

SØREN KIERKEGAARD: A HUMAN BEING IS SPIRIT

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In this paper, I will explain what Søren Kierkegaard (Kierkegaard hereafter) means by saying, “A human being is spirit.” I will, then, demonstrate how Kierkegaard utilizes such meaning to lay the groundwork for *The Sickness unto Death*.

For Kierkegaard, the human being is spirit and this spirit is the self. The self is the relation’s relating itself to itself; existing with in the tensions of the infinite and finite, the temporal and eternal, the free and necessary:

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. 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.¹

Contrary to Hegelianism, this is not a higher synthesis, of a joined thesis and antithesis, which later becomes a thesis.

The self, for Kierkegaard, is a harmonious continuous movement towards a balanced consciousness of self and God through faith. It is this very dynamic and non-static nature of the self that enables it to relate to itself, others and, above all, God.² When the self relates itself to itself, it does so as immediate consciousness. It is because of the nature of the self, as has been noted, the self can be immediately conscious of its own self. The self can relate, reflexively, to its own existence as a synthesis of infinitude and finitude.

To be spiritually healthy is to be a consciously balanced self of paradoxes and a spirit resting transparently in God. Any other possibility, for the spirit that is the self, leads to despair which is a spiritual sickness unto death³:

The formula that describes the state of the 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.⁴

Humans also despair because of their reflexive/reflective consciousness⁵, which is unique to them when compared to animals for instance. Despair, therefore, is a sickness of the human spirit and not animals, for example, due to a certain human superiority. Despair, among humans, is also related to the degree of such consciousness. Higher consciousness experiences a more intense despair. Those who experience a more intense despair, in fact, are better than those who are unconscious of their despair at all. Humans, in addition, despair due to their existential situation as shall be explained shortly.

Kierkegaard builds upon what has been previously said as the ground for *The Sickness unto Death*. In the first part of the book, he elaborates on the concept of despair, the types of despair and how it is experienced differently by different degrees of consciousness. In the second part, Kierkegaard introduces the concept of sin and how it is related to despair.⁶ The idea of continuity of the self relating itself to itself, the self's willingness to be itself and to accept God; however, remains in the background throughout the book.

The spirit (self), for Kierkegaard, can not be understood apart from God. In fact, the self is spirit and the human being is spirit because of the spirit's nature, as previously mentioned, and in its active relation to God. Anti-Climacus is the ideal Christian, unlike the despairing Christians mentioned in the text, precisely because of his understanding and being conscious of his spiritual nature of the self. The human being is spirit, for Kierkegaard, because of the human awareness; relating; and, almost, yearning toward that which is metaphysical (God).

In addition to the aforementioned, for Kierkegaard, this spiritual self is also existential, especially, due to its capability to make a choice for itself. The self, therefore, despairs in various ways. In fact, the self can despair, inasmuch as, wishing to be someone else or wishing for a new self!

There is the self that falls into a deficient mode of consciousness, therefore, in despair is unconscious of its own despair. The self, here, is superficial and is, therefore, furthest from being aware of its true spiritual nature. It is concerned with "immediacy" and the finite. It seems to be happy or could be happy, but has no depth. It is living on the surface of life far from its own most possibilities. This self is, existentially, like a feather in the wind of life, where it is taken wherever the wind goes without the slightest idea of what is taking place. This self, of the "sensitive," is existentially futile. This despairing self is in critical condition since it's the furthest from realizing its own despair; let alone curing it. Spiritually, this self, is the furthest from its spiritual paradox. Truth is its least concern. When the wind of life, however, scatters the objects of pleasure away from the reach of "the sensitive," who has been mostly dependent on them, the result is devastating; especially when one is faced by despair at once.

Then, there is the self that is conscious of its despair, however, it does not will to be its own self. This self can despair over external and/or internal aspects. For instance, it can despair over an aspect of everyday life like failure, or it can have a deeper form of consciousness and despair over its spirit. Despairing over the external is associated with "immediacy" and what is finite. Despairing over the internal aspects of the self is a deeper despair because of the deeper degree of consciousness associated with it. No matter the degree or type of despair, nonetheless, the self seems to go on avoiding to be itself. One, for example, would indulge in life and reassures oneself that there is nothing more to life to lessen the despair and avoid being oneself.

Finally, there is the despairing self that is willing to be itself but apart from God. This self despairs in defiance despite the fact that consciousness, here, is in a higher degree than any of the aforementioned. The deeper the consciousness, in fact, the more

intense the despair gets. One is defiant because one, almost, tries to take God's role, where one wants to be completely in charge of one's life. In trying to be the master, one rejects any kind of help or any non-self-established-cure for life's hurdles, especially, for one's intense despair. This, even, includes God and faith as the solution to such despair. In turning away from God, in such a manner, one becomes demonic.

One key aspect of despair, according to Kierkegaard, is that despair is universal. This means that all people are in despair, unless, as quoted previously, one is an exemplary representation of Kierkegaard's formula for the solution of despair. Even if one seems to go on without any symptoms of despair, certain problematics, still, could be behind the facade. This speaks of the universal quality of spirituality. After all, as a part of the title of this paper reads: a human being is spirit. Kierkegaard, furthermore, connotes that rooting out despair is not only an existential gain, but also an advantage of the true eternal life as was promised by Christ.

To conclude this paper is best to, perhaps, use part of Kierkegaard's last paragraph:

“By relating itself to its own self and by willing to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the Power which constituted it.” And this formula again, as has been noted, is the definition of faith.⁷

Notes:

1. Gordon Marino, *Basic Writings of Existentialism* (New York: The Modern Library, 2004, p. 41).
2. Kierkegaard writes from the point of view of Anti-Climacus who's the religiously ideal Christian.
3. For Kierkegaard, anxiety “*angest*” is the result of human freedom of choice and the condition for the possibility of despair, which he discusses in *The Concept of Anxiety*. Despair, on the other hand, is the result of the wrong use of that freedom to not be oneself and transparent in God.
4. Gordon Marino, *Basic writings of Existentialism*, op. cit., p. 43.
5. The reflexive movement of consciousness is intuition and the reflective movement of consciousness is cognition. The structure and function of consciousness, perhaps, is a good topic for another paper.
6. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death; A Christian Psychological Exposition for Edification and Awakening*, trans., intro. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941).

7. *Ibid.*, p. 216.