease itself.

The person who despairs of the forgiveness of sins has quarantined God in an airtight room, walked up to the six-inch thick window, and yelled at God, "I do not want your forgiveness." However, in order to make sure that none of God's goodness, kindness, and love contaminates him and possibly persuades him to change his mind, he has had to protect himself by putting God in a sealed room with a Plexiglas window, thus, spiritually and morally, placing himself completely on the other side of the universe and therefore as far away from God as a human being can possibly get. He is so adamantly rebellious toward God that he cannot stand the thought of being close to Him while also making sure that he is close to Him as possible in order to communicate clearly and strongly that He is rejecting God's offer of forgiveness of sins.

In life, this sin (to despair of the forgiveness of sins) is conceived erroneously more often than not, especially since the time when the ethical was abolished, so that an authentic ethical word is seldom or never heard. Despairing of the forgiveness of sins is esthetically-metaphysically esteemed as a sign of a deep nature, which is about the same as accepting naughtiness in a child as a sign of a deep nature. On the whole, it is unbelievable what confusion has entered the sphere of religion since the time when "thou shalt" was abolished as the sole regulative aspect of man's relationship with God. This "thou shalt" must be present in any determination of the religious; in its place, the God-idea or the concept of God has been fancifully used as an ingredient in human importance, in becoming self-important directly before God. Just as one becomes self-

important in politics by belonging to the opposition and eventually comes to prefer to have an administration just to have something to oppose, so also there is eventually a reluctance to do away with God—just to become even more self-important by being the opposition. Everything that in the old days was regarded with horror as the expression of ungodly subordination is now regarded as genius, the sign of a deep nature. “Thou shalt believe” is the old-fashioned phrase, short and good, as sober as possible—nowadays it is a sign of genius and a deep nature not to be able to do so. “Thou shalt believe in the forgiveness of sins” were the words, and the only commentary on that was “You will harm yourself if you cannot do it, for one can do what one is supposed to do”—nowadays it is a sign of genius and of a deep nature not to be able to believe that. What an excellent outcome Christendom has brought about! If not one word about Christianity were heard, men would not be so conceited, something paganism has never been; but since the Christian conceptions float unchristianly in the air, they have been used of the most aggravated rudeness—if not misused in some other but equally shameless manner. Is it not epigrammatic enough that cursing was not customary in paganism, whereas it really is right at home in Christendom, that out of a kind of horror and fear of the mysterious paganism as a rule named the name of God with tremendous solemnity, whereas in Christendom God’s name is the word that most frequently appears in daily speech and is clearly the word that is given the least thought and used most carelessly, because the poor, revealed God (who instead of keeping himself hidden, as the upper class usually does, was careless and injudicious enough to become revealed) has become a personage far too familiar to the whole population, a personage for whom they then do the exceedingly great service of going to church every once in a while, for which they are also commended by the pastor, who on behalf of God thanks them for the honor of the visit, favors them with the title of pious, but is a little sarcastic about those who never show God the honor of going to church. [114-116]

The sin of despairing of the forgiveness of sins is *offense*. The Jews had a perfect right to be offended by Christ because he claimed to forgive sins. It takes a singularly high degree of spiritlessness (that is, as ordinarily found in Christendom), if one is not a believer (and if one is as believer, one does believe that Christ was God), not to be offended at someone’s claim to forgive sins. And in the next place, it takes an equally singular spiritlessness not to be offended at the very idea that sin can be forgiven. For the human understanding, this is most impossible—but I do not therefore laud as genius the inability to believe it, for it *shall* be believed. [116]

In paganism, of course, this sin could not be found. If the pagan could have had the true conception of sin (which he could not have, since he lacked the conception of God), he could not have gone any further than to despair over his sin. Indeed, more than that (and herein is all the concession that can be made to human understanding and thought), the pagan must be eulogized who actually reached the point of despairing not over the world, not over himself in general, but over his sin. Humanly speaking, it takes both depth and ethical qualifications for that. Further than this, no human being as such can come, and rarely does anyone come so far. But, Christianly, everything is changed, for you shall believe in the forgiveness of sins. [116,117]

And what is the situation of Christendom with regard to the forgiveness of sins? Well, the state of Christendom is actually despair of forgiveness of sins; but this must be understood in the sense that Christendom is so far behind that its state never becomes apparent as being that. Even the consciousness of sin is not reached, and the only kinds of sins recognized are those that paganism also recognized—and life goes on happily in pagan peace of mind. By living in Christendom, however, men go beyond paganism, they go ahead and imagine that this peace of mind is—well, it cannot be otherwise in Christendom—consciousness of the forgiveness of sins, a notion that the clergy encourage the congregation to believe. [117]

Christendom's basic trouble is really Christianity, that the teaching about the God-man (please note that, Christianly understood, this is safeguarded by the paradox and the possibility of offense) is profaned by being preached day in and day out, that the qualitative difference between God and man is pantheistically abolished (first in a highbrow way through speculation, then in a lowbrow way in the highways and byways). No teaching on earth has ever really brought God and man so close together as Christianity, nor can any do so, for only God himself can do that, and any human fabrication remains just a dream, a precarious delusion. But neither has any teaching ever protected itself so painstakingly against the most dreadful of all blasphemies, that after God has taken this step it should be taken in vain, as if it all merges into one—God and man—never has any teaching been protected in the same way as Christianity, which protects itself by means of the offense. Woe to the babblers, woe to the loose thinkers, and woe, woe to all the hangers-on who have learned from them and praise them! [117]

If order is to be maintained in existence—and God does want that, for he is not a God of confusion—then the first thing to keep in mind is that every human being is an individual human being and is to become conscious of being an individual human being. If men are first permitted to run together in what Aristotle calls the animal category—the crowd—then this abstraction, instead of being less than nothing, even less than the most insignificant individual human being, comes to be regarded as being something—then it does not take long before this abstraction becomes God. And then, *philosophice* [philosophically viewed], the doctrine of the God-man is correct. Then, just as we have learned that in governments the masses intimidate the king and the newspapers intimidate the cabinet ministers, so we have finally discovered that the *summa summarum* [sum total] of all men intimidates God. This is then called the doctrine of the God-man, or that God and man are *idem per idem* [the same]. Of course, some of the philosophers who were involved in spreading the teaching about the predominance of the generation over the individual turn away in disgust when their teaching has so degenerated that the mob is the God-man. But these philosophers forget that it is still their doctrine; they ignore that it was not more true when the upper class accepted it, when the elite of the upper class accepted it, when the elite of the upper class or a select circle of philosophers was the incarnation. [117,118]

This means that the doctrine of the God-man has made Christendom brazen. It almost seems as if God were too weak. It seems as if the same thing happened to him as happened to the good-natured person who makes too great concessions and then is repaid with ingratitude. It is God who devised the

teaching about the God-man, and now Christendom has brazenly turned it around and foists kinship on God, so that the concession that God has made means practically what it means these days when a king grants a more independent constitution—and we certainly know what that means: “he was forced to do it.” It seems as if God had gotten himself into hot water; it seems as if the sensible man would be right if he said to God: It is your own fault. Why did you get so involved with man? It would never have occurred to any man, it would never have arisen in any man’s heart that there should be this likeness between God and man. It was you yourself who had it announced—now you are reaping the harvest. [118,119]

But Christianity has protected itself from the beginning. It begins with the teaching about sin. The category of sin is the category of individuality. Sin cannot be thought speculatively at all. The individual human being lies beneath the concept; an individual human being cannot be thought, but only the concept “man.” —That is why speculation promptly embarks upon the teaching about the *predominance* of the generation over the individual, for it is too much to expect that speculation should acknowledge the *impotence* of the concept in relation to actuality. —But just as one individual person cannot be thought, neither can one individual sinner; sin can be thought (then it becomes negation), but not one individual sinner. That is precisely why there is no earnestness about sin if it is only to be thought, for earnestness is simply this: that you and I are sinners. Earnestness is not sin in general; rather, the accent of earnestness rests on the sinner, who is the single individual. With respect to “the single individual,” speculation, if it is consistent, must make light of being a single individual or being that which cannot be thought. If it cares to do anything along this line, it must say to the individual: Is this anything to waste your time on? Forget it! To be an individual human being is nothing! Think—then you are all mankind: *cogito ergo sum* [I think therefore I am]. But perhaps that is a lie; perhaps instead the single individual human being and to be a single human being are the highest. Just suppose it is. To be completely consistent, then, speculation must also say: To be an individual sinner is not to be something; it lies beneath the concept; do not waste any time on it etc. And what then? Instead of being an individual sinner, is one to think sin (just as one is asked to think the concept “man” instead of being an individual human being)? And what then? By thinking sin, does a person himself become “sin”—*cogito ergo sum*? A brilliant suggestion! But there is no need to fear that one will become sin—pure sin—in this way, for sin cannot be thought. Even speculation has to admit this, inasmuch as sin does indeed fall outside the concept “sin.” But let us terminate this arguing *e concessis* (on the basis of the opponent’s premises)—the main issue is something else. Speculation does not take into consideration that with respect to sin the ethical is involved, always pointing in the direction opposite to that of speculation and taking the very opposite steps, for the ethical does not abstract from actuality but immerses itself in actuality and operates mainly with the help of that speculatively disregarded and scorned category: individuality. Sin is a qualification of the single individual; it is irresponsibility and new sin to pretend as if it were nothing to be an individual sinner—when one himself is this individual sinner. Here Christianity steps in, makes the sign of the cross before speculation; it is just as impossible for speculation to get around this issue as for a sailing vessel to sail directly against a contrary wind. The earnestness of sin is its actuality in the single individual, be it you or I. Speculatively, we are supposed to look away from the single individual; therefore, speculatively, we

can speak only superficially about sin. The dialectic of sin is diametrically contrary to that of speculation. [119,120]

Christianity begins here—with the teaching about sin, and thereby with the single individual. Surely, it is Christianity that has taught us about the God-man, about the likeness between God and man, but it has a great abhorrence of flippant or brazen forwardness. By means of the teaching about sin and particular sins, God and Christ, quite unlike any kings, have protected themselves once and for all against the nation, the people, the crowd, the public, etc. and also against every demand for a more independent constitution. All those abstractions simply do not exist for God; for God in Christ there live only single individuals (sinners). Yet God can very well encompass the whole; he can take care of the sparrows to boot. God is indeed a friend of order, and to that end he is present in person at every point, is everywhere present at every moment (in the textbook this is listed as one of the attributes of God, something people think about a little once in a while but certainly never try to think about continuously). His concept is not like man's, beneath which the single individual lies as that which cannot be merged in the concept; his concept embraces everything, and in another sense he has no concept. God does not avail himself of an abridgment; he comprehends (*comprehendit*) actuality itself, all its particulars; for him the single individual does not lie beneath the concept. [120,121]

The teaching about sin—that you and I are sinners—a teaching that unconditionally splits up the “crowd,” confirms the qualitative difference between God and man more radically than ever before, for again only God can do this; sin is indeed: *before God*. In no way is a man so different from God as in this, that he, and that means every man, is a sinner, and is that “before God,” whereby the opposites are kept together in a double sense: they are held together (*continentur*), they are not allowed to go away from each other, but by being held together in this way the differences show up all the more sharply, just as when two colors are held together, *opposita juxta se posita magis illucesunt* [the opposites appear more clearly by juxtaposition]. Sin is the one and only predication about a human being that in no way, either *via negationis* [by denial] or *via eminentiae* [by idealization], can be stated of God. To say of God (in the same sense as saying that he is not finite and, consequently, *via negationis*, that he is infinite) that he is not a sinner is blasphemy. [121,122]

As sinner, man is separated from God by the most chasmic qualitative abyss. In turn, of course, God is separated from man by the same chasmic qualitative abyss when he forgives sins. If by some kind of reverse adjustment the divine could be shifted over to the human, there is one way in which man could never in eternity come to be like God: in forgiving sins. [122]

However, offense is the most decisive qualification of subjectivity, of the single individual, that is possible. To think offense without thinking a person offended is perhaps not as impossible as thinking flute playing when there is no flute player, but even thought has to admit that offense, even more than falling in love, is an illusive concept that does not become actual until someone, a single individual, is offended. [122]

Thus offense is related to the single individual. And with this, Christianity begins, that is, making every man a single individual, an individual sinner; and here everything that heaven and earth can muster regarding the possibility of

offense (God alone has control of that) is concentrated—and this is Christianity. Then Christianity says to each individual: You shall believe—that is, either you shall be offended or you shall believe. Not one word more: there is nothing more to add. “Now I have spoken,” declares God in heaven; “we shall discuss it in eternity. In the meantime, you can do what you want to, but judgment is at hand.” [122]

A judgment! Of course, we men have learned, and experience teaches us, that when there is a mutiny on a ship or in an army there are so many who are guilty that punishment has to be abandoned, and when it is the public, the esteemed, cultured public, or a people, then there is not only no crime, then, according to the newspapers (upon which we can depend as upon the gospel and revelation), then it is God’s will.³⁵ How can this be? It follows from the fact that the concept “judgment” corresponds to the single individual; judgment is not made *en masse*, can be flattered *en masse*—in short, in many ways they can be treated as cattle, but they cannot be judged as cattle, for cattle cannot come under judgment. no matter how many are judged, if the judging is to have any earnestness and truth, then each individual is judged. Now when so many are guilty, it is humanly impossible to do it—that is why the whole thing is abandoned. It is obvious that there can be no judgment: there are too many to be judged; it is impossible to get hold of them or manage to get hold of them as single individuals, and therefore *judging* has to be abandoned. [122,123]

And now in our enlightened age, when all anthropomorphic and anthropathic conceptions of God are inappropriate, it is still not inappropriate to think of God as a judge comparable to an ordinary district judge or judge advocate who cannot get through such a complicated and protracted case—and the conclusion is that it will be exactly like this in eternity. Therefore, let us just stick together and make sure that the clergy preach this way. And should there happen to be an individual who dares to speak otherwise, an individual foolish enough to make his own life concerned and accountable in fear and trembling, and then in addition makes himself a nuisance to others—then let us protect ourselves by regarding him as mad or, if necessary, by putting him to death. If many of us do it, then there is no wrong. It is nonsense, an antiquated notion, that the many can do wrong. What many do is God’s will. Before this wisdom—this we know from experience, for we are not inexperienced striplings; we do not talk glibly, we speak as men of experience—before this wisdom to this day all men have bowed—kings, emperors, and excellencies—by means of this wisdom all our animals have been improved up to now—and so you can wager that God, too, is going to learn to bow. It is just a matter of continuing to be many, a good majority who stick together; if we do that, then we are protected against the judgment of eternity. [123,124]

Well, presumably they would be protected if they were not supposed to become single individuals except in eternity. But before God they were and are continually single individuals; the person sitting in a showcase is not as embarrassed as every human being is in his transparency before God. This is the relationship of conscience. The arrangement is such that through the conscience the report promptly follows each guilt, and the guilty one himself must write it. But it is written with invisible ink and therefore first becomes clearly legible only

³⁵ cf. Jacques Ellul in *Propaganda* where he argues that the beliefs of the crowd that has accepted propaganda become sacred to the point that individuals believe them to be eternal truths (pg. 165).

when it is held up to the light in eternity while eternity is auditing the consciences. Essentially, everyone arrives in eternity bringing along with him and delivering his own absolutely accurate record of every least trifle he has committed or omitted. Thus a child could hold court in eternity; there is really nothing for a third party to do, everything down to the most insignificant word spoken is in order. The situation of the guilty person traveling through life to eternity is like that of the murderer who fled the scene of his act—and his crime—on the express train: alas, just beneath the coach in which he sat ran the telegraph wires carrying his description and orders for his arrest at the first station. When he arrived at the station and left the coach, he was arrested—in a way, he had personally brought his own denunciation along with him. [124]

Therefore, despair of the forgiveness of sins is offense. And offense is intensification of sin. Usually people give this scarcely a thought, usually never identify offense with sin, of which they do not speak; instead, they speak of sins, among which offense does not find a place. Even less do they perceive offense as the intensification of sin. That is because the opposites are construed not as being sin/faith but as sin/virtue. [124]

C.

THE SIN OF DISMISSING CHRISTIANITY *modo ponendo* [POSITIVELY], OF DECLARING IT TO BE UNTRUTH

Thus is sin against the Holy Spirit. Here the self is at the highest intensity of despair; it not only discards Christianity totally but also makes it out to be a lie and untruth. What a tremendously despairing conception of itself the self must have! [125]

The intensification of sin appears clearly if it is conceived as being a war between man and god in which the tactics are changed; the intensification is an ascent from the defensive to the offensive. Sin is despair; here the battle is by way of evasion. Then comes despair over one's sin; here again the battle is by way of evasion or a strengthening of one's retreating position, but always *pedem referens* [in retreat]. Now the tactic is changed; although sin digs down ever more deeply into itself, thus moving further away, the in another sense it comes closer, becoming more and more decisively itself. Despair of the forgiveness of sins is a definite position over against an offer of God's mercy; sin is not solely retreat, not merely defensive action. But the sin of renouncing Christianity as untruth and a lie is offensive war. In a way, all the previous forms make the admission that the adversary is the stronger. But now sin is attacking. [125]

Sin against the Holy Spirit is the positive form of being offended. [125]

Christian doctrine is the teaching about the God-man, about the kinship between God and man, but of such a nature, please note, that the possibility of offense is, if I may say it this way, the guarantee whereby God protects himself against man's coming too close. The possibility of offense is the dialectical

element in everything essentially Christian. If this is taken away, then Christianity is not only paganism but also something so fanciful that paganism would have to call it nonsense. To be close to God, as Christianity teaches that man can come to him, dares come to him, and shall come to him in Christ—such a thought never occurred to any man. Now if this is to be understood directly, taken at face value without the least little reservation and in an utterly jaunty and cavalier fashion, then Christianity—if we call paganism’s fiction of the gods human madness—is an invention of a mad god. A man who still preserves his understanding could concoct such a teaching. The incarnate God, if without further ado one were to be hail-fellow-well-met with him, would then become a counterpart of Shakespeare’s Prince Henry. [125,126]

God and man are two qualities separated by an infinite qualitative difference. Humanly speaking, any teaching that disregards this difference is demented—divinely understood, it is blasphemy. In paganism, man made god a man (the man-god); in Christianity God makes himself man (the God-man). But in this infinite love of his merciful grace he nevertheless makes one condition: he cannot do otherwise. Precisely this is Christ’s grief, that “he cannot do otherwise”; he can debase himself, take a servant’s form, suffer, die for men, invite all to come to him, offer up every day of his life, every hour of the day, and offer up his life—but cannot remove the possibility of offense. What a rare act of love, what unfathomable grief of love, that even God cannot remove the possibility that this act of love reverses itself for a person and becomes the most extreme misery—something that in another sense God does not want to do, cannot want to do. The greatest possible human misery, greater than even sin, is to be offended at Christ and to continue in offense; and Christ cannot, “love” cannot, make this impossible. This, you see, is why he says: “Blessed is he who is not offended at me.” More he cannot do. Therefore he can—it is possible—he can by his love make a person as miserable as one otherwise never could be. What an unfathomable conflict in love! Yet in love he does not have the heart to desist from completing this act of love—alas, even though it makes a person more miserable than he otherwise would ever have been! [126]

Let us speak about this very humanly. How pitiable is the person who has never been motivated by love to sacrifice everything for the sake of love and consequently has never been able to do it! But suppose he discovered that precisely this, his love-motivated sacrifice, could become the greatest unhappiness for another person, for the beloved—what then? One of two things would happen. Either his love would lose its resiliency—from being a life force, it would subside into a brooding over mournful feelings closed up within; he would give up love, would not dare to perform this act of love, even collapsing, not under the act, but under the weight of that possibility. Just as a weight becomes ever so much heavier when it is placed on the end of a rod and the lifter has to hold it by the opposite end, so every act becomes ever so much heavier when it becomes dialectical, and heaviest of all when it becomes sympathetic-dialectical, so that what love motivates him to do, a concern for the beloved seems in another sense to dissuade from doing. —Or love would conquer, and he would venture the act out of love. But in the joyousness of love (as love is always joyous, particularly when it sacrifices everything), there would still be a profound grief—for it was indeed possible!

Story of Abraham – what if he had not responded to the angel of God and can't going by plunging the knife into Isaac out of anger and defiance because he was so upset that God would even command him to sacrifice Isaac?

Works of Love – pg. 198; passing by the possibility of offense as one passes by despair

It is vital that we realize that Christianity is not a human religion. It is the truth of God's mercy colliding with human beings' rebellion towards God and winning certain one's hearts by the miraculous, inward work of God.