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## Kierkegaard as a Thinker of Alienation

**Abstract:** Alienation is a key theme in both the philosophical tradition of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that begins with Hegel and Marx and in heterogenous school of existentialist thought in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kierkegaard is often included in narratives of these philosophical traditions, but his contribution to this topic is problematic. Unlike figures such as Marx or Sartre, he almost never uses the term “alienation” explicitly. The question then becomes one of interpretation: what ideas in Kierkegaard bear a meaningful family resemblance to the concept as it is found in other thinkers in these traditions? In this article I have identified three different texts from Kierkegaard in which concepts are discussed that I believe can be meaningfully designated as forms of alienation: “The Unhappiest One,” from *Either/Or*, “The Present Age” from *A Literary Review*, and the different stages of despair in *The Sickness unto Death*. The goal is simply to use these texts as the basis or starting point for developing an understanding of Kierkegaard’s concept of alienation. This will then in turn help us to determine more precisely his contribution to the development of philosophy in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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1 See Ronald L. Hall, “The Origin of Alienation: Some Kierkegaardian Reflections on Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of the Body,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 12, 1981, pp. 111-122. Martina Pavlíková, “Despair and Alienation of Modern Man in Society,” *European Journal of Science and Theology*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2015, pp. 191–200. James L. Marsh, “Marx and Kierkegaard on Alienation,” in *Two Ages*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press 1984 (*International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 14), pp. 155–174. Zachary Price, “On Young Lukács on Kierkegaard: Hermeneutic Utopianism and the Problem of Alienation,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 25, no. 6, 1999, pp. 67–82. Patricia C. Dip, “Angustia y alienación: Kierkegaard y Marx,” *Mirada kierkegaardiana*, no. 1, 2009, pp. 39–47. Jørgen Hass, “Entfremdung und Freiheit bei Hegel und Kierkegaard,” in *Kierkegaard und die deutsche Philosophie seiner Zeit. Vorträge des Kolloquiums am 5. und 6. November 1979*, ed. by

Unlike figures such as Marx or Sartre, he almost never uses the term “alienation” (in Danish, *fremmedgørelse*) explicitly.<sup>2</sup> The question then becomes one of interpretation: what ideas in Kierkegaard bear a meaningful family resemblance to the concept as it is found in other thinkers in these traditions? Unfortunately, this seems to be a somewhat neglected topic in the secondary literature due presumably to the fact that the issue is generally taken to be unproblematic. The logic seems fairly straightforward: alienation is an important topic in existentialism, Kierkegaard is an existentialist, ergo alienation is an important topic for Kierkegaard. While many general overviews of Kierkegaard might mention the concept of alienation, they rarely go into any detail about what exactly this amounts to in his thought. Thus the idea of alienation in Kierkegaard seems to have become a calcified cliché that everyone can agree upon, but which few people really have taken the trouble to determine more precisely.

In this article I would like to explore this issue directly. I have identified three different texts in which concepts are discussed that I believe can be meaningfully designated as forms of alienation: the analysis of “The Unhappiest One,” from *Either/Or*, Part One, the critical account of “The Present Age” from *A Literary Review*, and the different stages of despair in *The Sickness unto Death*. This is, of course, not to suggest that there are not other parts of Kierkegaard’s large *corpus* which might also be relevant for this topic; indeed, there presumably are. The goal is simply to use these texts as the basis or starting point for developing an understanding of Kierkegaard’s concept of alienation. This will then in turn help us to determine more precisely his contribution to the development of philosophy in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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Heinrich Anz, Peter Kemp, and Friedrich Schmöe, Copenhagen: Text und Kontext and Munich: Fink 1980 (*Text & Kontext, Sonderreihe*, vol. 7), pp. 62–83. Lore Hühn, “Selbstentfremdung und Gefährdung menschlichen Selbstseins. Zu einer Schlüsselfigur bei Schelling und Kierkegaard,” in “*Alle Persönlichkeit ruht auf einem dunkeln Grunde.*” *Schellings Philosophie der Personalität*, ed. by Thomas Buchheim and Friedrich Hermann, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag 2004, pp. 151–162.

<sup>2</sup> For this reason, there is no entry for “alienation” in the standard Kierkegaard reference works, such as *Kierkegaard’s Concepts*, Tomes I–VI, ed. by Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald and Jon Stewart, Aldershot: Ashgate 2013–15 (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 15). Julia Watkin, *Historical Dictionary of Kierkegaard’s Philosophy*, Lanham, Maryland and London: Scarecrow Press 2001. *Concepts and Alternatives in Kierkegaard*, ed. by Marie Mikulová Thulstrup, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1980 (*Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana*, vol. 3). *Theological Concepts in Kierkegaard*, ed. by Niels Thulstrup and Marie Mikulová Thulstrup, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1980 (*Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana*, vol. 5). *Some of Kierkegaard’s Main Categories*, ed. by Marie Mikulová Thulstrup, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1988 (*Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana*, vol. 16). Gregor Malantschuk, *Nøglebegreber i Søren Kierkegaards tænkning*, ed. by Grethe Kjær and Paul Müller, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel 1993. Frederick Sontag, *A Kierkegaard Handbook*, Atlanta: John Knox Press 1979.

## I The Unhappiest One and Hegel's Unhappy Consciousness

In the short chapter “The Unhappiest One” from the first volume of *Either/Or*, the aesthetic writer reflects on different forms of unhappiness.<sup>3</sup> The chapter takes as its point of departure a purported grave in England that instead of giving the name of the deceased on the tombstone gives simply the inscription “The Unhappiest One.” This is then the occasion for a meditation on different forms of unhappiness. The aesthete is concerned to find out what can be considered the greatest unhappiness, or put differently what did this person experience in life to have made his unhappiness greater than that of other people. He imagines a kind of competition among unhappy people in order to determine who can justly deserve the title of the unhappiest one.<sup>4</sup> He decides to divide the contestants into different categories and classes in order to determine more clearly their degree of unhappiness.

In this context the aesthete brings up Hegel's idea of the unhappy consciousness from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* for comparison.<sup>5</sup> As is well known, the unhappy consciousness represents a form of religious alienation. The reason for his unhappiness is that the unhappy consciousness is forever separated from God. The individual remains in a finite, sinful world, while God is in a transcendent beyond. The unhappy consciousness finds his truth and meaning in God but yet is radically separated from Him. This can be a relationship to *the past* since the unhappy consciousness looks back with longing to the time of Jesus and regrets that now that time has gone. He desperately attempts to restore this past by collecting splinters of the cross or the funeral shroud of Jesus, but for all of this the unhappy consciousness remains alienated and unfulfilled. But this can also be a relationship to *the future*. The unhappy consciousness is in a sense trapped in the sinful mundane world

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<sup>3</sup> SKS 2, 211–223 / *EOI*, 217–230.

<sup>4</sup> SKS 2, 215 / *EOI*, 221.

<sup>5</sup> SKS 2, 215f. / *EOI*, 222. See W. Richard Comstock, “Hegel, Kierkegaard, Marx on ‘The Unhappy Consciousness,’” *Internationales Jahrbuch für Wissens- und Religionssoziologie*, vol. 11, 1978, pp. 91–119. Matthew Edgar, “Deer Park or the Monastery? Kierkegaard and Hegel on Unhappy Consciousness, Renunciation, and Worldliness,” *Philosophy Today*, vol. 46, 2002, pp. 284–299. Liesbet Samyn, “How to Cure Despair: On Irony and the Unhappy Consciousness,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2009, pp. 317–351. Liesbet Samyn, “Yearning for the Grave: The Unhappy Consciousness in Hegel's ‘Phenomenology of Spirit’ and in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*,” in *Geist? Zweiter Teil*, ed. by Andreas Arndt, Berlin: Akademie Verlag 2011, pp. 255–261.

until he dies and is united with God in heaven. So here the focus is on a future life that will overcome the separation from the divine in the present.

Hegel's account of the unhappy consciousness provides the desired categories for unhappiness. Based on Hegel's discussion, Kierkegaard's aesthete then takes up an analysis of these forms of alienation with respect to the past and the future. The aesthete explains, "The unhappy one is the person who in one way or another has his ideal, the substance of his life, the plenitude of his consciousness, his essential nature, outside himself."<sup>6</sup> This can serve as a definition of alienation, which is characterized as some kind of separation. Alienation can take the form of a separation from God, but in principle it can be a separation from other things as well. So self-alienation is a separation from oneself. The aesthete continues by explaining this in more detail: "The unhappy one is the person who is always absent from himself, never present to himself. But in being absent, one obviously can be in either past or future time."<sup>7</sup> So one can imagine one's essence or the focus of one's life to be something that was in the past and is now gone, and for this reason one is separated from it. Or it can be something in an indeterminate future that one seemingly will never reach, and for this reason one is separated from it. One is condemned to live in the present, and so all longing for the past or hope in the future represents some kind of separation or alienation. One can only be happy if one is present to oneself, that is, if one's focus is on the present that one lives in. Unhappiness arises from the split between the temporal spheres: one must live in the present but one's focus is constantly on the past or the future.

The aesthete then goes on to explore both of these temporal modalities in turn. He examines first the individual who lives in the hope of a future. Here he recalls Hegel's discussion of the unhappy Christian consciousness looking forward to a life in heaven with God: "A person who hopes for eternal life is certainly in a sense an unhappy individuality, insofar as he renounces the present; but strictly speaking he is nevertheless not unhappy, because he is present to himself in this hope and does not come into conflict with the particular elements of finiteness."<sup>8</sup> To retreat from this life in hope of an afterlife is a betrayal of religion. It is important that one not try to escape the here and now. To live in hope of a future life is thus a form of unhappiness, although it does not qualify as the highest form.

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<sup>6</sup> SKS 2, 216 / EOI, 222.

<sup>7</sup> SKS 2, 216 / EOI, 222.

<sup>8</sup> SKS 2, 217 / EOI, 223.

But yet the aesthete seems to say that not everyone who lives with hope is unhappy. It is indeed possible to be hopeful of an eternal life in such a way that this does not undermine one's existence in the present. So one can say that there is a dialectical relation at work here. It is natural and normal that one has hopes and dreams and to this extent thinks of the future. But the key is not to become obsessed with this to the point that this focus on the future comes to obscure the present. One can thus still be present to oneself when one thinks of a future, but one should avoid taking this too far. The aesthete states that the same dynamic is at work with regard to someone who is focused on the past. We all have treasured recollections and life-defining memories of the past, and it is normal that we think of them from time to time. The problem only comes when we turn these into fixations and they come to occupy our minds more than the present. So once again it is a matter of having the right degree of focus on the present along with a relation to the past.

The aesthete explains that real unhappiness occurs when one focuses on a past or a future that is not possible. He gives the example of someone who had no real childhood, but then in later life through his work as a teacher comes to experience the true meaning of childhood in his young students.<sup>9</sup> Upon comparing this new experience with his own life experience, the individual feels an infinite sense of loss. There is something in the past that he has missed out on forever. Or likewise if someone knew no joy in life and then only discovered this in old age before dying, then this recollection of his own life without joy would be a bitter one. These are the real cases of profound unhappiness, according to the aesthete. He believes that the unhappiest one must be a person of this kind.

The aesthete says that with the past and the future the different forms of unhappiness seem to be exhausted, and for "this firm limitation, we thank Hegel."<sup>10</sup> But then he in a sense applies Hegel's own methodology to go Hegel one better. He combines the first and the second term, which Hegel had mentioned in his analysis of the unhappy consciousness, into a synthesis or higher unity.

He then explains that there can be a combination of the two forms of unhappiness, that is, as related to the future and as related to the past. At first this seems impossible since one is oriented either to the past or to the future. How can one be oriented toward both at the same time? The aesthete explains, the individual's "hope is continually being disappointed, but he discovers that

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<sup>9</sup> SKS 2, 218 / EOI, 224.

<sup>10</sup> SKS 2, 216 / EOI, 222.

this disappointment occurs not because his objective is pushed further ahead but because he is past his goal, because it has already been experienced or should have been experienced and thus passed over into recollection.”<sup>11</sup> Here the aesthete seems to have in mind examples like the ones he just gave: an individual regrets that he has had no joyful childhood, and this is a focus on the past. But it is also in a sense a hope for the future in that one hopes for a better childhood. But this is not something that lends itself to being a hope for the future in the way that one can hope for a million dollars or a new friend. Such hopes can in principle always be realized no matter how old one is or where one finds oneself in life, but this is not the case with a lost childhood since as an older person it is impossible that one will ever have the chance to go back and relive one’s childhood. Once it is over, childhood is irretrievably gone, and no one has a second chance to live it again. So one relates both to a future that can never be and a past that never was. One is unable to be present to oneself in the here and now because of a fixation on a regret about both the past and the future.

The aesthete then goes on to list a number of examples of unhappy figures, and this anticipates some of his analyses in rest of the book. He mentions a woman whose lover has been faithless (perhaps an allusion to Regine Olsen), Niobe (from Greek mythology), Antigone, Job, and the father of the prodigal son. Finally, as the winner of the title of the unhappiest one, he sketches an unnamed figure who has some affinities with Christ, although he is not mentioned explicitly.

In the analysis of the unhappiest one Kierkegaard has his aesthete not merely take up Hegel’s motif of the unhappy consciousness but also offer an analysis of different forms of alienation. Moreover, he imitates Hegel’s systematic and dialectical form of analysis that explores one possibility first, and then its opposite, and then a combination of the two. In short, Kierkegaard seems to have been inspired both by the actual content of analysis of the unhappy consciousness and Hegel’s methodology. This would seem to situate Kierkegaard in the post-Hegelian tradition with respect to the issue of alienation.

## II Kierkegaard’s Criticism of the Present Age

In 1846, only some three years after *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard published a long book review of the novel *Two Ages* by Thomasine Gyllembourg. In his chapter

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11 SKS 2, 218 / EOI, 225.

dedicated to “The Present Age,” he issues a criticism of different modern trends.<sup>12</sup> His analysis highlights elements that can be regarded as falling under the rubric of alienation. Kierkegaard begins with a general characterization: the age of revolution was characterized by its passion, whereas the present age is characterized by its cool calculation, reflection and lack of passion. This might at first glance sound like criticism of the age of revolution and praise of the present age, but in fact just the opposite is the case. Kierkegaard objects to what he regards as the overemphasis on reflection, which he believes leads away from important aspects of a person. He argues that by reflecting and calculating the whole time, people fail to act, and for this reason he describes the present age as one characterized by inertia, indolence and laziness.<sup>13</sup> Although people make a big show of being busy with important matters, all of the time and effort is spent with reflecting and calculating, and not with real action. In the present age this is regarded as sensible and prudent, but this is based on a misunderstanding since the lack of passion undermines making decisions and acting freely in the world.

While in the age of revolution people took to the streets to demand their rights, in the present age people have quiet meetings and discuss minor measures of reform dispassionately. Passionate revolutionaries try to tear down things in order to start over again, but people in the age of reflection stage their revolution by allowing old habits and institutions to remain but yet rendering them meaningless.<sup>14</sup> Revolutions take place because there are clear principles in conflict with one another. However, reflection undermines these sharp distinctions and oppositions; they become wishy-washy, or, in Kierkegaard’s language, they equivocate.<sup>15</sup> He claims that it is a characteristic of the

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12 SKS 8, 66–106 / TA, 68–112. See Daniel W. Conway, “Modest Expectations: Kierkegaard’s Reflections on the Present Age,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 1999, pp. 21–49. *Social and Political Philosophy: Kierkegaard and the “Present Age,”* ed. by Daniel W. Conway and K.E. Gover, London and New York: Routledge 2002 (*Søren Kierkegaard: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, vol. 4). George Pattison, “The Present Age: the Age of the City,” *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 1999, pp. 1–20. Milan Petkanič, “Passion and Age: Kierkegaard’s Diagnosis of the Present Age,” *Human Affairs: A Postdisciplinary Journal for Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2004, pp. 165–182. Husain Sarkar, *The Toils of Understanding: An Essay on “The Present Age,”* Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press 2000. John R. Wilson, “‘Signs of the Times’ and ‘The Present Age’: Essays of Crisis,” *Western Humanities Review*, vol. 26, 1972, pp. 369–374.

13 SKS 8, 67 / TA, 69.

14 SKS 8, 74f. / TA, 77.

15 SKS 8, 75 / TA, 78.

modern age that it has annulled the law of contradiction,<sup>16</sup> that is, nothing is absolutely contradictory any more, or, put differently, the contradiction between any two positions can always be overcome. In a passionate age one finds passionate individuals who are ready to fight for the one cause or the other. By contrast, in a reflective age people have no character since they undermine opposition and contradiction. Clear lines and sharp distinctions are lost in the present age, and everything remains blurred and ambiguous. People are no longer capable of bold and daring action that requires choice and resolution. In such an age there are no heroes. In the age of reflection young people no longer struggle for love or fame but instead for financial gain.<sup>17</sup>

In the age of reflection individuality is undermined. In the age of revolution people passionately participate in events that are important to them. By contrast, people who live in reflection are not participants but rather spectators. They tend not to relate themselves to the events around them but instead to distance themselves from them.<sup>18</sup> Since they have no personal relation to the issue, they lack inwardness and thus have no character. They see the issue, so to speak, from the outside. Instead of emphasis being put on individual action, the reflective age appoints one committee after another to discuss the issue. In a sense this criticism of reflection anticipates Nietzsche's critique of the reflectivity of the modern age some years later. According to Nietzsche this reflection has separated us from our natural instincts and led us to a distorted morality and system of values.

Whereas great actions are admired in the age of revolution, they are treated as objects of envy in the age of reflection. The person who does something bold and daring is regarded as reckless and rash. Kierkegaard sees envy as one of the defining characteristics of the present age.<sup>19</sup> Envy prevents people from acting decisively and boldly since individuals fear what others might think of such action. They are prudently advised by their friends and relatives not to undertake anything rash. The prudent people drag down the bold person because he stands out above them. This is what Kierkegaard refers to as the phenomenon of leveling, that is, bringing down the outstanding and the extraordinary to the common mean.<sup>20</sup> Excellence is ridiculed and persecuted by people who are weak and envious. Leveling is a phenomenon whereby an abstract group or crowd in general undermines and diminishes the achievements of

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**16** SKS 8, 92 / TA, 97.

**17** SKS 8, 72 / TA, 75.

**18** SKS 8, 76 / TA, 79.

**19** SKS 8, 78 / TA, 81.

**20** SKS 8, 80 / TA, 84.



specific individuals. Here again Kierkegaard anticipates an important concept in Nietzsche.

Kierkegaard's notion of leveling is also bound up with Hegel's concept intersubjective recognition. While the weak and spiteful person undermines the achievement of another person, it might on the face of things seem that there is only one party who is hurt by this. But in fact this also has a negative effect on the person who is doing the leveling. Kierkegaard says, "although the individual selfishly enjoys the abstract during the brief moment of pleasure in the leveling, he is also underwriting his own downfall."<sup>21</sup> For one to be who one is as an individual, one must respect and recognize others in their individuality. If one undermines the abilities and achievements of others, then one undermines oneself since this erodes the possibility of one receiving meaningful recognition from the other for one's own abilities and achievements. Leveling is a contest that has no winner.

The idea of *the public* plays a negative role in the process of leveling.<sup>22</sup> The public is, for Kierkegaard, a grotesque abstraction. What exists are a manifold of particular individuals with particular interests and dispositions. However, the idea of the public levels all of this and objectifies an abstraction. One can speak a lot about *the public interest* or make political decisions based on *public opinion*, but in the end this idea has no reality and no responsibility can be ascribed to it as to a person. When we interact with one another in society, we do so in concrete ways and situations that involve different interests and opinions. The idea of the public has no sense for this. It does not reflect any of the complexity of human relations in societies or communities.

The phenomenon of the public is created and preserved by the press.<sup>23</sup> Envious people in a reflective age see in the press an organ by which they can level what is outstanding and distinguished. They gain a perverse pleasure in seeing a talented person being torn down by the attacks of the press. Kierkegaard saw himself as a victim of this kind of persecution in connection with his conflict with the journal *The Corsair*, which humorously criticized him and printed satirical images of him. Kierkegaard points out that attacks of this kind are created by the envious nature of people, but yet they do not have to take any responsibility for it whatsoever. While they support the press and read these kinds of criticisms with great pleasure, they are always quick to distance themselves from it, saying that it was the sole responsibility of a partic-

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<sup>21</sup> SKS 8, 83 / TA, 86. See also, *ibid.*: "for the individual who levels is himself carried along."

<sup>22</sup> SKS 8, 86 ff. / TA, 90 ff.

<sup>23</sup> SKS 8, 89 ff. / TA, 93 ff.

ularly mean-spirited editor or journal. Even though they may subscribe to the journal and read it religiously, they can always distance themselves from any given attack and claim that they had nothing to do with it.

### III The Political and Religious Dangers of the Present Age

There is also an important political dimension to Kierkegaard's analysis since this was the age when there were calls for equality and democracy throughout Europe, which eventually led to the Revolutions of 1848. Kierkegaard was critical of this move since he believed that these principles undermined individuality by eroding important social distinctions. Democracy means leveling since the opinion of everyone, including the greatest expert and the least informed person, counts for the same since everyone has just one vote. In democracy members of parliament are elected who are intended to represent the others. Kierkegaard objects to this form of representation since it undermines the value of the individual. The idea of a consensus or public opinion insidiously becomes reified as if it were a kind of collective person or individual.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, democracy can lead to the tyranny of the majority and public opinion, which undermines the minority and the individual who has a view that differs from this. The individual on his own counts for nothing, and his views and values are only meaningful if they are shared by others in the context of a political party or faction. Moreover, people do not want to be different from others, and so there is a tendency to go along with the crowd without even considering the issue seriously for oneself. Peer pressure can make people do things in groups that they would never dream of doing on their own as individuals. For these reasons Kierkegaard is wary of the new political trends that are breaking out in his own day.

The tendencies of the modern age are particularly troublesome for him with regard to religion. According to his view, in Christianity each individual is special and unique before God. For Christianity, each of us is a single individual, and this is a positive concept. Each person must make the decision of faith on his own and take responsibility for it. The modern age, however, undermines this sense of individuality and responsibility. Christian belief involves passion and inwardness, which are repressed in the age of reflection. The modern age tells us that we as individuals do not count for much if we are not a part of a larger

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<sup>24</sup> *SKS* 8, 81 / *TA*, 85.

group. But it is impossible to have Christian faith based on the arguments and reasoning of a larger group; instead, one must believe on one's own. People in the modern age continue to regard themselves as Christian and to use Christian terminology, but they no longer know what they mean by this. Kierkegaard thus sees the social crisis of his day as related to the religious confusion that he finds in his contemporaries.

The symptoms of the modern age that Kierkegaard outlines can be understood as forms of alienation. When one stops regarding oneself as a participant, actively engaged in events, and starts regarding oneself as a spectator to them, then one is alienated from oneself as an individual. One's own desires and interests are undermined. Likewise, when one associates oneself with the crowd and eschews one's individuality, one is alienated from one's true self. The things that make us different as individuals no longer have any value, and we become characterless. This also means that we become alienated from others since it is not clear who they are or what they stand for either. Kierkegaard seems to have identified the source of alienation that many people have today in large democracies, where one feels alienated from the mainstream majority view and sees that one's own opinion or vote has no value whatsoever in the big picture. In the modern age the idea of individuality is eliminated and replaced with abstractions such as the crowd, public opinion, national interest, the majority, etc.

## IV The Understanding of the Self in *The Sickness unto Death*

Kierkegaard published *The Sickness unto Death* in 1849 under the name of the pseudonym, Anti-Climacus. This work was followed a year later by *Practice in Christianity* which was ostensibly penned by the same author. The title of *The Sickness unto Death* is inspired by the story of Lazarus in the New Testament (John 11:1–44).<sup>25</sup> The motif of sickness is understood as despair, and this can be regarded as the key topic of the work. Despair means the understanding of mundane existence that ends in death. Without the Christian message, this leads to hopelessness. Much of the first part of the work is dedicated to outlining the different forms of despair that humans can fall victim to. Despair has many different forms that reflect the different aspects of the human condition. Kierke-

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<sup>25</sup> SKS 11, 123–125 / SUD, 7–9. See also SKS 11, 133–137 / SUD, 17–21.

gaard's pseudonymous author examines these in a systematic fashion in a way that is highly reminiscent of Hegel's dialectical methodology.<sup>26</sup>

At the beginning of *The Sickness unto Death*, Anti-Climacus immediately announces the influence of Hegel by employing some of Hegel's key terms.<sup>27</sup> Specifically, he uses the word "spirit" in order to refer to human beings (in contrast to plants, animals or other things). He goes on to indicate that the individual self is synonymous with spirit. His much discussed definition of the self is as follows: "The self is a relation that relates to itself or is the relation's relating to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating to itself."<sup>28</sup> As in Hegel, human beings are conceived as self-conscious and as having the ability to reflect. They can see themselves from the outside and evaluate who they are, constantly revising this evaluation in terms of experience. In this sense the individual is both subject and object, that is, the subject making the evaluation and the object being evaluated. The point for Anti-Climacus seems to be in agreement with Hegel: humans are specifically characterized by just this kind of reflection and self-evaluation. This results in a complex mental life, which, it is thought, only humans have. This is Anti-Climacus' pendant to Hegel's theory of self-consciousness.

Anti-Climacus then introduces a set of opposite terms, which also define the self: "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."<sup>29</sup> Here again we can see the shadow of Hegel's dialectic. Human beings are not just one sided; rather, they have qualities that might seem immediately to be contradictory. Anti-Climacus uses these dual terms to organize his analysis of the concept of despair. Since human beings are complex entities, they can be regarded from different points of view and in different aspects. For example, we can see humans as physical beings as continuous with nature or as self-conscious entities raised higher than mere nature. Similarly, humans can also think of themselves in different aspects, isolating the one side from the other, and then reversing this.

A religious or Christian element can also be found in the analysis in that human beings are conceived from the outset as created beings, that is, created by God. Anti-Climacus writes, "The human self is such a derived, established

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<sup>26</sup> See Jon Stewart, Chapter 13, "Kierkegaard's Phenomenology of Despair in *The Sickness unto Death*," in his *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2003, pp. 550–595.

<sup>27</sup> SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13.

<sup>28</sup> SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13.

<sup>29</sup> SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13.

relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another.”<sup>30</sup> The idea seems to be that since we are created beings, we also have a necessary relation to our creator since our very essence is determined by the fact that we are created. It is impossible to separate ourselves from this relation to the creator since this is a part of who we are. This also echoes Hegel’s theory of self-consciousness, by which individuals are who they are in the dialectic of recognition with other self-conscious agents. This also applies to the relation to God, who is also spirit. Who we are as human beings is determined by what our conception of God is, and vice versa.

The idea that human beings are created by God is key for understanding the idea of despair as a conception of alienation. The fact that humans are created as a synthesis makes humans the complex beings that they are and separates them from nature. But this also makes despair possible. So in a sense it lies in human nature or human self-consciousness to despair: animals do not despair. Despair is simply a feature of the human condition. The forms of despair can be understood as forms of alienation. This is confirmed by the fact that in a draft Kierkegaard says of sections A and B of *The Sickness unto Death*, “Both forms are forms of an unhappy consciousness.”<sup>31</sup> Despair is characterized by a lack of balance of the synthesis: one aspect is accepted to the exclusion of the other. The individual identifies with one aspect and is alienated from the other. To overcome alienation, one must accept and embrace the dialectical nature of human existence in its contradictory forms.

## V The Forms of Despair

Since human beings are a synthesis of different contradictory elements, despair occurs when the individual takes one of these elements unilaterally to the exclusion of the other. In Anti-Climacus’ language, the individual relates himself to himself in a mistaken, one-sided manner. This means that there are different forms of despair in accordance with which element the individual chooses to emphasize. Anti-Climacus refers to the different elements of the self in Hegelian language as “dialectical opposite[s].”<sup>32</sup> For Hegel as for Anti-Climacus, the truly dialectical view is the one that sees the legitimacy and validity of both opposites and sees the individual as a synthesis of them.

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<sup>30</sup> SKS 11, 130 / SUD, 13f.

<sup>31</sup> Pap. VIII-2 B 150.8 / SUD, Supplement, p. 150.

<sup>32</sup> SKS 11, 146 / SUD, 30.

## A Infinity and Finitude

The first categories that are treated are the finite and the infinite. Human beings are a synthesis of both. We have a physical, limited finite side that makes us continuous with the rest of nature, but we also have an infinite spiritual side that we have in common with God. So humans are a special combination of both aspects. However, one can choose to deny this and focus exclusively on the one side or the other, and when one does this, then one is in despair because this unilateral focus means a denial of what one truly is, that is, a synthesis.

Anti-Climacus begins by exploring the person who takes himself to be pure infinity and to lack finitude.<sup>33</sup> Each form of despair is defined by a lack or denial of one aspect of the self. So the despair of infinity means to conceive of oneself as infinite and unlimited. This form of despair is closely related to the imagination since in the imagination everything is possible, and we are not held back by the limitations of our finitude. The individual who lives in the fantasy of the imagination is in despair since he is not who is really is. He is living a dreamed role in a dream world and not his real life in the real world. In Anti-Climacus' language, this means that the individual "lacks a self."<sup>34</sup> The individual fails to recognize his finite, limited side. In a sense this form of despair can be an exaggerated kind of religiosity, by which one has an imaginary relation to God. Such a relation is a kind of "intoxication" that leads one away from oneself.<sup>35</sup>

There is also the opposite form of despair, according to which the individual focuses exclusively on the finite to the exclusion of the infinite.<sup>36</sup> This is the despair of finitude. In the form of despair the individual focuses on himself simply in terms of his limited, finite side. One is reduced to a physical being with no ability to transcend this. This view is typical of the secular way of thinking, which conceives of human beings simply as a part of nature. Humans are limited just like everything else in nature. Such a person becomes lost in the petty affairs of daily life, and fails to see anything higher. Anti-Climacus claims that this is a form of conformism, and thus by following this unreflective modern practice, one becomes "a copy, a number, a mass man."<sup>37</sup> In other words, one ceases to be who one is as an individual. Moreover, by ignoring the infinite element in the self, one ceases to be who one is. In short, one is in despair.

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<sup>33</sup> SKS 11, 146–148 / SUD, 30–33.

<sup>34</sup> SKS 11, 148 / SUD, 32.

<sup>35</sup> SKS 11, 148 / SUD, 32.

<sup>36</sup> SKS 11, 149–151 / SUD, 33–35.

<sup>37</sup> SKS 11, 149 / SUD, 34.

Such an individual ignores the divine and dedicates himself solely to mundane things.

It will be noted that for both of these initial forms of despair there is nothing that stands in the way of the individual being a flourishing and successful member of society. In fact, the despair of finitude can actually lead to great material prosperity in the world since one is focused solely on mundane affairs. The fact that the individual is in despair is irrelevant for one's success in family life or business. Indeed, no one would ever think to regard such people as being in despair.

## **B Possibility and Necessity**

The next set of dialectical opposites that Anti-Climacus explores is possibility and necessity. As was the case with the previous forms of despair, the issue here is the exclusive focus on the one category to the exclusion of the other. Human beings are a synthesis of both possibility and necessity, but yet the person in despair can forget or deny this by dwelling exclusively in the one or the other.

The despair of possibility is then to deny that there is a necessary element in the self.<sup>38</sup> According to this view, the individual is always open to an infinite number of possibilities. One can do and be absolutely anything that one wants. This is similar to the despair of infinitude since it conceives of the individual to be without limitation. The individual who dwells in possibility has difficulty completing projects since for him everything in the realm of possibility is just as good as if it were actuality. Thus in a sense the possibilities become real in the mind of the person in this form of despair. The book that one will write or the piece of music that one will compose are brilliant, but this always remains in possibility and not in actuality where such products can actually be criticized. This is a form of despair since it fails to recognize certain necessary elements in what it is to be human. We cannot overcome certain factual aspects of our physical being and our existence in the world. While there is, to be sure, possibility, it is never absolute or unlimited. There are natural limitations of time and energy that prevent one from carrying out every single project. By failing to recognizing this element of necessity in life, the individual is in despair.

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38 SKS 11, 151–153 / SUD, 35–37.

The dialectical opposite of this form of despair is the despair of necessity, whereby one denies the element of possibility.<sup>39</sup> In other words, one conceives of everything as necessity and fails to see any room for real possibility. We exist as physical beings in a physical universe, which is governed by the laws of cause and effect that nothing can escape. Like the despair of finitude, the despair of necessity reflects a secular view. When one sees the world in terms of necessity, then one denies the realm of possibility, and this means, according to Anti-Climacus, to deny God, since for God everything is possible.<sup>40</sup> In this form of despair, when one reaches a crisis or a disaster occurs, one despairs since this is the result of cause and effect, and there seems to be nothing that can alleviate the situation. In this way one denies the possibility of God. If one believes that there is only necessity, then prayer does not make any sense because prayer presupposes the idea of God and possibility. One personality type that falls victim to the despair of necessity is the “philistine-bourgeois mentality.”<sup>41</sup> Like the victim of the despair of finitude, this kind of person is wholly focused on the affairs of daily life, which seem predictable and thus reliable. Anti-Climacus refers to this as a focus on “triviality.”<sup>42</sup> Only when things go seriously wrong, is this kind of person jarred out of his complacency. The philistine bourgeois lives in the mistaken belief that he can control the world and thus has no need for God. By denying possibility, this kind of person is also in the despair of necessity.

All of these forms of despair can be understood as forms of self-alienation. The individual is a synthesis of contradictory elements, which must be held together. The alienation occurs when one of these elements is insisted upon at the expense of the other, and thus the two elements are thrown out of balance. One is not who one is unless the contradictory elements are held together in the correct balance. When they are out of balance or one side is denied, then one is in despair and alienated from oneself. Moreover, since we are created beings and thus always have a relation to God, when we are alienated from ourselves, we are *ipso facto* alienated from God. For this reason the opposite of despair is faith.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> SKS 11, 153–157 / SUD, 37–42.

<sup>40</sup> SKS 11, 153 / SUD, 38.

<sup>41</sup> SKS 11, 156 / SUD, 41.

<sup>42</sup> SKS 11, 156 / SUD, 41.

<sup>43</sup> SKS 11, 164 / SUD, 49.



## VI The Forms of Despair as Defined by Consciousness

We have explored so far only the first forms of despair that are defined simply by the categories of infinity and finitude and possibility and necessity. Now Anti-Climacus introduces another set of forms that are determined by whether or not the individual is conscious of being in despair or not. He claims that there is an ascending scale, whereby “the greater the degree of consciousness, the more intensive the despair.”<sup>44</sup> He thus begins by exploring the low end of the scale, where there is no consciousness of despair, and proceeds to the high end, where there is full consciousness of it. With each new stage of despair, one comes closer to full awareness and salvation.

The first of this set of forms of despair that Anti-Climacus explores is what he refers to as “the despair that is ignorant of being despair, or the despairing ignorance of having a self and an external self.”<sup>45</sup> This form of despair corresponds to the secular person, who is not much interested in God. Anti-Climacus also states that this is the form of “paganism and the natural man,”<sup>46</sup> that is, the person who has no religion or knowledge of Christianity. He claims that this is the most widespread form of despair. Such a person is focused exclusively on the mundane sphere and the realm of the senses. He does not believe in anything higher than this. Such a person is in despair since he has this unilateral focus and does not see himself as a synthesis that includes a spiritual element as well as a physical one. According to Anti-Climacus, such a person chooses to focus on the lowest elements of the human being instead of the highest, that is, humans are simply their physical natures. This is what they have in common with animals but not God. They fail to recognize the element of spirit that they have within themselves. In short, they fail to recognize that they have an eternal self; they fail to recognize that they are created beings and have a relation to God, and this is a form of despair.

Here we can see the special way in which the word “despair” is being used. Usually when we talk about despair, we talk about it as a kind of mood or mental state that one experiences when one feels a sense of hopelessness or deep depression. In such cases the person who feels this knows it quite well, and it

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<sup>44</sup> SKS 11, 157 / SUD, 42.

<sup>45</sup> SKS 11, 157–162 / SUD, 42–47.

<sup>46</sup> SKS 11, 160 / SUD, 45.

would be absurd to talk about despair that the person is unaware of. But for Anti-Climacus' understanding, it is quite possible for someone to be in despair but not aware of it or not be conscious of it. Such a person could lead a normal life and from the outside seem apparently happy and flourishing. Despair lies beneath the surface. Again we are reminded of his special definition of despair as a lack of balance in the dialectical relation between two contradictory elements. This lack of balance can certainly be present without someone being aware of it as in the case that Anti-Climacus sketches.

Given that the individual who does not know God or the spiritual is in despair, one would think that the one who does know these things would, according to Anti-Climacus, not be in despair. But this is not the case since the next form of despair is the despair of being conscious of having an eternal self. For Anti-Climacus, one can know that one has an eternal self but yet still have a mistaken relation to this or, put differently, can misunderstand the nature of this. He then proceeds to sketch two forms of this: not to will to be oneself and to will to be oneself, both of which are forms of despair.<sup>47</sup>

The form of despair of not willing to be oneself, Anti-Climacus refers to as "feminine despair."<sup>48</sup> He divides this into two further forms: despair over the earthly and despair of the eternal.<sup>49</sup> With regard to the despair over the earthly, the individual lives in the mundane world of the senses and is focused on the goods of the world. This individual is unreflective and knows only the goods of mundane life. When some disaster strikes, and the individual happens to lose some of these goods, then he falls into despair. Unlike the previous form of despair that we just discussed, this individual knows that he is in despair: he despairs since he lost some of his property or possessions. But, according to Anti-Climacus, this is a mistaken conception of despair since true despair is about losing God or what is eternal and not about losing something finite and temporal.<sup>50</sup> The individual might be sad to have lost some of his property, but this is not real despair. This can in no way be compared with the infinite loss of God. This form of despair evinces an exaggerated emphasis on the goods of this world and a blindness for the infinite importance of God and spirit. Anti-Climacus even indicates that such a person can be a professing Christian, but yet still not have any idea of what this means.<sup>51</sup> This is a form of Christian hypocrisy and confusion that he takes to be typical of his own day. Focused

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<sup>47</sup> SKS 11, 165–181, 181–187 / SUD, 49–67, 67–74.

<sup>48</sup> SKS 11, 165 / SUD, 49.

<sup>49</sup> SKS 11, 165–175, 175–181 / SUD, 50–60, 60–67.

<sup>50</sup> SKS 11, 167 / SUD, 51.

<sup>51</sup> SKS 11, 168 / SUD, 52.

on the mundane world, this form of despair does not will to be itself, that is, a created being before God. This can take the form of wishing to be someone else, that is, envying someone who enjoys the goods of bourgeois life unimpeded.

In explicating this form of despair, Anti-Climacus presents an analysis that recalls the forms of alienation that we saw in the discussion of “the unhappiest one” in *Either/Or*. Anti-Climacus argues that, while it is often thought that despair is a kind of childhood phase that one can grow out of, this is in fact an error. Both young people and old people can be in despair. While the despair of young people is oriented towards the future, the despair of old people is oriented toward the past. For young people this involves the illusion of hopes and for old people the illusion of recollection.<sup>52</sup> These were the very categories of the analysis of the unhappiest one. The individual does not truly live in the present, so long as he or she nourishes an illusion in hope or recollection. Both cases are forms of despair and alienation. If the true self is the created being that one is before God, then this is completely obscured by a focus on the mundane goods of either the past or the future. One fails to be who one is: a synthesis of the different, conflicting elements.

The second form of the despair of not willing to be oneself is the despair of the eternal or over oneself. According to Anti-Climacus, this form of despair is in fact already implicit in the despair over the earthly in the sense that despairing of the goods of mundane life is a despairing over oneself. In contrast, to the previous stage, here the individual recognizes that it is his own weakness that makes him despair of the goods of the world. The individual despairs of having an eternal self that can overcome this weakness.<sup>53</sup> In other words, at the previous stage when the individual lost one of the goods of the world, he despaired and ascribed this to a shortcoming or bad luck in the world. Now at this stage there is a dialectical shift, and when this happens the individual realizes that in fact the shortcoming lies with himself and not the world since he is the one who is attached to such external things in an inappropriate manner. The individual despairs of his own weakness and of not being able to will himself. This is clearly an individual in conflict with himself. Anti-Climacus uses the somewhat odd term “inclosing reserve” to characterize this individual. This means simply that the person suffering from this form of despair withdraws or closes himself off from the world in a certain sense. He keeps his inward reflections about his own weakness to himself. He somewhat arrogantly regards other people as unreflective, and thus takes it as a waste of time to discuss such matters with

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52 SKS 11, 173 / SUD, 58.

53 SKS 11, 176 / SUD, 62.

them. This person seeks solitude and avoids groups of people. This fixation on one's own weakness can end in suicide.

The final form of despair is defiance or the despair of willing to be oneself.<sup>54</sup> At this stage the individual is focused on himself as before, but now he is able to will himself. He regards himself as infinite and eternal, but, most importantly, he does not acknowledge the necessary relation to God. So he wills himself in the absence of this relation, thus in a sense attempting to create himself. This is what Anti-Climacus refers to as defiance.

Two aspects of this form of despair are distinguished: despair as acting self and despair as being acted upon,<sup>55</sup> that is, active and passive. When the individual who is victim of this form of despair *acts in the world*, he does not acknowledge God or any higher power. He believes that he himself is the highest. But without any deeper grounding, the acts of the individual appear arbitrary and meaningless. The individual tries to ascribe importance to them, but he is unable to do so since he is unwilling to appeal to God or any higher authority than himself. In all of his actions there is nothing that holds firm, and thus he lives in a world of "imaginary constructions"<sup>56</sup> and builds "castles in the air."<sup>57</sup> When the individual in this form of despair *is acted upon* by some outside force, he does not wish to recognize it. The world often presents us with obstacles and impediments that make it difficult for us to reach our goals. The individual in defiance in a sense acknowledges this, but he defiantly pretends that this is not a problem for him. He does not wish to appeal to help from God or anyone else to overcome such obstacles, and must instead minimize them based on his own strength and will. To accept help from someone else is regarded as a form of humiliation and a recognition that one is limited. He accepts a godless world with all of its defects and defiantly wills himself in this context. He thus accepts his own suffering in order to maintain the ability to will himself and create himself.

This is defiance, and it ends, in its extreme form, in the demonic. For such a person, the problems of the individual's life become a fixation that the individual refuses to give up. He regards himself as a victim that the world had wronged, and he wishes to maintain the source of his problem to demonstrate this. Such an individual disdains the world and regards himself as vastly superior to other people. He thus ends up in a monumental and

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<sup>54</sup> SKS 11, 181–187 / SUD, 67–74.

<sup>55</sup> SKS 11, 182–183, 183–185 / SUD, 68–70, 70–71.

<sup>56</sup> SKS 11, 182 / SUD, 68.

<sup>57</sup> SKS 11, 183 / SUD, 69.

irresolvable struggle with the world. Defiance is the highest form of despair and thus the end of the ascending list that Anti-Climacus has traced.

These forms of despair as defined by consciousness can also be seen as forms of alienation, either from oneself or from the world or both. In each case, the individual has an incorrect relation to the world and to himself, and this results in distortions in one's self-relation and in one's relation to others in the world. This invariably involves a mistaken relation to God, and for this reason in the second part of the work, despair is understood as sin.

## VII Kierkegaard and Hegel

Traditionally works on the history of 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy tend to juxtapose Kierkegaard and Hegel and to cast Kierkegaard in the role of a great anti-Hegelian. However, as we have seen, in *The Sickness unto Death* there is much evidence that in fact Kierkegaard was in some ways inspired by Hegel. Kierkegaard has his pseudonymous author make use of a philosophical language that often recalls that of Hegel, with one of the key terms being spirit. Moreover, the dialectical methodology that Anti-Climacus follows in Part One of the work very much resembles that of Hegel, whereby one category is explored on its own until its contradictions are revealed, and then its opposite is explored in the same way. Thus pairs of categories such as finitude/infinitude, possibility/necessity, etc. are explored in a way that shows their dialectical relations to each other. These analyses can be seen as a form of Hegelian phenomenology, according to which one follows the experience of consciousness of an individual who is defined by the one category or the other.

One can also find in *The Sickness unto Death* an allusion to the dialectic of recognition and the lordship and bondage analysis in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. For Hegel, recognition must be freely given among equals in order for it to be meaningful. For this reason the compelled recognition of the master does not count for anything. Likewise, being recognized by someone inferior cannot be valid. Kierkegaard's Anti-Climacus takes up this point in his discussion of what it means to say that one exists *before God*. He writes,

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!<sup>58</sup>

It is impossible to receive meaningful recognition from cattle or from a slave. The conception of selfhood produced by this form of recognition would be subhuman. But the recognition of God is something completely different. Here Anti-Climacus agrees with Hegel's praise of Christianity for its conception of God as a loving human being who recognizes other human beings as infinitely valuable and free beings. Hegel contrasted this view to the Jewish conception of God as a tyrant, who threatens and punishes the believers if they fail to follow the law, instead of appealing to their free, rational consent.<sup>59</sup>

For Anti-Climacus the conception of the self is also intimately and necessarily bound up with the conception of God. In order to have a self, one must acknowledge that one is a being created by God. The fact that "the other" is God is important since this raises the value of the individual above what it is in the forms of despair that deny God and thus force the individual to try to stand on his own. Anti-Climacus writes, "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."<sup>60</sup> There is thus a dialectical relation between the self and God.

With these examples we can see that far from being an ardent critic of Hegel, Kierkegaard is in fact profoundly receptive to certain aspects of his thought, which he appropriates for his own purposes. This shows that there is not a radical break in the history of philosophy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as is sometimes thought. Instead, the century can be largely understood as a variety of attempts to come to terms with some of the key analyses of Hegel concerning issues such as alienation, religion and the individual.

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<sup>58</sup> SKS 11, 193 / SUD, 79.

<sup>59</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vols. 1–3, trans. by E.B. Speirs and J. Burdon Sanderson, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; New York: The Humanities Press 1962, vol. 2, pp. 205–208; *Sämtliche Werke. Jubiläumsausgabe*, vols. 1–20, ed. by Hermann Glockner, Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag 1928–41, vol. 16, pp. 77–81.

<sup>60</sup> SKS 11, 194 / SUD, 80.

## VIII Christianity and Alienation

According to Anti-Climacus, the solution to this is to embrace Christian faith and enter into a proper relation to God. Only in this way can alienation be overcome. Only by recognizing that we are beings created by God, can we hope to get past the problems of despair that are so common in the world. This is an important point of contrast with writers such as Feuerbach, Marx and Nietzsche, for whom religion and Christianity specifically are not the solution to alienation but rather its root cause.

Another point of contrast can be seen in Kierkegaard's use of the metaphor of despair as a form of sickness. The idea is that without Christianity we are all sick, and for this reason the different forms of despair represent different forms of this sickness. Christianity can heal us from this sickness by helping us attain the right balance of the different elements that make us who we are. The goal is not transferred to some other sphere since to want to escape to a life after death is once again the mark of an unhappy or despairing consciousness. God's demand is that we live before him, grounded in faith, here and now. The demand is that we become who we are in this time, in this place, right now. Nietzsche uses the metaphor of sickness as well but in a quite different way. For him, Christianity is not the cure to the sickness but rather its main cause. Christianity is a cancerous growth that has infected European culture by alienating us from our natural instincts.

While much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is characterized by a biting criticism of Christianity, Kierkegaard attempts to defend it, although admittedly not in any way that we are used to seeing this in Christian apologetics. To defend Christianity usually means showing that it is in harmony with *logos*, reason, the order of the created universe. But Kierkegaard insists that to defend Christianity in this sense is to betray it. This approach always implies that if such a defense is unsuccessful, then disbelief is justified. Kierkegaard says Christianity will never be justified because it is absurd, paradoxical, etc. Belief must be the result of a fundamental response to a call from God, which is absurd and indefensible rationally (like Abraham's response). In other words, he agrees with all the critics who say it is absurd. He just thinks it must be accepted nonetheless, but on other grounds than reason. So he is obliged to reconceive Christianity in important ways. Somewhat oddly, in this regard he makes common cause with Hegel, whose stated goal in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* was to defend Christianity from the criticisms of the Enlightenment. He believes that this defense can be made with philosophical tools. Kierkegaard differs from Hegel in his tactics since he does not want to issue a philosophical defense

of Christianity as such; indeed, he denies that such a defense is even possible. Instead, he wants to show that there is an inward, subjective sphere of religious life that escapes the criticisms of science and Enlightenment reason. So while their approach is radically different as is their conception of Christianity, Hegel and Kierkegaard can nonetheless be seen as responding to the same problem. Together they represent the minority voice in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in their attempt to defend Christianity and its traditional doctrines.