Emotions about Nothing

Kierkegaard, author of a philosophical masterpiece with the unserious title *Philosophical Fragments*, has also left us a series of *psychological* fragments that are consciously incomplete. He never intended to be systematic in his treatment of emotional life, nor does he ever engage in a fuller philosophical exploration of human nature and emotions as did David Hume. And while his avowed interest in the moods selected for sustained attention is resolution, he explores only the crisis phase.

Yet while Kierkegaard never declared a programmatic plan for exploring psychological topics, he in effect engaged in a phenomenology of moods, in a wide exploration of a set of emotions that are particularly distinctive for having no clear object and, in effect, revealing themselves to be emotions about “nothing.” The phrase “emotions about nothing” does not mean here emotions of insignificance or worthy of dismissal from consideration but exactly the opposite: emotions that are powerful and real and uniquely revelatory about the human condition and where “nothing” ultimately emerges as a highly important negative ideogram of something that holds the greatest significance.

Given the role of “nothing” in his psychological explorations, it is somewhat ironic that Kierkegaard wrote in 1844 that if ever there were to be such a thing as Danish philosophy, it would not begin with nothing.¹ And yet his important contributions to psychology begin with an exploration of world and self-dissatisfaction that quickly reveal not only a non-object but point toward an exploration of the paradoxical “nothing” in play.

For in boredom, I discover that I am interested in nothing, that nothing at hand interests me. In irony I reject the unsatisfactory world but do not know what will satisfy or fulfill me, and turn on it with scorn in the false initial impression that nothing will provide fulfillment and relief. In anxiety my fear has no object and I am thrown back on myself and eventually the “nothing” that is at the center of my own being. (See chapters 8 and 9.) In despair I am on the verge of giving up hope of ever solving the riddle of myself and of my existence, a riddle that seems to defy answers and come to nothing.

It is well known from his *Journals* and from later biographies that Kierkegaard suffered serious emotional crises.² In the emotional depths
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into which he was plunged, he explored the self, before Existentialists and beyond Romantics, with an eye for detail and with reflective brilliance. His analysis of the emotional life must to some extent be understood in relation to the Romantics of his times and seen as a strong corrective. Kierkegaard set out to show that an individual’s emotional life can have a meaning, depth, and ultimate clarity that go far beyond popular wisdom, poetic Schwärmeri, and philosophical group psychologies of a Hegelian cast. Ultimately Kierkegaard proposes the religious (or spiritual) sphere as the deepest ground of the person and as the realm to which his analysis of indeterminate emotions points. What Kierkegaard means by the religious is not a set of doctrines or documents or practices but a personal experience and a personal discovery of the grounding and equilibrium-restoring source for a series of emotional upheavals in the personality. He sought to portray and then conceptually articulate the meaning and intentionality of certain emotions. Kierkegaard explores a “logic of the heart” through an examination of the truth of human growth. He does so empirically and reflectively and speculatively and then moves on to formulate a philosophical statement of the underlying elements that make sense of emotional life. He also engaged in existential experimentation—personal and imaginative.

What is particularly distinctive is the emphasis on the meaning of individual experience. Thus while there is general language about becoming a self, every self is understood as a distinctive and individual self-creation. To some extent, Kierkegaard’s analysis can be considered an updating and elaboration of the well-known quote from Augustine’s Confessions (addressed as a prayer to God): “Our heart is restless until it finds rest in you,” but with added emphasis on each individual’s distinctively individual experience.

The Concept of Moods

Kierkegaard’s authorship is to a significant degree an analysis of the stormy emotional life of the potentially religious subject, a presentation of the human spirit weathering the internal storms involved in reaching the transcendent. Kierkegaard limited his psychological explorations to emotions that eventually pointed the way toward a higher subjectivity. Further, he had a concept of these moods, even if he never wrote a formal treatise on moods as such, as Heidegger was among the first to see clearly and then to articulate in a very different philosophical project of his own. Kierkegaard’s presentation of certain moods is not straightforward, and
for this he had his deliberate reasons. Moreover, despite the extensive descriptions he provides, he never directly defines a mood as such; and the four moods that he emphasizes, as well as their manner of presentation, make for a surprising list for the twenty-first-century reader, namely, irony, anxiety, melancholy, and despair.

Anxiety and despair are each the clear subject of a treatise by a transparent pseudonym \(^7\) (The Concept of Anxiety, by Vigilius Haufniensis, and The Sickness unto Death, by Anti-Climacus). Irony, which is initially the most surprising “mood,” was the subject of Kierkegaard’s Copenhagen dissertation, for which he was awarded a degree by the university and the epithet “master of irony” by the public. But for him irony was not essentially a matter of wit or a sharp tongue but a coloration of the entire personality, a tonality (Danish Stemning) that characterized the way one experienced the world and oneself in the world. It is a mood of rebellion and rejection of finitude—the givens and limits in which one always finds oneself as a human being. Melancholy is longing for a beloved, not as nineteenth-century Romantics understood it but ultimately as Christian mystics did. Kierkegaard’s concept of the moods of religious subjectivity also contains a discernible dialectic of moods. And his rational examination of emotional life constitutes a logic of moods, a clear and meaningful ordering of crisis and resolution in what would at first appear to be merely a chaos of emotions. Moreover, in each instance he would hold that crisis is both predictable and necessary for personal growth to occur.

Kierkegaard is interested principally in moods that trigger reflection and self-consciousness, moods that intensify the experience of subjectivity and call one’s identity into question. A mood is an attunement, a coloration affecting perception. “Being in a mood” is a way of indicating its hold. For some, such as Heidegger, one is always in a mood, always colored, attuned. One does not choose one’s mood in the sense of selecting it, but for Kierkegaard, as for Heidegger, once in a mood one needs to accept it and the new knowledge about the self that it brings.

The four moods of dawning subjectivity that Kierkegaard examines have no external objects and are essentially about the self, as indicated by their intensification of subjectivity. These moods have the effect of making one more conscious of oneself and of the problem of the self, in two senses: (1) the self as shattered and a burden and (2) the self as task to be accomplished.

Moods come and go, but all four that Kierkegaard considers are tied to one fundamental existential condition, namely a shattered self in need of reconstitution. These moods can, however, lie dormant, and a dialectic of moods, as Kierkegaard portrays them, occurs only in a subject
awakening from the slumbering condition of alienation to a growing consciousness of its truth and the crisis of choice that it reveals. Each of the moods examined has a direction and a kind of revelation. But its message is implicitly present in the personality. The moods lead to awakening in which the consciousness and task of subjectivity emerge.

The solution to a mood, or the way out of the emotional crisis that Kierkegaard targets, is to choose oneself in light of the directionality that a mood reveals to the discerning subject. While moods come and go, the underlying problem does not. Each eventually builds to a crisis stage demanding resolution. However, resolution does not happen by itself. It is not automatic and there is no assurance that one will arrive where the moods ever more clearly direct one. This is true in two senses: first, in that each step requires an act of the will that one is not compelled to make (even if one is emotionally punished for not making it); second, in that the final re-fusion of the self results from a feeling of outside input, which he terms a “grace.”

As a free being experiencing the possibilities but also the task of freedom, one is equally free to actualize oneself or to destroy oneself in inaction and resistance; and Kierkegaard’s writings portray characters that rather clearly will not go the whole way, most notably the central character of Either/Or.8

Hegelian Terminology

Such terms as “concept,” “dialectic,” “crisis,” “contradiction,” and “necessity” are shared Hegelian vocabulary and part of the metaphysical tradition. Hegelian terminology is clearly visible in Kierkegaard’s works, and the dialectic of moods in Kierkegaard has a Hegelian structure: each mood has an initial state; a crisis phase in which inner opposition is brought into open contradiction and then intensified to the point of requiring resolution; and finally a resolution akin to a Hegelian Aufhebung—cancellation and preservation, and nowadays frequently translated with the coinage “sublation.”9 Kierkegaard’s psychology of moods is a detailed examination of the second (i.e., crisis) phase. The principal difference between Hegel and Kierkegaard is contained in the Kierkegaardian category of the “individual.” For him, the existing individual seemed to have been forgotten or dissolved in the Hegelian system of philosophy, where attention focused on the progress of an abstract humanity seemed to take over. In contrast, Kierkegaard emphasized individuals and their individual freedom.
His writings therefore begin with a highly individualized subject who, while surely an intellectual and philosophically inclined, increasingly agonizes over the meaning of his subjectivity. And although Aesthete A of *Either/Or* is a creation of Kierkegaard’s mind (if partly based on his own romantic youth), there is still no question of privileged access to him. Anyone can see his problem and one’s own very similar problem in him.

While in the later works the analysis is of the problems of every individual self—rather than the highly individualistic and fantasizing self of *Either/Or*—the emphasis remains upon the individual, who must individually realize the universally open destiny of authentic subjectivity. In contrast, Aesthete A of *Either/Or* possesses only a false and deceptive individuality, which unmasks itself over time. And the authentic individuality promised is no less individual or genuine for being available to every subject. Human destiny here is never thought of as a collective experience or a collective destiny but as individual and distinctive.

Diagnosing a Moody Aesthete

Aesthete A of *Either/Or* is a formidable and fascinating character, an individualist and would-be individual who, because his existence is rooted largely in imagination and personal willfulness, never achieves authentic individuality. Kierkegaard’s aesthete is burdened with and tormented by his self-consciousness and awareness of his perverse stance. He can neither let himself go nor quite contain himself. No sooner does a possibility occur to him than his fantasy spins out every conceivable variation, which he then compares and judges. In the process, he wears himself out without ever taking action on anything. He both loves doing this and hates it; but more significant still, he cannot stop it. (See the fuller discussion of the psychology of Aesthete A in chapter 4.)

He is above all an *intellectual* aesthete: his are the pleasures of thought, of fantasy, of the detailed plan of action. His alter ego, Johannes the seducer, author of “The Seducer’s Diary” in *Either/Or*, has his greatest pleasure in the idea of seduction rather than in the real thing. His pleasure is in executing his idea, and, odd though it may seem, for him the idea is clearly more important than the physical deed. Moreover, it is precisely his intellectuality as seducer that makes him so diabolical. Unlike the famous Don Juan and his 1,003 conquests, Johannes boasts of only one conquest and feels he compares very well.
Kierkegaard’s inclusion of the intellectual into the aesthetic stage is an important point in his writing. His major point against Enlightenment philosophy, Romanticism, and idealism is that an exclusively intellectual life is existentially bankrupt. The roller-coaster moods of the aesthete are witness to the frenzied bankruptcy of a life lived exclusively for personal pleasure (the aesthetic) and nothing more.

But Kierkegaard does not merely depict an intellectual Romantic who is a prisoner of moods, who is ironic and melancholy, anxious and despairing, in our usual senses of these words and also in the special sense he will emphasize. He scrutinizes the emotional life of his intellectual aesthete as others in his time did not and thereby takes emotional life with the utmost seriousness.

The sole solution Kierkegaard holds out for every aesthete—namely, experiencing a transcendent dimension in oneself—emerges gradually from the aesthetic writings but is declared openly along the way in parallel religious discourses that Kierkegaard published under his own name. The solution for this crisis of reflection is not grandiose absolute knowledge in the manner of Hegel but, more modestly, accurate knowledge of the self unencumbered by theories of human individuality that are intellectual fancies ungrounded in individual experience.

Irony as the Mood of Rebellion against Finitude

Irony is an early crisis mood in an existence lived on the level of pleasure (sensual and intellectual) and centered exclusively in oneself. As the pseudonymous Johannes Climacus remarks,

Irony is an existence qualification, and thus nothing is more ludicrous than regarding it as a style of speaking or an author’s counting himself lucky to express himself ironically once in a while. The person who has essential irony has it all day long and is not bound to any style, because it is the infinite within him. (SKS 7:457; CUP 503–4)

That is, it is something higher within the person calling out to be freed. Irony represents a heightened consciousness about the world (finitude) and about oneself in the world. It begins in the reflection in which one realizes that one feels unsatisfied, uncompleted by the world, and begins to reject and resent the world for failure to satisfy. Kierkegaard thus
speaks of irony as raising one out of a nonreflective existence but leaving one in midair (SKS 1:109n; CI 48n).

One ironizes, according to Kierkegaard, because the world has lost its validity (SKS 1:297; CI 259). The implicit promise of the world to satisfy a person’s full needs is experienced as broken and increasingly recognized as unfulfillable. Disappointment in the world breeds resentment, and the ironist turns increasingly bitter against the world and his fellows, and sometimes against himself.

Kierkegaard did of course recognize the more usual understanding of irony as a tool of discourse, which he views rather as a surface phenomenon. Thus the rebel against finitude sometimes employs rhetorical irony: saying the opposite of what he means but at a deeper level reflecting the difference between reality and appearance; sometimes he indulges in the private irony of showing up others in their own illusions as he watches from some pseudosuperior viewpoint. In the first instance he plays on the fact that everything is not as it appears or sounds; in the second he engages in exploding the cherished illusions of others.

Kierkegaard draws a line between the ironist and the satirist. His view is that the satirist is a reformer at heart, seeking to correct the foibles of mankind (whether in the gentler Horatian mode or in the harsher Juvenalian). But his point in the contrast is that the ironist at this stage in his development has no ethical concerns: he does not take others into account for their own sake but merely for his own purposes. In short, he has no serious concern for others. His goal in engaging in ironic discourse is a kind of one-upmanship, the self-satisfaction of an ailing and solitary self taking some brief pleasure in exposing others to their own illusions, a kind of Schadenfreude.

When Kierkegaard’s dissertation turns to the deeper manifestations of irony in an ironist’s existence, he breaks new ground. He recognizes the rebellion of irony as representing the first moments of genuine subjectivity, of the break with the masses and the emergence of an individual, even if at this point individuality is still negatively defined. Kierkegaard terms irony an incitement to subjectivity, and the ironist himself he calls an unfulfilled prophecy about a complete personality (SKS 1:199; CI 149). When he says that no genuinely authentic human life, no life worthy of being called human, is possible without irony, he is to some extent reformulating the famous line of Socrates in The Apology, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” He means that breaking with everyday illusions is a prerequisite for achieving a more authentic mode of being human.

Irony is negativity itself—“infinite absolute negativity,” as he terms it. Irony as negativity means quite simply that it only negates. Here we return to the indeterminate. For irony does not provide content to the
existence that it has severed from the world. The ironist merely feels cut off from and superior to the masses in their enduring ignorance. He no longer looks to the world for the sustenance of his inner life, yet he still requires sustenance and feels its absence. He becomes alienated from others. Even a relationship to other ironic subjects proves illusory since irony cannot provide the positive bond that establishes a relationship. The danger is that the ironist succumbs to the illusion that he can identify something positive.

Irony breaks other illusions but must catch itself before it plunges into an empty infinity of fantasy. For having realized the unworthiness of former objects of desire, it may seek to satisfy itself through the creation—and destruction—of imaginative objects of desire.

Without genuine content, without continuity, and without perspective, the ironist by degrees moves into crisis in his rebellion against the world: he has rejected the world but has nothing in its place. Kierkegaard speaks of living in a hypothetical and subjunctive way, under the sway of moods and feelings (SKS 1:319; CI 284). And the only unity in discontinuity is the superficial profundity and hungry satiety of boredom, that other central experience of the indeterminate. Boredom is finally only an index of the uninteresting: it lets me know what does not interest me, but it tells me nothing about what will or should interest me, and so it seems to set me before an infinite task of eliminating the uninteresting in the hope of stumbling upon something truly interesting and in my interest.

One may thus schematize the life of an ironist as follows: an initial moment of seeing through a finitude that cannot satisfy the infinite longing of the human spirit; a moment of opposition between the self and the world that leads to rejection of the world but needs to master itself before it can reconcile with a world that it still needs. This would constitute a “mastered irony”: an irony in which one is freed from finitude. One does not, however, come to a controlled or mastered irony before passing through other crisis moods and their ever more explicit revelation of the depths of the self.

Anxiety as the Mood of Possibility

Kierkegaard writes of anxiety in a restricted sense. He would regard anxiety about a decision or an exam or a doctor’s report or even the stock market as surface manifestations of a more fundamental personal anxiety about oneself. An individual’s anxiety in its grounding is always about himself, even if, on the surface, it is about another or something else.
In Kierkegaard’s view, a special anxiety crisis begins to dissolve a life centered on intellectual and sensual pleasure and leads to rising above mere aesthetic categories. A human being as a living, changing organism, always has possibility according to Kierkegaard. And the freeing but challenging experience of one’s own possibilities is precisely what the mood of anxiety is about. But since possibility is by definition something that has not been actualized, Kierkegaard and subsequent existentialist writers term it the “nothing” of anxiety. The continually erupting experience of possibility ultimately points to one essential possibility of crossing over to the plane of the ethico-religious. The resolution of anxiety in choosing to actualize one’s possibilities as a centered and ethical being is also the resolution of the negativity of irony. The seriousness of the mood is reflected in the alarm and fascination that attend it.

In his exploration, Kierkegaard uses conventional theological language, but his point is not conventional at all—he demythologizes theological language and recognizes beneath it the narrative and description of the human condition never satisfied with stasis and always seeking to actualize itself on a greater scale. Experimentation is possible, failure is sometimes the outcome, and each must find his or her own way.

Kierkegaard centers on the existential meaning of the Fall story as a symbolic depiction of the state in which every human finds him- or herself at the moment when she or he is also confronting personal possibility: fallen, responsible, and guilty yet aware of the personal need and freedom to overcome this condition in a resolute act of the will. Choice of the self gives positive content to the “nothing” of anxiety. But further possibility remains and thus anxiety with it. Anxiety is most decisively—but still not completely—overcome in the mood of despair, with which Kierkegaard links anxiety in several places. So long as a subject lives, he has possibilities, and hence anxiety is never annihilated.

Among the intellectual debates that raged in the early centuries of Christianity, one of the most central had to do with finding the right expression for recognizing an individual’s ability to affect his own psychic growth while feeling that a greater and transcending Reality (namely God) was also involved. It is heard in the faith versus works debate of the Reformation. Kierkegaard can be understood as emphasizing both, but the divine input retains the status of a sine qua non, that is, an indispensable element, even if it also seems to be able to be counted on to materialize at the right moment. (Something similar seems to be expressed in the Hindu teaching about the monkey-hold or cat-hold theory of salvation, and in the Zen teaching of sudden versus gradual enlightenment.) Kierkegaard-Haupniensis’s teaching in The Concept of Anxiety culminates in chapter 5, “Anxiety as a Saving through Faith.” The emphasis is upon
both saving experience and faith experience. For only the term faith, in Luther’s sense of a personal involvement with the Transcendent, properly identifies that which will restore the fallen self—that is, restored relationship to God as the ground of one’s being.

The Mood of Melancholy as Longing for the Infinite

It is no small task to explain to contemporary readers what Kierkegaard could have meant by describing two types of melancholy when the contemporary person might hardly be expected to understand any longer what would be meant by even one of them. For we stand at a considerable distance from the Romantic period, when most everyone would have understood what it meant to speak of a young man’s melancholy. Of course it meant that he had not found the right young lady yet, that he was actively seeking and tenderly suffering in the meantime, and that we felt for him as someone who deserved success. As observers we would also have taken pleasure in the awakened memories and sympathetic tender feelings in ourselves. In short, we would have been somewhat in love with our own feelings and admired the sweet suffering of young lovers who had not yet fully culminated their search. All that is changed now. We live in a very different time, and, while a bit of this phenomenon may survive, it is far less visible in a culture where early sexual activity has frequently displaced traditional courtship and romance. Certainly there are still unhappy lovers, but they usually do not call themselves melancholic.

The task at hand is to understand what Kierkegaard meant by his use of not just one but two terms for melancholy, corresponding to two stages of the dark emotion. The term was already in decline in the late nineteenth century but went into total eclipse after Freud. And one of the problems is that it has meant many things across the centuries. “Melancholy” (literally “black bile”) has Greek roots and dates from a theory of a balance of four humors (yellow bile, black bile, phlegm, and blood) that had crystallized by about 400 B.C.E. in Greek medicine but seems to have even older roots in Egyptian thought. It gained its greatest popularity as a theory under Galen in the second century and dominated medieval medical thinking. Under Avicenna, the theory was extended to encompass mental and moral life. In fact it was only definitively undercut as a theory in the mid-nineteenth century with the theory of cellular pathology.
Kierkegaard’s use of the language of melancholy is purely metaphorical and not allied with the vanishing medical theory of humors for the psychological explanation of mental dispositions and inclination. There is—metaphorically—both “black bile” (Melancholi) and “blacker bile” (not the literal meaning of his term Tungsind, which is “heaviness of spirit”).¹⁸ This latter form is portrayed as a more intense and critical state of mental-emotional life, presaging a personal crisis about “nothing.” It is the melancholy of a subject become reflective in the wake of the failure of all finite objects to satisfy an unquenchable longing.

In Kierkegaard’s description, Melancholi, the first moment of this condition, and its English cognate, “melancholy,” is the longing of poets and young men, the sweet and seductive pain of not possessing a beloved or object of desire. Tungsind (German Schwermut)—which might better be translated with the antiquated term “melancholia”—is portrayed as an advanced case of the same psychic-emotional-spiritual malady. Ultimately, Kierkegaard sees it as pointing to a spiritual problem: the longing for the highest object of desire, the Transcendent itself (although Kierkegaard uses traditional Christian God language). In this second and reflective stage of melancholy, the impossibility of finding an all-satisfying object of desire among the realities of this world becomes increasingly clear. This occurs for his several melancholic aesthetes in a process of elimination of finite objects until they are left with “nothing,” which ultimately points to the Infinite (=God) as the real possibility. But before then, Tungsind, which literally means “heavy spirit,” comes to stand for gloom, reserve, and empty isolation.¹⁹

Kierkegaard depicts Tungsind as the natural development of Melancholi and would thereby imply that the lighter form thought to be curable by romantic love is not the genuine article. Kierkegaard analyzes melancholy in three works. Either/Or, part 1, is the presentation of an engaging melancholic. Aesthete A is well on his way to becoming reflective about his melancholy and knows that his attempt to live in aesthetic categories—sensual and intellectual—cannot succeed. But he refuses to affirm himself in a relationship to something higher than himself. The chaos and eruptions in the aesthete’s inner life are interpreted by Judge William, in part 2, as spirit’s revenge: “But the spirit does not allow itself to be mocked; it avenges itself on you and binds you in the chains of [Tungsind]” (SKS 3:197; E/O 2:204). However, the judge also tries to console the suffering aesthete with the positivity of melancholy: it indicates the movement of the human spirit toward something.

Kierkegaard’s Judge William engages in a brief but insightful two-page analysis of Tungsind, which includes an analysis of the “nothing” of Tungsind. He writes,
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There is something unexplainable in [Tungsind]. A person with a sorrow or a worry knows why he sorrows or worries. If a [melancholiac] person is asked what the reason is, what it is that weights [tyng] on him, he will answer: I do not know; I cannot explain it.\(^{20}\) (SKS 3:183; E/O 2:189)

**Repetition**, by the pseudonymous amateur psychologist Constantin Constantius, is a self-proclaimed psychological examination of a young man whose melancholy has not been cured by romantic love.

The young man of *Repetition* was melancholy, fell in love, and comes to his amateur psychologist friend Constantin more melancholy than ever. He is puzzled and troubled, for the so-called cure, falling in love, has not worked. He is in fact more melancholy than before. He also begins to feel that he cannot carry through to marriage under these conditions. Gloom and despair begin to weigh him down, and he is on his way to the heaviness of spirit that is the “blacker bile” of Tungsind.

“Never in my practice had I seen such melancholy [Melancholi] as this,” remarks the surprised psychologist (SKS, 4:13; R, 136). And once he concludes that the religious is the base of the problem, he acknowledges reaching the limits of his competence. Constantin and the young man simultaneously discover the potential religious element in melancholy—the latter through reflection on his own experience, the former through observation of the young man and the young man’s self-analytical letters.

*Stages on Life’s Way* contains another version of a broken engagement and a presentation of a melancholy already at the stage of Tungsind in “Quidam’s Diary” (“‘Guilty?’/‘Not Guilty?’”), where in alternating morning and evening entries the gloomily melancholy young man recounts by day the breakup of his engagement one year ago and, by night, agonizes over a lingering guilt.\(^{21}\)

The diarist in question is in a gloomy state of melancholy from the very first page. By degrees he begins to think that his root problem is religious in nature, and one of the reasons for the rupture with the young fiancée is that he thinks that she has little or no understanding of the religious. His last hope of reconciliation is to stir the religious in her, if possible, but it proves not to be so.

Frater Taciturnus, the observer and editor of the larger work, sums it up: “Thus the [melancholia] of my character is the crisis prior to the religious” (SKS, 6:398; SLW, 430). If he recognizes coming to terms with the religious dimension of his life as his main problem and task, he is still a long way off, as he observes, “I am really no religious individuality; I am just a regular and perfectly constructed possibility of such a person” (SKS, 6:240; SLW, 257). The religious crisis in melancholy can be stated
using some of the terminology employed to describe anxiety, with which it is intimately connected. The nothing of melancholia is ultimately connected to the nothing in anxiety that Schelling called the dark ground of God—the nothing from which God was held to have created the world and from which a person now feels challenged to create him- or herself.

This Melancholi is the innocent throb of longing within a sensitive nature, and it indicates both sensitivity and religious potentiality. (It remains even in the individual who exists in religious categories, for, so long as he lives, he has always greater religious potential.) Melancholi, to Kierkegaard’s way of thinking, indicates a personality with a developing, spiritual dimension. But in its initial phases, it indicates a gestating condition. In the language so frequent in the works, spirit sleeps. However, it will awake, as the reader witnesses in Repetition. The beginning of the evolutionary movement is referred to as the stirring of spirit, or the stirring of the Idea.

The stirring within the personality reveals, to Kierkegaard’s mind, that an encounter with the Absolute is sought, i.e., with the grounding power of our self. The painful longing expressed in the metaphysical language of Absolute, Ideal, and Eternal might thus be spoken of as a “metaphysical wound.” It is a wound which festers so long as it is not healed and, as we have occasion to be reminded by Kierkegaard, a wound that is never entirely healed (thus the enduring bit of melancholy even in the religious person).

Despair as the Mood of a Conscious, Shattered Self

Kierkegaard’s treatises on anxiety and despair are companion pieces. For in many senses The Sickness unto Death (1849) (by the pseudonymous Anti-Climacus) is in part a continuation of the 1844 treatise by Vigilius Haufniensis, The Concept of Anxiety. While their styles are technically different, their principal concern is sin, or human failure and brokenness, and related psychological states. The Sickness unto Death proceeds with the same seriousness as the work on anxiety and turns that seriousness, in part 2, to a consideration of despair as a continuation in the failed state. Like The Concept of Anxiety, it is profoundly and self-consciously existential and is intended to be seen as having nothing to do with scholarly works that have no practical application.

Kierkegaard describes despair in two ways. The first is despair as a structural imbalance in the personality (e.g., the despair of possibility is
the failure to recognize one’s limits; the despair of necessity is the failure to recognize one’s freedom and possibilities, etc.). The second way is as a profound experience of a split in one’s being and simultaneously the crying out for healing. It is a personal earthquake with a high Richter-scale reading.

Overcoming the mood of despair involves rising to a more acute consciousness of one’s personal dilemma in becoming an authentic self: not only the awareness of a higher personal possibility and one’s responsibility for the present condition but also the recognition of one’s limited ability to finish the job and agonizing confession of inability to finish it without outside help. (This description sounds vaguely similar to contemporary twelve-step programs, with which it has some points in common.) It is here that the “hopelessness” suggested by the term “despair” can be seen. But the paradox is that the subjectively experienced mood of hopelessness is not hopeless. It is a mood of helplessness, out of which one can be helped. The “nothing” of despair is the recognition of the nonselfhood in which one is suffering, consciousness of the nonattainment of a psychic imperative.

Despair is thus in a true sense also a mood of possibility, as is anxiety. But it is a mood of intensified anxiety that turns on one specific possibility, namely, taking on the consciousness of the need for a grace to become an enhanced whole.

The issue in despair as a state of being is either to remain in an increasingly agonizing situation of self-alienation or to respond to the promptings already detectable and detected in irony, melancholy, and anxiety.

Of course, no one is forced to become his or her true self (i.e., a self formed on the basis of a true understanding of the dynamism that a human being is), and Kierkegaard in his novelistic writings has portrayed and analyzed aesthetic characters who clearly will not do so, either out of weakness or from defiance. The despair of defiance even leads to a kind of nihilism that seeks to prove the wretchedness of all existence:

Rebelling against all existence, [the despair of defiance] feels that it has obtained evidence against [existence], against its goodness. The person in despair believes that he himself is the evidence, and that is what he wants to be, and therefore he wants to be himself, himself in his torment, in order to protest against all existence with this torment. (SKS, 11:187; SUD, 73–74)

And this despairer is adamant that no one take his despair away from him, for he needs his own despair and unhappiness to prove to
himself that he is right. To repeat: the final agonizing, but paradoxically hopeful, moments in despair are the recognition of one’s ultimate helplessness to get oneself out of the existential hole that one has dug oneself into. The pseudonymous Anti-Climacus speaks of it as sin consciousness and describes the marvel of human self-becoming in the corresponding theological category of grace. But the experience of helplessness is not a passive mood of weakness but rather a crisis moment attained only after an arduous effort of self-recovery, so that, if this is grace, it is not “cheap grace”—a giveaway that one has in no way striven to merit. Kierkegaard wants to maintain the theological sense here of an experience of recovery that is felt to be beyond one’s deserts.

If what Kierkegaard describes is to any extent accurate, one would need to be a very sensitive and well-trained pastoral psychologist nowadays to distinguish between someone suffering the last phases of cure and someone in need of medication. Kierkegaard is not writing about those troubled selves who might be helped by Prozac and other modern equivalents. The psychologist Anti-Climacus focuses on the total cure for an underlying problem, for those who are in a condition able to face up to it. Thus he is not interested in the temporary alleviation of symptoms, and he would be harsh in his judgment of anyone offering further distractions to one on the verge of spiritual recovery. For he thinks that so long as total cure is not attained, sickness of the spirit will break forth again.

Kierkegaard never describes or portrays the reconstituted, refocused, and cocreating human subject after the breakthrough moment. With the revelation-proclamation of the need of help from a transcendent source, Kierkegaard’s exploration abruptly ends. It advances toward a definition of the modern self, with admittedly metaphysical underpinnings and an undisguised religious presupposition.