Despair as Divided Will and Inner Life Ignored

Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness unto Death* at first glance might seem to suggest that there are multiple forms of despair. The table of contents contributes to this impression as section headings announce discussions of despair as conscious or unconscious or as defined by finitude and infinitude, possibility and necessity, and so forth. But despair is a single sickness. In *The Sickness unto Death*, a symptom-oriented psychologist views the manifestations of serious forms of disease while his *metaphysician alter ego* analyzes the roots of the disease and steers the patient toward a religious solution. The actual disease is all one thing—a refusal to be who and what one really is—contracted in a primal act in which the will turned against itself. He analyzes its progressing in a maturing individual toward a kind of fever pitch where the fever can be broken and the patient at last be healed. This is what Kierkegaard is essentially talking about in *The Sickness unto Death* and what he had partially portrayed in the “case history” of Aesthete A in *Either/Or*, where the problem of despair was first vividly portrayed. As we have already seen, there the Aesthete’s “Diapsalmata” revealed a despairing individual whose life was a burden to him, who felt empty and trapped, without hope, without a way out. Judge William, in part 2, gave the seemingly hopeless Aesthete A the paradoxical counsel to despair as the act needed to break him out of his apparent dead end.¹ The presentation of despair in *Either/Or* as both sickness and required action suggested an illness that has to run its course. Judge William recognized despair in the young man he was observing, but he did not deal with the range and intensity of the forms of despair. Thus, six years after *Either/Or*, another Kierkegaardian pseudonymous narrator would provide a virtual diagnostic manual of despair and correct Judge William’s injunction to despair in order to overcome despair and instead assert very clearly in the introduction to *The Sickness unto Death* that despair is *not* the cure for despair. In addition, Kierkegaard per Anti-Climacus will emphasize the source of the cure for spiritual illness as coming from “outside” or “above,” in the experience of a grace that is only posited and whose workings are never described in detail.²
Judge William’s counsel was tantamount to encouraging Aesthete A to take a positive course about his condition (“Do something!”) in place of passivity. Where Aristotle in his own notion of health stressed outward activity, Judge William meant inward activity and became the first spokesman among Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms for the importance of the inner life. Kierkegaard followed Aristotle in asserting that health—in this case, psychological and spiritual health—required activity but stressed that the inner dimension is at least equally important in total human health. In this view, health is not the mere absence of illness but the product of positive action on one’s part. An essential aspect of Kierkegaard’s psychological thought is that a healthy or “cured” self is not the mere result of getting rid of some kind of illness and neutralizing disease but requires active, engaged attention to the inner life and to the sickness lurking there.

Students of Kierkegaard generally view *The Sickness unto Death* as a continuation and sharpening of insights from *The Concept of Anxiety*, where the analysis of everyone’s first act against oneself (sin) led to an analysis of the “nothing” that permitted this condition to come into being. *The Sickness unto Death* thus shares with *The Concept of Anxiety* a declared interest in the psychological and in the “upbuilding,” or self-improving. Its subtitle, “A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening,” should be taken at its word and as indicating greater interest on the part of the author in driving the reader to action than in an exhaustive, intellectually dazzling systematic analysis. But the latter is perhaps the more striking in the work, and therefore perhaps Kierkegaard’s need for issuing a warning. Surely nineteenth-century readers were puzzled by the work. It strikes the twenty-first-century reader as a combination of reflection on experience (its phenomenological aspect) and Christian theology. The two parts cannot be easily disjoined, for they are also conceptually intertwined. (Commentators have noted that the psychology of part 1 already presupposes the theology of part 2, while the theological part 2 rests on the psychological foundations of part 1 and lends it credibility.)

Surprisingly, Kierkegaard—Anti-Climacus claims in the introduction that any university student could have written *The Sickness unto Death*, but the contemporary university student often prematurely despairs of understanding the work as a whole because of the first paragraph’s arresting but confusing definition of the self:

> What is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or it is the relation’s relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation’s relating itself to itself.
Despite the appearance of a definition, one would not necessarily be expecting a full definition of the self here but rather indications of Kierkegaard’s emphases and program. While he begins by defining the self as relationship, what is most striking, but not always obvious, is that the first relationship mentioned is relationship to one’s own self. This is not what we normally think of when we first think of relationship, but rather relationship to others. However, in proceeding in this manner, Kierkegaard is not proposing solipsism but rather an alternative and ultimately complementary perspective to the outer-oriented culture of his (and our) times. Relationship is not just about the external, not just about the other. *It is emphatically also inner.* There is a way of relating to oneself, and it is different from the relating to other selves in one’s outer life.

The work thus highlights problems in this inner relationship to oneself. And misrelationship to oneself in one’s inner life is fundamentally what constitutes despair. Religiously understood, the misrelationship is reflected in an absent or ruptured relationship to God. And it is manifested psychologically above all in a split will: a will that wills two things and tortures itself in an ongoing battle of these two wills and reveals the possibility, on the part of those who wish to bring it to conclusion, of achieving a purity of heart that wills one thing.

Beneath the symptoms of a life in flight from itself into fantasy, illusions, and external things, a divided will as the root phenomenon of despair is a rupture between an individual’s existence and his or her becoming, which Kierkegaard views ultimately as a religious task. Thus it is important to keep in mind that Kierkegaard–Anti-Climacus sees himself in *The Sickness unto Death* here as a “Christian psychologist,” rather than a natural psychologist. He provocatively announces that he brings certain intellectual terms, categories, and beliefs to the analysis of despair, most notably the Christian category of sin, as well as its theological background. Formally speaking, this is not so very different from what happens in Freudian psychology, Jungian psychology, or the newly emerging field of evolutionary psychology: namely, an intellectual framework and foundational point of view are superimposed upon the project and the data to be analyzed. Most significantly, the question posed to the data is how they make sense in light of the postulated theory. Therefore, one aspect of the project in *The Sickness unto Death* is to articulate how the problem of a fragmented or divided self can be understood in light of the Christian category sin.

The opening definition of the self in *The Sickness unto Death* cited above has baffled many a Kierkegaard reader, including that university student who Kierkegaard thought might easily write his book. And a lot
of ink has been spilled in trying to puzzle out what it means for a self to relate to itself and for a relation to relate to itself. Strictly speaking, (actual) self does not relate to (higher) self as one human being relates to another (as in the way that John relates to Peter or to Mary, for example) but relates itself in reflection about the present, regret about the past, and anticipation of a future. Kierkegaard’s own formulations may not always be the most fortuitous expression of his insights, especially for those unaccustomed to seeing psychological problems expressed in nineteenth-century metaphysical language. However, unpacking the formulation is less difficult than parsing it. The key to understanding Kierkegaard’s opening formulation of despair—and, even more important, understanding what to do about it—rests in understanding how a self relates to itself and how a relationship relates to itself inwardly.11

A mistake in contemplating the opening lines of the work would be to think that Kierkegaard is portraying the self merely as a relationship between antithetical metaphysical elements in the personality: finitude and infinitude, necessity and possibility, and so on.12 The key line is that the self is the relating to its own self.13 How then does a self relate properly to itself? By an act of the will: by willing to be that which in essential structure and existential dynamism one truly is. But the factual problem, in Kierkegaard’s understanding, is that one has already willed not to be the self that one most truly is and can be14 and, as reflection and analysis reveal, has instead either willed weakly to avoid this higher calling or else defiantly willed to pseudocreate some fantasy self. In the process, a series of psychological repercussions emerge, the most notable brought to clearest expression in Sartre’s famous term “bad faith,” namely, the individual’s uncanny actualized ability to deceive himself about himself and his true state.15 (The discovery of a false self is, however, still a distance from a clear sense of the self that one should be willing and actualizing.)

Kierkegaard’s insight aims to highlight experiential indications of the nonunity of a deceptively unified self, the fact that a person is always to some extent not yet who she or he truly is, that the self is a dynamism that one must direct toward that which is greater than oneself and which grounds the self, namely, the Transcendent. The illusion of already being a unified or completed self, and free of any troubling reflection about this, is what Kierkegaard called unconscious despair and named as despair’s most prevalent form. While he terms it unconscious, he nevertheless repeatedly suggests that it is not an undisturbed unconsciousness but one in which there are occasional tremors that one chooses not to notice, until and unless there is, as it were, an earthquake. The situation could be
analogous to a person’s going to a physician unaware of any problem and insisting on feeling fine, while the physician, in contrast, detects a problem in the patient that as yet has no surface symptom; and upon hearing the diagnosis, the patient privileges the surface feeling of well-being over the physician’s detection of an underlying condition.\textsuperscript{16}

Kierkegaard thinks here of an unconscious condition that has been self-inflicted. Unlike a physical condition whose origins or infliction may not be essential to the cure, in despair, it is quite otherwise. Insofar as one comes to recognize responsibility for the state of affairs of the self, one is brought back to one of the central questions of \textit{The Concept of Anxiety}: how do we undo a primal deed (a first sin) and its aftereffects—a deed that we ourselves individually, and no one else in our stead, must have done to ourselves? The answer is deceptively easy on the theoretical level, excruciating and complex on the existential level. \textit{Theoretically}, one needs to will to be oneself. \textit{Existentially}, one needs to make an act of will from out of the complex, existential, impaired self that one currently is. An impaired self that has already \textit{not} willed to be itself must attempt either (1) to persevere in the bad faith of attempting to keep the problem from disturbing everyday consciousness or (2) try in vain to do away with itself entirely or (3) attempt to undo what has been done and make a new act of the will.\textsuperscript{17} The outstanding question remains, how does one fuse together a will that has been split?

The task of Kierkegaard in \textit{The Sickness unto Death} is not to speculatively re-create the original deed or to meditate on the why of this act, as he did in \textit{The Concept of Anxiety}, but instead to recognize the manifestations of the consequences of the deed and to point toward the cure. Moreover, Kierkegaard warns at the outset that this cannot happen by any attempt at going backward and undoing the deed.\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, the only path is to go forward, to experience the ultimately redeeming conscious agony of the divided straining to be healed. \textit{Paradoxically, only by going forward—into deeper, conscious despair—is there hope for overcoming despair}. But such a living out of nonselfhood to its \textit{existential} conclusion is described as an anguished act of consciousness, as one takes the full measure of what one has done to oneself and recognizes how hopeless the situation seems to be. Ironically, in the agony of felt hopelessness lies the possibility of actual hope, as expressed in the Christian promise of grace. For when one has come to full consciousness of one’s fallenness and brokenness, therein lies the first real hope.

To understand the varieties of being a nonself versus the simplicity of being an authentic self, Anti-Climacus’s treatise presents the reader with an abstract cataloging of the manifold ways of being a not-self.\textsuperscript{19} His analysis of the forms of despair seems to be an attempt to consider de-
spair from every possible categorical angle (e.g., the despair of finitude as the lack of infinitude, the despair of infinitude as the lack of finitude, the despair of necessity as the lack of possibility, etc.). The underlying point in this analysis of opposites is that despair is an imbalance caused by a misrelationship to one’s Ground and resulting misrelationship to oneself. Despite the abstract language, the work tries to point the reader toward an understanding of what the misrelationship to oneself is all about, while theologically asserting that no final cure can arise without correcting the misrelationship to the Grounding Power, or God as understood in traditional Christian thought. The seriousness of the work, on its own terms, lies not only in its analysis but also in directing the reader to do something about despair, Christianly understood. Thus Kierkegaard’s seeming speculative and methodical survey of the categories of despair quickly joins up with the Christian theology of sin, where, in the deepest sense of guilt and responsibility, there emerges the hope of forgiveness and establishment of a self regrounded in God. (Secular interpreters of Kierkegaard, such as Heidegger and Sartre, have been able to mine his insights while bracketing the Christian language.)

While Anti-Climacus posits a universally applicable cure, he stresses the individual nature and destiny of each self, as well as the individual nature of each person’s relationship to the Grounding Power. In his view, it is not at all the case that we all become the same self. Each self is radically individual and, to the extent that there is a felt relationship to God (that which is Absolute), it will also not be identical for each. The rich religious implication here is that each individual’s relationship to God is indeed individual: it is not identical to Abraham’s or to Jesus’ or to any Christian saint’s. It will be uniquely one’s own, even if it shares essential aspects with the experience of others. Kierkegaard thus gives new meaning to the phrase of “being alone with one’s God.” There is thus an implicit existential richness here in Kierkegaard’s analysis that can be overlooked in the emphasis on forgiveness and grace.

Through the detailed analyses of the forms of despair, the reader is led to understand that the exit path out of the cave of despair first involves further descent into despair—to experiencing the hopeless situation of continuing as a nonself and, in pained humility, despairing of the illusion of being able to be the creator of some new kind of self on one’s own. Finally, it is breaking with hopelessness itself and regaining hope. To employ a different metaphor of descent, overcoming despair by continuing through despair can be thought of as soaring down the slope of despair only to build up enough momentum to soar up the opposite slope. Kierkegaard, for his part, can imagine this happening only with the grace of God, who graciously restores the relationship broken by sin.
Diagnosing the Conflicted Self

Kierkegaard describes the internally conflicted self as cleft in two, torn between opposite metaphysical poles of the self, and severed from its anchoring or grounding principle. He then proposes a cure that initially involves a worsening of suffering: living through the experience of cleavage intensively and self-consciously, to its bitter end in the desperate cry for a rebirth of the self. If it were only psychological rebirth that was sought, his would be a natural psychology. But Kierkegaard means spiritual rebirth and is aware of addressing his prescription to a culture for which the term “spiritual” means increasingly little because the spirit and the spiritual, inwardness and inner life have been overlooked in experience and banished to poetry and theology books.

Authentic and Inauthentic Despair

These are not the terms of Kierkegaard but rather of the German scholar Michael Theunissen, who, in *Kierkegaard’s Concept of Despair*, attempts to get to the heart of what he calls Kierkegaard’s anatomy of despair and in some cases to find clearer formulations than Kierkegaard arrived at. For, as has been suggested, Kierkegaard’s schematization of despair can sometimes have the effect of obscuring what is essentially going on in despair. Theunissen notes that Kierkegaard’s cataloguing of the forms of despair initially makes it seem that the forms of despair sketched by Kierkegaard–Anti-Climacus are quite distinct from one another. Yet on closer examination, each seems to contain elements of its opposite. For Theunissen, it all comes down to *the despair of necessity as the loss of the sense of possibility*. This is the form of despair par excellence: a fractured will that feels it impossible to will what is required (despite the fact that an act of will remains an open possibility) (p. 97). He distills Kierkegaard’s schematization even further when he writes, “The existential-dialectical principle of Kierkegaard’s analysis of despair is: *We do not will to be directly what we are*” (p. 5).

One is always factically what one is, but the problem is willing or not willing to be who one is, and thus relating or not relating to oneself thereby (p. 14). The general human condition is that we do not will to be what we are, and we sense it, even if we repress it. Theunissen terms authentic despair the rising to the level of knowing it. Inauthentic despair would be *unconscious despair* (which Kierkegaard holds to be the majority case). But, looked at in another way, there really is no such thing as a pure
unconscious despair. There is always an inkling about one’s condition, even if one strives to repress or deny it. Theunissen comments that one cannot be in despair without some “self-consciousness in the sense of an accompanying self-presence” (p. 15).

But the disruptive, diremptive not willing here is really also a kind of willing, in the mode of negation (p. 15). So there is always an element of willing even in what is termed not willing, and always an element of consciousness even in what is termed unconscious despair. Thus, inauthentic despair is not a true parallel category to conscious despair in fact but only in terminology. It is a subcategory, a less-conscious despair; a kind of virtual unconscious despair, but one that is not unconscious upon fuller scrutiny. For it takes constant effort to keep the sense that one is in despair from rising to awareness. This is a major insight of Kierkegaard’s here, picked up by subsequent existential authors (and by Sartre in particular). Theunissen describes it thus:

In terms of a structural theory, to be in despair in all of its forms means both that we do not want to be what we are and that we want to be what we are not. We do not want to be what we are as human beings who are defined by both necessity and finitude as well as possibility and infinitude, and we want to be what we are not, that is, a pure possibility and infinitude, which in its purity is inhuman, or a pure necessity and finitude, which alienates us from our human being. (pp. 18–19)

We are alienated from our own human being when we yearn to be absorbed in the collective or want to be submerged in another. In effect we yearn for an inhuman existence. But not willing to be who we are is always primarily a rejection of who we are and only secondarily a desire to be what we are not (p. 19).

But the fact is that even if we want to be rid of ourselves, we cannot do it through an act of will. Failure to do so leads only to a heightened consciousness about despair. Its opposite finds easy expression but remains a very difficult achievement: “Not to be in despair means to accept oneself, and in the depth dimension of our self, it means to ground oneself in the power that has established the self” (p. 22).

This is the essential message of Anti-Climacus’s part 1, freed of the metaphysical language and categories in which it is expressed.

Part 2 of The Sickness unto Death introduces the Christian theology of sin in order to understand the disease that is at the root of existential “dis-ease” and then the cure. (Recall that the origin of the disease was analysed in The Concept of Anxiety, where the original sin is de facto an act of the will: as mythologically represented, not following the command of
God in the Garden of Paradise.) One does not, however, have to accept the Christian doctrine of sin in order to make sense of what Kierkegaard is saying. In fact, most of his diagnosis can be restated without reference to the Christian doctrine of sin—but not completely, of course.

**Excursus: Despair in Neo-Darwinian Thought**

Evolutionary biologists speculate that despair and depression reflect the cleavage between ancestral highly social conditions that attended the evolution of *Homo sapiens* and the current social and cultural configuration, in which modern humans often find themselves feeling isolated and frequently living alone.23

Interestingly, Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness unto Death* contains analogous ideas about contemporary society and above all about the contemporary individual’s alienation from an original, superior natural condition. Kierkegaard denounced the disappearance of authentic individuality in what he held to be the bourgeois philistinism of the nineteenth century and the resulting intensification of alienation.24 Kierkegaard attempted to get at a root sense of alienation from an original condition but interpreted it in terms of the accepted Christian theology of his day. Both Kierkegaard and Heidegger roundly criticized the complacency and self-satisfaction of contemporary society and for bringing everyone down to the same level, for its downgrading of the individual and for its elevation of the masses, for empty speech and hollow relationships—all of which combine and conspire to weigh the individual down in “bad faith” about his or her condition and conspire to distract the person from self-recovery.

Surely Kierkegaard and evolutionary psychologists differ about the origin of the problem of despair. As for the cure, both agree that there is no going back, there is only a going forward. For the evolutionary psychologist, even if return to a more ancestral form of social living were possible, it would not be a realistic recommendation, and a utilitarian calculus would suggest that the increased incidence of despair is the unavoidable price one pays for living conditions that in most other ways are preferable to ancestral society (and more conducive to successful reproduction of the species). The answer to the modern condition is to be found in the laboratory of self-actualization. It should be noted that this is something Kierkegaard would never have permitted to be called self-creation, as that smacks of the mythological Lucifer’s desire to replace
God and thus to be his own lord. Nor would Kierkegaard have been open to the new evolutionary theologian’s idea of co-creation.25

But the view from the perspective of current evolutionary psychology (certain to be refined in the future) would not be the solution for Kierkegaard.26 Evolutionary psychology’s take on despair as an experience of the cleft between an ancestral condition and a modern condition leaves out of consideration the possibility of internal evolution anytime soon. In short, it considers the contemporary psyche of Homo sapiens as de facto a constant vis-à-vis an ancestral human psyche, or at least as still having the structure and role in the glacial pace of evolution as it had two hundred thousand years ago, when Homo sapiens emerged as a distinctive species, or even fifty thousand years ago, when the most recent trace of human evolution is held to have occurred.

For his part, Kierkegaard puts the emphasis on a dynamic psyche, and the entire meaning of cure for him is not the reestablishment of an ancestral social model but rather a new, exhilarating, and undefined condition that depends for its success on willing to be the dynamic being that one is and on doing so in a felt interaction with the experienced Transcendent.27

The severing from the Grounding Power (God) and the current experience of cleavage within oneself are understood as in a cause-effect relationship. It is because of the severing from the Grounding Power that the personality is unbalanced and veers toward one extreme or the other (possibility and necessity, finitude and infinitude, etc.) without ever fully breaking with its opposite. The same phenomenon of separation and cleavage also points toward the solution or cure, namely restoration of relating and reanchoring of the self in its Ground.28 Kierkegaard imagines the cleavage as constituting the tendency in the personality to overemphasize one or the other opposite poles in the self: possibility and necessity, the eternal and the temporal, infinitude and finitude. He posits instead a “true self” that would reflect a synthesis and balance of these elements.

Each of the forms of despair that Kierkegaard catalogues represents a variation of not being oneself. However, they are not all equal. Much of what he means by despair and by the self can be restated less obscurely. To become oneself is (a) to will to be the dynamic becoming entity that one truly is and (b) not to will to try to be static or to be some imaginary other kind of being than the one that one is. But the reality is not nearly as simple as the formulation: one finds oneself in a world that subtly pushes one toward one of the fantasy alternatives that he sketches, and one wonders what is wrong with oneself when one embraces one of these false options that conflicts with the ongoing dynamism within oneself.
His message, in many senses, amounts to, “Go with the flow,” not so very different in form from the Stoics in formulation but surely different in the content of the self-knowledge one has in our times, as well as in the understanding of what is meant by “the flow.” Kierkegaard’s language of analysis is fairly modern, while the language in which he discusses the solution or cure is often ancient, metaphysical, and theological. These latter are cherished categories of medieval and modern metaphysics but pose serious “translation” problems for many contemporary readers. Both the problem and advantage in reading Kierkegaard after absorbing Nietzsche’s announcement of the death of Western metaphysics is that we are now able to see how clearly his work proceeds out of a Christianized Plotinian universe via Augustine of Hippo, an intellectual universe that we now know not to be so. Contemporary physics does not in any way suggest that everything will return to the One. On the contrary, the evidence seems to point to its exact opposite.

Thus no contemporary reader can be expected to accept Kierkegaard’s articulation of the problem of a split and self-alienated self in the metaphysical language of finitude and infinitude, the eternal and the temporal, possibility and necessity. He is expressing an existential dilemma in the philosophical language then in use. (Of course, there is also an existential connection here to classic and medieval philosophy.) The understanding of the existential dilemma that he is trying to express is in fact as old as Saint Paul and Saint Augustine: a divided self whose will and willpower have been compromised and are not up to the task of restoring themselves. Quite importantly, Kierkegaard locates the problem of the self in the will rather than in knowledge. For it is not a matter here of merely “knowing the self,” in Socrates’s famous adoption of the motto of Delphi. Kierkegaard, like Freud after him, recognizes that part of the problem is that the self does not know itself. And yet the Delphic inscription (γνῶθι σεαυτόν) is also not so far away in formulation either. In a sense, one must have some self-knowledge in order to will the self. Kierkegaard certainly recognizes that, but the kind of knowledge called for here would not be the knowledge of metaphysical categories of finitude and infinitude, eternal and temporal, and so on.

Kierkegaard’s The Sickness unto Death, the titularly gloomy companion to The Concept of Anxiety and more importantly its conceptual completion, is in fact far more positive and hopeful than its sister work. The Sickness unto Death does not have the originality and striking genius of The Concept of Anxiety—a genius that uncovers more than it is aware of and that leaves for succeeding generations to process its findings, as a Heidegger, for example, would do some 80 years later. It appears to be a kind of 1848 Diagnostic Manual of Despair: a work of diagnosis but also...
schematization in which all the variants are carefully labeled. But if it proceeds through the various forms of despair, the “data” defy conceptual neatness. He recognizes as much and admits that each paired type contains elements of the other in itself and in some senses may be considered a variant of its own opposite, as in the example of the despair of weakness and the despair of defiance, each of which contains elements of its opposite.

Beyond Sin and Grace?

Sin remained a major interpretative category in Kierkegaard’s thinking but is problematic for many modern thinkers. Equally problematic is its theological corollary, grace. Kierkegaard accepts the tenets of traditional Christian theology as facts and interprets the human condition filtered through them. He accepted the biblical story of the fall of Adam and Eve and the theological interpretation of it that crystallized in the theology of Augustine of Hippo, namely as constituting an original and inherited sin, even if he added a modern existential twist. Thus in The Concept of Anxiety, Kierkegaard had his pseudonymous narrator give modern psychological depth to this old doctrine. That line of thought continues to underlie The Sickness unto Death, as well as the theological corollation of grace together with faith, all the while emphasizing not the theological and the traditional so much as the existential and experiential. Kierkegaard’s solution to the “bad faith” of despair remains the experience of the ancient faith of Christianity in a God who offers forgiveness, salvation, and grace.

For modern secular readers of Kierkegaard, the notion of grace or supplement to human effort is more problematic than the notion of sin itself. Sin at least had been successfully secularized by Kant in Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone (Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft) with its notion of a fall into radical evil and further secularized by Heidegger in Being and Time (Sein und Zeit) in his concept of Dasein’s Verfallenheit (fallenness) as a starting point (rather than a self-inflicted wound) from which the human person must extricate him- or herself. And while Kant does allow for a kind of gracious regard by the Moral Law Giver vis-à-vis one struggling to be perfectly moral, there is no equivalent in Heidegger’s work, nor is there any phenomenological need for any superhuman supplement.

Kierkegaard’s conceptual embrace of grace is not a description of a phenomenologically grounded need but rather the solution offered to him by Christian theology and to which he subscribes and which, he
would no doubt assert, conforms to his own experience. It is a sincerely held belief on Kierkegaard’s part, but it is an arbitrarily added element, without demonstration or proof. While the majority of commentators on Kierkegaard have been and continue to be believing Christians, their testimony alone does not establish that Kierkegaard was correct either as a psychologist or phenomenologist (rather than as a theologian) in adding this element as a decisive truth in human existence. This goes as well for his requirement that the self relate to its Constituting Power (or Ground) in order to achieve authentic selfhood.\footnote{30}

If one had the opportunity to ask Kierkegaard–Anti-Climacus to describe a concrete historical individual of Christian faith who has overcome despair, he would likely respond that he has no access to the inward life of another. (But Heidegger does no differently in his analysis of fall- enness and authenticity in \textit{Being and Time} nearly a hundred years later.) It is of course much easier to think of describing historical non-selves, and here there is an abundant supply, both non-Christian and Christian. However, for this commentator there is no reason to think that important non-Christian individuals such as Socrates and Siddhārtha Gautama should be regarded as having been in despair at the conclusion of their lives. In fact, based on the sources that we possess, there is no more reason to think that they were in despair, in Kierkegaard’s sense, than there is to think that the historical Jesus of Nazareth himself was in despair at the end.

In a certain sense, this observation is unfair to Kierkegaard, who addressed his work only to a contemporary and professing Christian audience so that they should understand and do something about their despair along the lines outlined by their Christian faith. But if it is unfair to Kierkegaard to raise the question of authentic selfhood achieved outside Christianity, it is by no means an unfair question in and of itself, nor an irrelevant one for anyone who is interested in the possible psychological truth about overcoming the split in the self that Kierkegaard otherwise so insightfully sketches.

Is there then a model of authentic selfhood that does not require being articulated in the categories of Christian theology? Can one successfully substitute the language of Being or the Ground of Being (Heidegger and Tillich, respectively) for Kierkegaard’s Constituting Power? Can one speak meaningfully and in a promising manner about a model of becoming a self where the self is relating to a felt sense of the Transcendent (that is not necessarily visualized or conceptualized in Christian images)? In thinking about such questions, one is ultimately obliged to pass beyond Kierkegaard. One cannot, after all, expect him to rise above his times and culture. Kierkegaard has also given no indication what-
soever that he would be prepared to consider such an option, and his writings, as this writer knows them, would suggest that he would regard this way of speaking as a return to paganism—perhaps even to the golden Greek paganism of Socrates himself—but still a paganism deprived of a higher truth proclaimed by Christianity.

Still, Kierkegaard’s radical insight about the tremors of possibility arising within the shattered self (in the anxiety experience of *The Concept of Anxiety*) and their intensification in the pained consciousness of being a shattered self in need of reconstitution, regrounding, and rebirth have a meaning and a validity for others who do not think of the process in Christian terms, as Heidegger and even Sartre demonstrated in their early twentieth-century non-Christian writings so indebted to Kierkegaard.

The thesis of *The Sickness unto Death* still commands our attention, namely, that to overcome or rectify the condition of being an incomplete self one must intensify and accelerate the process of dissolving the false self. In twentieth-century parlance, this was once colloquially referred to as “bottoming out,” hitting bottom. But in the end, Kierkegaard’s analysis points affirmatively to a dynamic, self-actualizing self with its own unique history and its own unique resolution, not at all in isolation but rather genuinely united with others in an experienced common Ground. But he does not describe it in its actualization. As such, Kierkegaard concludes at the edges of mysticism, affirms what he holds to lie beyond, but, if he enters, does not take the reader with him. Meantime, what he has left behind remains a very rich deposit that continues to be mined.