

# KIERKEGAARD AS PHYSICIAN OF THE SOUL: ON SELF-FORGIVENESS AND DESPAIR

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Despair (sickness of the spirit) and divine forgiveness are decisive psychological and theological themes essential to both Søren Kierkegaard's relational vision of 'the self before God' and his own personal struggles with guilt and the consciousness of sin. Reading Kierkegaard as both a physician and a patient of this struggle, therefore, this article examines *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) as an attempt to resolve the sinful 'self' by integrating a psychological perspective on despair with a theology of the forgiveness of sins. It is suggested that by presenting this integrative notion of self-knowledge through the 'higher' Christian pseudonym of Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard is indicting his own resistances to accepting divine forgiveness and thereby operating—via a 'higher' pastoral identity—as a physician to his own soul. By diagnosing the unconscious psychological and theological relationships between sin/forgiveness, offense, and human impossibility/divine possibility, Kierkegaard finally reveals *faith*—as a self-surrendering recognition of acceptance before the Holy Other—to be the key to unlocking the enigma of the self in despair.

## *Kierkegaard & Psychology: Either Patient or Physician?*

"But he who is a physician is someone who is no one."  
(Kierkegaard, 1849/1983, p. 161)

Søren Kierkegaard's (1813-55) pertinence to the discipline of psychology has, in general, been explored in two ostensibly conflicting regards: both as a source of profound psychological insight and as a psychological case study—a potentially neurotic subject for psychological analysis and speculation. In other words, as either a physician or a

patient. In 1958's *Young Man Luther*, the Danish-American psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1958/1993) referred to "Hypersensitive Kierkegaard, another melancholy Dane" (p. 240) as "a kindred *homo religiosus*" (p. 13) to Martin Luther and therefore a potentially suitable subject for a future case study in his own right. Erikson never followed through on this famous ambition, but such a study would seem, ostensibly at least, to proceed naturally from his psycho-historical study of the religiously anxious Reformer. Indeed, in his anxiety over sin and a discernible need for divine reassurance, Kierkegaard can be regarded as the modern inheritor of the scrupulous self-scrutiny of Luther: struggling, through the dark clouds of melancholy and despair, with self and God in the spiritual crucible of *Anfechtung* (see Podmore, 2006).

In particular, Erikson (1972) observed Kierkegaard as the enigmatic victim to a "strange curse connecting his own doom with that of his father's secret depravity" (p. 202). Despite leading a relatively innocuous external existence in the small northern European harbor-town of Copenhagen, Kierkegaard bequeathed to his subsequent multitude of bewildered readers a labyrinthine, furtive, and perpetually self-dramatized internal history. The secret of this mysterious 'curse' and the question mark over Kierkegaard's psycho-pathology in general has long been and continues to remain the subject of much scholarly fascination and conjecture. Kierkegaard's deliberate proclivity for dramatic lyrical confessions, self-consciously evoking the eternal night brooding within, has elicited a variety of morbid and salacious speculation about the hidden etymology of a secret suffering which, invoking the affliction of St. Paul, he provocatively names as his 'thorn in the flesh'. The pathology of Kierkegaard's neurotic religiosity has been traced variously to such—occasionally speculative—hidden sources as manic-depression, psychosis,

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sexual anxiety, syphilis (Fenger, 1980, pp. 62-80), epilepsy (Garff, 2005, pp. 458-461), or even the malformed physicality of Kierkegaard's alleged hunchback (Magnussen, 1942).

The proliferation of such rumors in the twentieth century even led Jean-Paul Sartre (1972/1989) to boldly proclaim that, in spite of the unbroachable silence at the very heart of this wound in Kierkegaard's writings, all are agreed in diagnosing "a sexual anomaly as its kernel" (p. 89). As it happens, Sartre's citation of a sexual anomaly coheres with Erikson's reference to Kierkegaard's "father's secret depravity": namely, the suggestion that his father (and perhaps later in life Søren himself) had availed himself of the fleshly delights of the whorehouse—the memory of which was tormented by the dread possibility of having contracted or spread syphilis; or even of fathering an unknown and unintended child. A more moderate reading of the alleged sexual anomaly, however, traces Kierkegaard's familial guilt to the uncomfortable knowledge that after the death of his first wife, Kierkegaard's father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, had impregnated the servant girl (Ane Sørensdatter Lund, shortly to become Michael's second wife in 1797 and Søren's mother in 1813) before the socially appropriate period of mourning his first wife had elapsed. As with the alleged allusion to syphilis, this incident, while perhaps not as morally glaring today as it would have been rendered to the pietistic eyes of the Kierkegaards and their contemporaries, nonetheless contains the hereditary element which, Søren worried, had opened the genealogical pathway by which guilt would be transmitted. The paternally inherited curse to which Erikson and many others refer alludes to the suspicion that Kierkegaard regarded himself to be the intractably ordained inheritor of his Father's guilt. He, like his siblings before him, were all destined to die before his father, before the numerologically stigmatic age of Christ's own death: thirty-three years old.

According to another of the most prevalent speculations, however, Kierkegaard's father, born into extreme poverty and bondage in Sæding by the west coast of Jutland, confessed to his son that he had cursed God for his hardship whilst tending sheep alone on the barren heath. Regardless of its true epicenter, it was the experience of initiation into some disturbing family secret that initiated a psychic event described by Kierkegaard (1967-78) in suitably dramatic terms in his Journals as "the great earthquake":

an incident bringing in its wake the conviction that "[a] guilt must rest upon the entire family, a punishment of God must be upon it: it was supposed to disappear, obliterated by the mighty hand of God, erased like a mistake" (5:5430; See further Podmore, 2006). Identifying a hereditary strain inherent to his own apparently intractable melancholy, Kierkegaard's writings allude to the appropriation of a terrible secret guilt from his father. Under the enigmatic idiom of "A quiet despair" (1:745) Kierkegaard recounts a genealogy of hereditary melancholy: a stern father laboring under a secret depression; a silent confidante, his son Søren, "upon whom the whole of that melancholy descended in inheritance" (1951, 600).

Despite all the endeavors of scholarly excavation and psychobiography, one cannot be certain where the dark hidden root of Kierkegaard's 'thorn in the flesh' grows: it remains, in appropriately Kierkegaardian terms, a secret between the self and God whose most discrete interior details have been borne to the grave. Many of Kierkegaard's enigmatic allusions to "the great earthquake," "the thorn in the flesh," and "a quiet despair" occur in literary treatments which blur the boundaries between autobiographical confession, imaginative construction, and ironic misdirection, and, as such, are of limited diagnostic reliability. In this respect, Kierkegaard's writings appear to preserve the aphorism of his young aesthete 'A' in *Either/Or* (1843/1949): "One ought to be a mystery, not only to others, but also to one's self" (p. 21). However, what is evident throughout is that the burden of alien and interior guilt, along with the struggle to obtain and become at peace with forgiveness, were the more manifest symptoms of Kierkegaard's thorn in the flesh. Ultimately, what is revealed more vividly than the complexion of this ineffable dark night is the divine light by which Kierkegaard sought to negotiate his journey through life: namely the divine light of unconditional forgiveness and acceptance. Kierkegaard (1951) confesses in his Journals that it is this "thorn in my flesh to which the consciousness of sin and guilt has attached itself; I have felt myself to be different. This suffering, this difference I have understood as my relation to God" (1288). While Kierkegaard regarded his melancholy as a curse at least partially inherited from his earthly father, he also came to interpret his suffering, more positively and with greater potential for religious and psychological salvation (healing), as an inexorable expression of the relation to his Father in Heaven—"the agony with which God

laid the reins upon me" (1951, 600). By this transition to a more *eternal* perspective, Kierkegaard effectively brought his neuroses over guilt and atonement into a more healing theological dialectic of the consciousness of sin and the acceptance of forgiveness.

Despite his theological and philosophical acumen, however, such an assortment of potential neuroses may sound a virtually symphonic note of caution against viewing Kierkegaard as anything other than a patient of psychology and certainly no reliable physician. However, despite the perennial caricature of the melancholy Dane, there has also been significant recognition of the potential jewels of psychological insight to be unearthed within Kierkegaard's writings. For example, the distinguished Kierkegaard scholar Julia Watkin (1998) has described Kierkegaard's position as "a Socratic depth-psychology that gives an account of ethical-religious development in the individual" (p.372). Watkin even continues to suggest that "It is highly likely that, but for the fact of his writing in a minority language, he would have been hailed, long before the advent of Freud, as a founder of an important depth psychology" (p. 372). In this assertion, there can be heard echoes of Charles Carr's (1973) earlier claim that the "penetrating quality of Kierkegaard's insights into guilt, dread, sin, and despair also render him worthy of recognition as the father of modern therapeutic psychology" (p. 16).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, while also considering him as a potential case study, Erikson had referred to Kierkegaard (on whom he made extensive unpublished notes), rather than Freud, as the first real psychoanalyst (Hoare, 2002, pp. 177-79).

Undoubtedly what has emerged as one of the most fertile areas of cross-pollination between Kierkegaard's thought and the discipline of psychology has been Kierkegaard's contribution to thinking about the self (e.g. Watkins, 1998). As Robert Perkins (1987) summarizes, "Kierkegaard's view of the self has been one of his most fruitful ideas in the areas of psychotherapy and counseling, *The Sickness unto Death* frequently being read. The wealth of com-

ment on Kierkegaard by practitioners and scholars in these areas is pertinent and perceptive" (p. 3). In this article, however, I wish to explore specifically the centrality of Kierkegaard's theology and psychology of sin and forgiveness to his cartography of the self before God. By examining the relation between sin and forgiveness in *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening* (Kierkegaard, 1849/1983), I hope to illuminate how, through the curative integration of a theology of grace with a psychology of despair, Kierkegaard elucidates a model of selfhood which finds its restorative integration in heterogeneous relation to an Absolute Other in whom the self discovers its unconditional (self-) acceptance. Furthermore, by this reading I suggest that in articulating this view through the 'higher' pseudonymous identity of Anti-Climacus (the author of *The Sickness unto Death*), Kierkegaard creates a therapeutic hermeneutic which aims not only to alleviate the despair of his reader, but also to come to terms with his own difficulties in accepting the 'impossibility' of self-forgiveness. In doing so I propose to reconcile, at least in the pastoral moment of the composition of *The Sickness unto Death*, the impressions of Kierkegaard as both a physician and patient.

#### *'Physician, Heal Thyself!': Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Hermeneutic*

Although *The Sickness unto Death* is of paramount concern, this work is, I suggest, one of the more explicit expressions of a therapeutic element that can be read throughout Kierkegaard's writings. At various points within his authorship Kierkegaard presents himself as a Socratic figure in relation to his writings and to his readers. He portrays himself as the hidden ironist whose appointed maieutic task is to deliver the reader of the latent existential truths suppressed within their hidden interiority. By virtue of humour, dialectic, poetry, and deception into the truth, the reader could be delivered, Kierkegaard hoped, from ignorance and absorption within the inauthenticity of 'the crowd', and into the truth of subjectivity. Kierkegaard's books are thus essentially designed as mirrors in which the reader must discover, not Kierkegaard himself, nor the masked gaze of a pseudonym, but a rigorously honest and authentic self-reflection. In order to facilitate this dual erasure of authorial authority and an enticement of personal reflection, Kierkegaard would encourage the reader

<sup>1</sup>Carr (1973) continues by asserting that "Kierkegaard was the first to transfer psychology from the physiological laboratory to a truly personal context. He bridged the gap between the psychology of his day which focussed primarily on the observation of external phenomena and the application of these techniques to his own self-understanding. Through his writings and self-analysis, Kierkegaard preceded Freud, Jung, and Rogers on subjects such as the unconscious, introversion, and self, ideal-self conflict" (p. 16). See also Sobosan (1975, pp.31-35).

to read aloud to themselves—to address themselves and so, in therapeutic terms, to become both the speaker and the listener, the patient and the healer. By such techniques, the reader would ideally be freed from the implicit power dynamics of ‘objective’ reading and turned instead towards a potentially curative confrontation with inner stability: a confrontation which, while anxious, could give birth to a realisation of freedom and personal responsibility. This moment of recognition is perhaps most appositely evoked by Kierkegaard in the aptly titled *For Self Examination* (1851/1941) in which the decisive “transition to the subjective” (p. 63) is exemplified by the moment of self-recognition that David realised in his conviction by the prophet Nathan, ‘thou art the man’ (2 Samuel 12:7): an inescapably potent disruption of objective reading which gives birth to an unanticipated existential moment of recognition. In typically Kierkegaardian terms, David indirectly condemns himself by vilifying the protagonist of Nathan’s story—oblivious to what suddenly appears inescapable: that he has been caught out, deceived into the difficult truth of the realisation that ‘thou art the man’.

Indeed, Kierkegaard’s broad-spectrum theory of ‘indirect communication’ has itself been read as conducive to the practice of psychotherapy. Deriving her theory from a reading of Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*—written under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus—Katherine Ramsland (1989) explains Kierkegaard’s technique thus:

Kierkegaard exploits the notion in his creation of his many pseudonyms that persons can serve as such mirrors for other persons ... The structure of human experiencing is captured with a fictional but similar-to-true-life structure and displayed in such a manner that readers can learn about themselves without being told anything directly ... The conditions of becoming a person are condensed into perceivable patterns, intensifying the impact on individuals who acknowledge the relation to themselves. (p. 67; cf. Ramsland (1984-85, pp.189-204).

In both *Philosophical Fragments* (1844) and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), Kierkegaard employs the pseudonym Johannes Climacus (‘lower’ in relation to Anti-Climacus, as discussed below) to elucidate the shortcomings of a particular prevalent mode of (objective) knowledge; whilst also describing, in less compromising terms than he saw it expressed in contemporary Danish Christendom, the radical requirements of true Christianity. But at the same time, Johannes Climacus is denying that he is a Christian himself: that he is able to realize the heights of Christianity whose

horizon he has so agonizingly traced. Again, the mirror is held up to the reader and the author himself wishes to recede.

However, it is, I suggest, in 1849’s *The Sickness unto Death* that Kierkegaard articulates his most theologically consummate and psychologically fertile moment of self-recognition and healing—a vision of the self which relates identity and self-acceptance to faith in a forgiveness of sins which is the gracious gift from the divine Other: “Faith is: that the self in being itself and in willing to be itself rests transparently in God” (p. 82). Here Kierkegaard also devises a way to speak to what he regarded as the omnivorous despair of the present age without compromising his own ostensibly humble claim to be “without authority” (e.g. Kierkegaard, 1967-78, 2:1258). In fact, the pervasiveness of despair is itself signified by the fact that Kierkegaard regards himself as among its victims. It is because of this identification with the sick that Kierkegaard will not avail himself of the title of healer—a title that he gives to his latest and arguably most consummate pseudonym, Anti-Climacus. However, I contend that it is precisely the personal experience of Kierkegaard as one among the sick that obliquely confers upon Anti-Climacus his pastoral acumen. It is in this pseudonymous relationship that one may acknowledge Kierkegaard—as wounded healer—as a physician of the soul.

### ***THE SICKNESS UNTO DEATH: ON FORGIVENESS & DESPAIR***

In one of the more agonizing passages from early in *The Sickness unto Death*, Anti-Climacus (Kierkegaard, 1849/1983) outlines his harrowing prognosis of despair:

Thus to be sick unto death is to be unable to die... despair is the hopelessness of not being able to die.

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. (p. 18)

Sorajjakool (2006) astutely infers how “This theological statement seems to reflect Kierkegaard’s personal struggle with melancholy,” describing it as “a theological construct interpreting his existential struggle” (p. 78). Although the hidden root of Kierkegaard’s ‘thorn in the flesh’ was continually dissembled, revealed, concealed, and flaunted, perhaps the most prominent manifestations of its pathology that permeates his writings is the struggle for, against, and with the

dialectical polarities of forgiveness and despair. Whatever lay at the heart of Kierkegaard's malady, there is an almost pathological, or scrupulously religious, need and desire to be delivered from despair and reconciled with forgiveness. Whatever occurred in Kierkegaard's life—whether the hereditary curse of his father's secret blasphemy or his own melancholic rejection, or release, of his fiancée Regina—Kierkegaard needed forgiveness just as he needed to relate himself to God. In reality, these anxious desires became psychologically and theologically inextricable. However, more than being a release from the melancholy arrows of the past, being forgiven was, for Kierkegaard, the path towards integration of the self in relation and reconciliation to its Creator. Kierkegaard ultimately endured “a lifelong struggle to accept in depth the forgiving love of Christ” (Carr, 1973, p. 15)—a struggle that was at a particularly acute point around the period of *The Sickness unto Death's* conception and publication (1847-49). From a diagnostic perspective, Sorajjakool (2006) observes that, during this period in particular, “It seems as though Kierkegaard's theological reflections were an attempt at coping or dealing with anxiety and depression” (p. 77).<sup>2</sup> In a Journal entry from 1847 Kierkegaard (1967-78) explains how “A man rests in the forgiveness of sins when the thought of God does not remind him of the sin but that it is forgiven, when the past is not a memory of how much he trespassed but of how much he has been forgiven” (2:1209). This statement epitomizes the eternally assured forgiveness that Kierkegaard sought to procure for himself. The tension between a religiously scrupulous guilt over past transgressions and an appropriate faith in the absolute and unconditional forgiveness of sins prompted Kierkegaard to seek not only of the forgiving of sins but also the reassurance of the forgetting of sins. In ‘Love Hides a Multitude of Sins’, the Second Series of 1847's *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard (1847/1995) writes impressionistically of God ‘forgetting’ as well as ‘forgiving’ sins: a figurative

reflection of how, by the grace of God, forgiven sins are not held over the head of the one who is forgiven like an (unrepayable) debt or a melancholy remembrance of past transgressions. By such absolute forgiveness, God expresses love. “By *forgiveness* love hides a multitude of sins ... forgiveness takes the forgiven sin away” (p. 294).

Forgetting, when God does it in relation to sin, is the opposite of creating, since to create is to bring forth from nothing, and to forget is to take back into nothing. What is hidden from my eyes, that I have never seen; but what is hidden behind my back, that I have seen. The one who loves forgives in this way: he forgives, he forgets, he blots out the sin, in love he turns toward the one he forgives; but when he turns toward him, he of course cannot see what is lying behind his back. (p. 296)

By this anthropomorphism, Kierkegaard seeks to express an essentially pastoral reassurance that not only are sins forgiven; they are no longer seen (recalled) when God looks at the believer. What is seen is one who is irrevocably forgiven—and it is therefore the duty of the individual not to obsessively recall past sins, but to realize the comprehensiveness of divine forgiveness by accepting oneself as accepted in the eyes of God.

Kierkegaard could perhaps bring himself to accept the *doctrine* of forgiveness—to believe in the divine forgiveness of the other; but where his own sins were concerned (and perhaps the hereditary sins of the father), however, he evidently struggled to realize the ‘transition to the subjective’ in personally recognizing and accepting the divine promise that the past was truly forgiven, even ‘forgotten’ by God. Of course, Kierkegaard (1967-78) observes in an 1848 Journal entry, “the feeling of one's own unworthiness” (the consciousness of sin), the recognition of “the need for forgiveness of sins betokens that one loves God.” But this consciousness can become so harrowing that “all by himself no man can ever come to think that God loves him” (2:1216). Decisively, therefore, just as the consciousness of sin must be revealed in relation to God, so must forgiveness be learned from beyond the shores of one's interior self-interpretation.

It is this determinate principle that emerges more explicitly towards the end of 1849's *The Sickness unto Death*, where doubt and loss of hope in forgiveness are evoked under the rubric of perhaps the most intensified form of despair: ‘The Sin of Despairing of the Forgiveness of Sins (Offense)’. Such despair is a sickness of the self and, as such, requires the attention of a physician.

<sup>2</sup>In particular, see Sorajjakool (2006) ‘Chapter Seven. Integration: The Case of Søren Kierkegaard’ (pp.69-79) and ‘Appendix 3. Diagnosis of Søren Kierkegaard’ (pp.113-119). In this latter diagnosis, Sorajjakool comments that “perhaps he was suffering from a mood disorder, perhaps dysthymic disorder with an early onset. He most likely experienced two major depressive episodes (discovering his father's curse and sexuality, and during the *Corsair* affair [in which Kierkegaard was cruelly lampooned by a popular local satirical newspaper]) and had an obsessive-compulsive personality” (p. 114).

However, after much agonizing and ‘fear and trembling’ over his vocation and the meaning of his God-relation, along with a last-minute change of mind, Kierkegaard decided that he was unworthy to identify himself explicitly as such a healer, humbling himself instead under the “ideality” of the work and introducing the pseudonym Anti-Climacus (Kierkegaard, 1967-78, 6:6446 and 6:6762). “The difference from the earlier pseudonyms is simply but essentially this,” Kierkegaard (1967-78) revealed in an 1849 Journal entry, “that I do not retract the whole thing humorously but identify myself as one who is striving” (6:6446). The emergence of the Anti-Climacus pseudonym represented a “halt” in the authorship and a realization of a higher expression of Christianity with which Kierkegaard—being “too much of a poet”—dared not identify himself (6:6450). Renouncing his claim to authorship, Kierkegaard identified himself instead as the editor (thus implying a closer affinity with this work than with many other pseudonymous works) and released *The Sickness unto Death* under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus: one who is “a Christian on an extraordinarily high level,” far “higher” than the “lower,” ironic, pre-Christian, humorist Johannes Climacus—the pseudonym of the earlier *Philosophical Fragments and Concluding Unscientific Postscript* who cannot call himself a Christian, though he recognizes what Christianity requires better than most Christians in Christendom (3:3423).

Kierkegaard thus judges himself personally as “higher than Johannes Climacus, lower than Anti-Climacus” (6:6433; cf. Perkins, 2004, pp. 3-5). However, in an unused draft of *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard (1849/1983) is eager to clarify that “I judge no one . . . even if I may have a psychologist’s eye—I nevertheless see people in such universality that I truly can be said to see no one—yet I judge no one.” And yet, Kierkegaard concedes, there is one individual who he does see, and sees and judges unrelentingly: namely himself—one who is “personally so guilty, so very guilty.” As such, Kierkegaard confesses that “the book judges me in many ways . . . I myself am the only one dealt with negatively and positively in the book” (p. 159). It is thus Kierkegaard’s (1967-78) recognition that “I personally am a part of the book” that prohibits Kierkegaard’s initial thought to include a postscript by the editor (i.e. under his own name) (6:6437). However, it is possible to gain an impression of how

such an editor’s note might have appeared. In an unused draft, Kierkegaard (1849/1983) writes:

[I]f it is possible that the author does not judge anyone, in a way I myself am most concerned that that will not happen, for if he does judge someone, it will be me first and foremost. That this is no platitude, a reader certainly will have no difficulty in seeing, for although he may not feel that the book applies to him, he will easily see how I must feel that it applies to me in many ways.

It does indeed seem as if the book were written by a physician. But he who is a physician is someone who is no one; he does not say to any single human being: You are sick. Nor does he say it to me; he merely describes the sickness while he at the same time continually defines what “faith” is . . . On the other hand, I do all I can so that I might be the one he means—as if I were the one, the sick person, of whom he speaks – by at least striving to be the one who honestly strive. (p. 161)

Elsewhere in his Journals, Kierkegaard (1967-78) declares that, “Now I understand perfectly that an editor’ preface [rather than a postscript] must always accompany the new pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, in which I say: I am striving.” In this note, Kierkegaard explicitly reiterates, “This book seems to be written by a physician; I, the editor, am not the physician, I am one of those sick” (6:6535). Anti-Climacus, in Kierkegaard’s assessment, writes with the tone of a physician—“someone who is no one.” In an unused draft, however, Kierkegaard (1967-78) proposes a prayer which he finally decides against including in the Preface. In this prayer, Kierkegaard identifies *Christ* as the true physician in whom lies salvation from the sickness unto death:

And you, our Lord Jesus Christ, you who came to the world to heal those who suffer from this sickness . . . help us in this sickness to turn to you to be healed! And you, God the Holy Spirit, you who come to our assistance if we honestly want to be healed: be with us so that we never to our own ruination elude the physician’s help but remain with him – saved from the sickness. For to be with him is to be saved from the sickness, and only when we are with him are we saved from the sickness! (3:3423)

In accordance with this prayer, it is possible to infer a distinction between Anti-Climacus as physician and *Christ* as physician. Anti-Climacus is “someone who is no one”: that is, someone who does not judge, but merely describes the sickness, potentially eliciting the self-recognition of the reader. It is first of all Kierkegaard who voluntarily submits himself to the judgment of his own “higher” pseudonym. However, being under the diagnosis of this physician is not ultimately salvific in itself. In addition to diagnosis one requires treatment—and this is where Christ

as physician offers the salvation from the sickness unto death that Anti-Climacus can only indicate in his prescription of faith. In this respect, the Anti-Climacus pseudonym actually implies an important qualitative distinction previously made by his “lower” namesake Johannes Climacus: the difference between the Socratic teacher who elicits the truth and the god-man who embodies the relational truth (Kierkegaard, 1844/1985, 9-36). Whereas Anti-Climacus the physician prescribes the Truth, Christ the savior *is* the Truth.

As such, it is only in relation to the Truth—“before God”—that the self can become disclosed to itself. The Socratic injunction to ‘know thyself’ thus falls short of the Christian vision of self-knowledge which establishes self-disclosure in relation to a Transcendent Other. According to Christianity, as Kierkegaard (1967-78) formulates in his Journals, “that is provisional—know yourself—and look at yourself in the mirror of the Word in order to know yourself properly. No true self knowledge without God knowledge or before God. To stand before the mirror means to stand before God” (4:3902). Or, as Anti-Climacus (Kierkegaard, 1849/1983) constructs it: “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 [*gjennemsigtigt*—literally ‘see-through’] in the power that established it” (p. 14). One of the central epistemological implications of the sickness unto death (despair) is the realization that one’s introspective, solitary attempts to know thyself are destined to failure, frustration and even a potential deepening of despair itself: “in despair to will to be oneself” (p. 67). It is only in *relation* to an *other* that the self can be known—a notion illustrated by the relation between physician and patient concerning the diagnosis of sickness and health:

The physician knows that just as there is merely imaginary sickness there is merely imaginary health, and in the latter case he first takes measures to disclose the sickness. Generally speaking, the physician, precisely because he is a physician (well informed), does not have complete confidence in what a person says about his condition... 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. (pp. 23-4)<sup>3</sup>

Anti-Climacus’s identification of the roles of affectation, self-delusion and imagination would have been particularly penetrating for Kierkegaard himself. A person may neglect eternity’s obligation

to become a self—“in despair not to will to be oneself” (p. 49)—and, by dissolving one’s identity within the amorphous inauthenticity of ‘the crowd’, deceive oneself that nothing is wrong. One may narcissistically seek to create *ex nihilo* an imagined or “infinite” self: a hubristic self which wills to become “absolutely its own master,” forsaking the relational call of the other (p. 69). Such portraits of inauthentic selfhood abound in Kierkegaard’s writings. However, Anti-Climacus also definitively identifies a delusional sickness of the self which—perhaps even from a pathological sense of guilt or unworthiness—cannot imagine the possibility of existing “before God” without succumbing to fear and trembling:

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 characterise 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!’ (p. 32)<sup>4</sup>

Intriguingly, the words of this “fantasized religious person” can also be found within Kierkegaard’s (1967-78) own Journals:

I am certainly able to comprehend that a bird can live; it does not know at all that it exists before God—and I am certainly able to comprehend that a person can endure existing before God when he himself is unconscious of doing that. But to be conscious of the fact that one exists before God—and then to be able to live! (2:1364)

<sup>3</sup>Carlisle (2006) comments on this passage:

Anti-Climacus’s vocabulary of sickness and health is important for a number of reasons. It explains the structure of the text, which follows the physician’s method of first diagnosing and explaining the nature of the sickness before offering a cure... The medical metaphor also suggests that the ‘prescription’ of faith is for the individual’s own benefit: it is for the sake of alleviating the painful condition of despair, rather than a moralizing demand that the reader ‘ought’ to have faith in order to be a ‘good’ person... The term ‘sickness’ also implies the suffering that sin involves... This emphasis upon suffering encourages a compassionate rather than judgemental response to the sinfulness of others, which is very much in line with Jesus’s own teaching (pp. 103-4).

<sup>4</sup>Kilborne’s (1999) identification of ‘sin’ in *The Sickness Unto Death* as “shame” rather than “guilt” seems particularly appropriate to this passage. While it risks reducing the theological content of Kierkegaard’s understanding of sin, Kilborne helpfully illuminates the optical exchanges and disruptions at the heart of Kierkegaard’s vision of the self: “For the purposes of this article we will provisionally define shame as involving discrepancies between the way one wants to be seen and the way one feels or imagines one is being looked at, a failure to conform to an ideal (in psychoanalytic terms, a profound conflict involving the ego ideal)” (p. 35).

Kierkegaard's anxiety is tangible: becoming conscious of the fact that one exists before God may induce a harrowing *Angst*, a 'spiritual trial' [*Anfægtelse*] evoked by the tension of the "infinite qualitative difference" between self and God. However, Anti-Climacus—the physician of despair—urges a cautionary awareness of the psychologically embellishing effects of fantasy and imagination upon the prospect of existing alone before God. Anti-Climacus thus reflects Kierkegaard back to himself by placing Kierkegaard's words in the mouth of "a fantasised religious person." For this 'fantasised' individual, the thought of existing before God seems ontologically incommensurable and psychologically unendurable. Surely such an encounter can only end in madness or annihilation. However, as Anti-Climacus (Kierkegaard, 1849/1983) observes, this self has actually become 'fantastic' [*Phantastiske*] and as such "leads a fantasised existence in abstract infinitizing or in abstract isolation, continually lacking its self, from which it moves further and further away" (p. 32). Such a 'fantastic' self cannot become itself because "in fantasy this infinitizing can so sweep a man off his feet that his state is simply an intoxication" (p. 32). Anti-Climacus's warning is evident: although "[t]he God-relationship is an infinitizing" it must still retain the individual's relation to the finite, lest one succumbs to the intoxication of the fantastic—an intoxication that Kierkegaard knew only too well.

Such a fantastic perspective—particularly once related in the mind of the sick person to a neurotic sense of one's irremediable guilt as sinner *before God*—can easily cause one to fall into a potentially pathological downward spiral. This is clearer in relation to Part Two of *The Sickness unto Death* where the identification of despair as sin *before God* is rendered more explicit. In addition to the deluded intoxication of "the fantasized religious person," Anti-Climacus at this point portrays that which he deems as "poet-existence": an existence guilty of "the sin of poeticizing 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" (p. 77). Such a person is characterized by the tendency "to poeticize 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" (p. 78). Once again, in his Journals Kierkegaard (1967-78) humbly identifies himself as "the religious poet" in this composition (6:6437), thereby eliciting the moment of recognition ("a transition

to the subjective"; 'thou art the man') from himself to himself via a higher pseudonymous representation of his religious identity. The poet can therefore be indicted for having created a poetically and melancholically embellished depiction of the God-relationship. "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" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1983, p. 78).

However, if such a poet is to realize this despair as the primal element of faith, then despair must be recognised as 'sin before God': a recognition which also points towards deliverance from sin through a relational forgiveness 'before God'. Furthermore, one must accept that 'God' is not a concept malleable to the imaginative desire to poeticize God "as somewhat different from what God is." In order to become a self before God, one must come to terms with the "infinite qualitative difference" (Kierkegaard, 1849/1983, p. 126) between the self and God: between the self's projected fantasy and the revealed Holy Other God. However, this abyssal difference between self and God—a difference which prohibits fantastic constructs or projections of 'God'—may itself also become a source of psychological horror for the individual caught in the bleakest depths of this sickness unto death. As Kierkegaard himself knew only too well, once a rigorous conception of *sin* (the absolute difference between self and God) is accepted, the door can then be opened to a host of melancholy anxieties, spiritual trials, and fantastic delusions concerning the wrath of God and the scrupulous self-scrutiny of the sinful conscience. In other words, once authentic selfhood is understood to be derived in relation to God (a God from whom the self is estranged by an infinite qualitative difference of sin), then the notion of forgiveness becomes central to the self's integration and (self-) acceptance before God. However, if guilt over sin advances into depressive, fantastic, or pathological realms, then it risks giving birth to supplementary but no less harrowing forms of despair: namely, that which Kierkegaard himself had evidently labored under, despair over sins and despair of the forgiveness of sins.

#### *Despair Over Sin: The Impossibility of Self-Forgiveness*

"Sin itself is severance from the good," Anti-Climacus (Kierkegaard, 1849/1983) warns, "but

despair over sin is the second severance" (p. 109). In "the sin of despairing over one's sin" a second abyss of estrangement is postulated between the self and God. The first abyss separating self and God is *sin*—the absolute difference; but here in "the second severance" the self *despairs over* despair (sin). In an effort to accept and integrate the conception of itself as a sinner, Anti-Climacus argues, the self frequently responds by seeking to become "internally consistent," by closing itself up within itself and defending itself against any 'possibility' of forgiveness that threatens to disrupt its impression of itself as sinner (p. 109). In the attempt to own its identity as a sinner, the self which despairs over sin actually wills to be itself—in demonic self-consistency—to the extent of refuting any heterogeneous offer of redemption. However, the reality of such a demonic self is that "in despairing over his sin and of the reality of repentance, of grace, he has actually lost himself" (p. 110). What is more, the demonic self, which plunges itself into the internal consistency of a life of decadence and damnation, may actually also resemble the melancholy sensitivity towards sin, that "deep nature" (p. 111) of the *homo religiosus* who, with scrupulous self-indictment, discloses their most intimate despair in the confession that "I will never forgive myself" (p. 111). Ostensibly, such self-condemnation may be symptomatic of a troubled soul captured in the melancholy narrowness of the consciousness of sin; but it also belies an implicit hubris towards one's own guilt: a (self-) confidence in the omniscient potency of self-indictment and consequently self-forgiveness.

In this compelling diagnosis, Anti-Climacus exposes the self-delusion that is implicit in such despair over sin. The message for Kierkegaard is also implicit: what may appear to be a humble appropriation of one's sinfulness is actually self-oriented subterfuge and a final narcissistic grasp at oneself in the face of divine forgiveness. A second, albeit related, tactic for choosing to wallow in sin rather than embrace forgiveness is exposed and indicted by Anti-Climacus under the rubric of "the sin of despairing of the forgiveness of sins (offense)." In this case, the self is "directly before Christ" and, as such, the offer of forgiveness is more directly explicit. Once again, in making a final narcissistic grasp at self-creation, the self falls into a state of "in despair to will to oneself—a sinner—in such a way that there is no forgiveness" (p. 113). In a psychologically astute vignette, Anti-Climacus describes this relation thus:

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 no forgiveness of sins, it is impossible,' and it looks like close combat. Yet to be able to do 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]... In order that the 'No,' which in a way wants to grapple with God, can be heard, a person must get as far away from God as possible. (p. 114)

In other words, such an apparently combative stance face-to-face with God (*before God*) is actually a flight from God and an evasion of the heterogeneous relationship of forgiveness. This description recalls Anti-Climacus's earlier description of the despair of 'the fatalist'. In similar vein, Anti-Climacus formerly provides an evocative description of a person who, after enduring the greatest horror imaginable (named by Anti-Climacus as a 'thorn in the flesh'), wills to collapse into an irresolvable despair. This fatalist's despair—as with the sinner who despairs of the forgiveness of sins—is exacerbated by the loss of *possibility*. "At this point, then, salvation is, humanly speaking, utterly impossible" (p. 38). However, this capitulation into the despair over possibility is also an alleviating surrender which abandons God; "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" (p. 38). Salvation, *humanly speaking*, appears an impossibility, and the self in despair consolidates itself by collapsing into that thought. And yet, Anti-Climacus counters, faith has the "antidote for despair—possibility—because for God everything is possible at every moment" (pp. 39-40).

The struggle of faith is thus expressed as a battle for divine possibility in the face of a forgiveness which is impossible *humanly speaking*. And it is by the self-surrender of prayer that one expresses such faith in divine possibility over human impossibility—a prayer thereby resisting the nihilism of despair. The fatalist's collapse into despair thus constitutes "a mute capitulation: he is unable to pray" (p. 40). The fatalist is unable to pray because there is for him no air of possibility in which to breathe a word, only the silent gasp of despair. He has lost God and his self; but, "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" (p. 40). To pray is therefore to break the self-enclosed silence of despair in order to

struggle against human impossibility in the name of heterogeneous divine possibility.

At the point at which salvation from despair transpires as a human impossibility, Anti-Climacus astutely identifies an implicit psychology of *offense* at work in the self which despairs of the forgiveness of sins: namely, offense against the divine forgiveness of sins—a forgiveness which, perhaps even due to its melancholy self-indictment, the self regards as “impossible” (p. 116). But such offense, according to Anti-Climacus, although theologically disruptive is actually psychologically understandable, and may even signify spiritual depth. If one has something approaching an adequate impression of the depth of sin, as Kierkegaard consistently asserts, then absolute forgiveness by God may indeed seem to be a “paradox,” an absurdity, an offense to reason and to one’s own sense of guilt (a guilt around which an enclosed impression of the self is constructed). And yet, as Kierkegaard realized acutely, the existential problem concerns how one is to be released from this, the prison of despair’s offense over the impossibility of forgiveness. How is a person of tender conscience and religious longing to accept the absolute acceptance which one desires yet cannot embrace? At this point a theology of grace and the otherness of God opens a way through the pastoral impasse of the impossibility of forgiveness.

The key to the self’s deliverance from this despair can be located in an act of self-abnegation or self-surrender to the heterogeneity of the forgiveness of sins: a self-negation which actually opens one up to the possibility of becoming a self, discovering one’s self, in relation *before God*. By contrast, Anti-Climacus identifies that the refusal to accept an ‘impossible’ forgiveness represents an implicitly hubristic form of “in despair to will to be oneself—a sinner—in such a way that there is no forgiveness” (p. 113). In its even more intensified form, such despair becomes “THE SIN OF DISMISSING CHRISTIANITY MODO PONENDO [POSITIVELY], OF DECLARING IT TO BE UNTRUTH.” This refusal of the divine offer of reconciliation is equated by Anti-Climacus with the unforgivable sin, the sin against the Holy Spirit [Matthew 12:31-32]: “Here the self is at the highest intensity of despair; it not only discards Christianity totally but makes it out to be a lie and untruth” (p. 125). In other words, offense against the forgiveness of one’s sins is actually a subconscious form of pride or *self-assertion*: an implicit belief that ‘only I can judge how much of a

sinner I am and only I can declare whether I am forgivable. It is my consciousness of sin; and I say that forgiveness of my sins is *impossible*.’ As such, Kierkegaard (1967-78) pointedly suggests elsewhere in his Journals that “Perhaps the sin against the Holy Spirit was rather the pride with which he would not forgive himself,” the hubris which believes that one’s sin has exhausted the possibilities of divine mercy. “There is also a severity in condemning oneself and not wanting to hear about grace which is nothing but sin” (4:4029).

Theologically understood, the inconsistency of such a rejection of acceptance is undermined by the desire to establish a refusal of forgiveness in the self’s epistemological reflections on its own sinfulness. Ultimately, despite the self’s unconscious desire to master itself through self-judgment and self-condemnation, Anti-Climacus (Kierkegaard, 1849/1983) emphasizes how such judgment remains beyond the cognitive capacity of the self alone: “that is what you know least of all, how far from perfect you are and what sin is” (p. 96). The error resides in conflating what one can forgive oneself for with what God can forgive one for: a self-projection which, by judging divine possibility by the internal frontiers of human impossibility, ensues erroneously from an omission of the ‘infinite qualitative difference’ between human and divine forgiveness. This introspective grasp at the self is essentially tantamount to judging God and the self according to the self’s own interior standards, and therefore an implicit denial of the ‘offensive’ truth that one “has to learn what sin is by a revelation from God” (p. 95). This theological inconsistency helps to expose and illuminate the subconscious desire for self-mastery which Kierkegaard and Anti-Climacus identify as the real psychological hindrance to deliverance from despair through faith in the forgiveness of sins. In fact, this despair manifests a latent self-willing which autonomously prescribes the parameters of divine forgiveness in order to affirm that one is, by virtue of one’s demonic or pious self-impression, beyond the reaches of salvation as one believed. In reality, “this kind of talk is exactly the opposite of the brokenhearted contrition that prays to God to forgive” (p. 111). The heart condemns itself—but God is greater than our hearts (1 John 3:20). As Anti-Climacus explains further, the true meaning of the infinite qualitative difference is not merely *sin*, but the *forgiveness of sin*: the infinite qualitative difference between human *impossibility*

and divine *possibility*. Decisively Anti-Climacus counters the psychological crisis of despair by asserting the theological truth that while God is so infinitely other than me in my sinfulness, I am so infinitely other than God in the forgiving of sins:

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 all eternity come to be like God: in forgiving sins. (p. 122)

### ***Conclusion: Kierkegaard as Patient & Physician of the Soul***

In his insightful exploration of the psychology of forgiveness and despair, Kierkegaard elucidates the often unconscious relations between offense, self-mastery, and im/possibility by which the self struggles to know and accept itself. The infinite qualitative difference between self-forgiveness and divine forgiveness (between human impossibility and the sacred possibility of acceptance) asserts that the self should accept the forgiveness which, by ensuing from the divine *Other*, exceeds and transcends the self's introspective capacities for self-diagnosis and even despair. This relational vision of "the self before God" thus evades the self-enclosed interiority of the modern self-derived self by establishing its understanding of itself on an acceptance and integration that comes from the Other (Lorrain, 1997, p. 311). In the course of *The Sickness unto Death*, it often appears that through Anti-Climacus's visceral portrayals and incisive exposés of despair, Kierkegaard hopes to diagnose and thereby immunize himself against his own refusal of divine acceptance. He therefore manifests the various guises of despair, which he himself knows so intimately, only to undermine them from within their own interior psychology. As such, Anti-Climacus is able to expose the subconscious pride of despair because Kierkegaard has taken an extensive and penetrating look in the mirror: the divine mirror of the Word (Sorajjakool, 2006, p. 79). By this reading, Anti-Climacus is only what he is—a physician—because Kierkegaard was capable, at times, of becoming a highly self-aware patient.

According to Anti-Climacus (Kierkegaard, 1849/1983), "Only the Christian knows what is meant by the sickness unto death" (p. 8). But if Kierkegaard himself was clearly on such intimate terms with the sickness unto death then what might

the implication be for his reticence to identify himself, presumptuously, as he saw it, as a Christian (Kierkegaard, 1849/1968, p. 33)? It should not be said that on all philosophical and theological levels Anti-Climacus can be read as a cipher for Kierkegaard's own views on all matters (for example, see further Possen, 2004, p. 191; Perkins, 2004). In fact, it could be argued that the gap postulated between Kierkegaard himself and the higher pseudonym Anti-Climacus—who declares that which Kierkegaard dared not or deemed himself unworthy to proclaim—would preclude a total integration of the two. In a therapeutic respect, it could be said that Anti-Climacus parallels the Divine in functioning as an 'other' who is able, by opening up a reflective psychological space for Kierkegaard, to convey to the self an acceptance which the self cannot articulate for itself.

However, this reading of the pseudonymous hermeneutic also implies something of a paradox of identity. It is only through the guise of Anti-Climacus that Kierkegaard (the mere editor) feels able to realize the authority of a physician of the soul, of an 'extraordinary Christian' who can isolate, illuminate, and dare to prescribe faith as the means to heal the sickness unto death. And yet the irony resides in the knowledge of the reader (particularly the later reader who is subsequently availed of Kierkegaard's private Journals, a wealth of secondary literature, biography, and psychological conjecture) that Kierkegaard himself is intimately acquainted with this sickness and therefore uniquely equipped to describe its pathology. Although Anti-Climacus conveys the piousness of a spiritual advisor, the real empathy and pathos of this work is most fully realized in our understanding of the editor Søren Kierkegaard as something of a wounded healer. Although he describes himself as one "without authority," and although he felt compelled to efface his identity beneath the façade of a 'higher' name, it is the spiritual struggle of Søren Kierkegaard—a struggle to realize his own identity 'before God'—that burns through the text. Without this hidden identity Anti-Climacus possesses piety but he lacks empathy in the Kierkegaardian 'subjective' sense of self-recognition. He needs his editor—his patient—from whom he acquires his diagnostic acumen. Kierkegaard himself is humbled under the pious name of Anti-Climacus; but it is this humility of Kierkegaard—his discrete confession that "I myself am one of the sick"—which penetrates, through the veil of his pseudonym, to the heart of the sickness unto death in his wounded reader.

"There is no victory more beautiful than that won by forgiving, for here even the vanquished can rejoice in extolling it." (Kierkegaard, 1967-78, 2:1203)

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