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Kierkegaard The Sickness Unto Death

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Understanding Kierkegaard The Sickness Unto Death: A Deep Dive into Despair and the Self

Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher often hailed as the father of existentialism, wrote a dense, penetrating work in 1849 that continues to unsettle and enlighten readers. That work is *The Sickness Unto Death*. Written under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus, this book is not a medical treatise but a profound psychological and spiritual analysis of what Kierkegaard considered the fundamental human ailment: despair. For Kierkegaard, the sickness unto death is not a physical malady that ends with the cessation of life. Instead, it is a condition of the spirit, a misrelation within the self that, if left unaddressed, leads to a kind of living death. This article will explore the core concepts of Kierkegaard **The Sickness Unto Death**, unpacking its definition of the self, its taxonomy of despair, and its ultimate prescription for overcoming this universal human condition.

What is the Self? The Foundation of Kierkegaard's Argument

Before we can understand the sickness, we must first understand the patient. Kierkegaard opens *The Sickness Unto Death*with one of the most famous and challenging definitions in all of philosophy. He writes that the self is a relation that relates itself to itself. This is not merely a play on words. It is a radical departure from seeing the self as a simple substance or a soul. For Kierkegaard, a human being is a synthesis of the finite and the infinite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity. We are not simply one or the other; we are a dynamic, unstable composite of these opposing forces.

The key to this definition lies in the phrase "relates itself to itself." A rock does not relate to itself. An animal lives in a state of immediacy, driven by instinct. But a human being can step back from their own existence, reflect on it, and take a stance toward who they are. This act of taking a stance is the act of becoming a self. The self is not something you are born with; it is a task that must be achieved. However, this synthesis is fragile. It does not establish itself. According to Kierkegaard, the relation is established by a third term: the power that established the whole relationship. This is Kierkegaard's way of introducing God. The self, in its authentic state, is grounded transparently in God. When this grounding is lost or rejected, the self falls into misrelation. This misrelation is what Kierkegaard calls despair.

The concept of the self in Kierkegaard **The Sickness Unto Death**is therefore a structural one. Despair is not just sadness or a bad mood. It is a failure to be the self that one is meant to be. It is the disrelationship in the relationship of the synthesis. This structural approach allows Kierkegaard to argue that everyone is in despair, even those who feel perfectly happy and content. The person who is unaware of their despair is, in a sense, in the most dangerous form of despair.

Defining the Sickness: Despair as the Sickness Unto Death

Why does Kierkegaard call despair a "sickness unto death"? This phrase is borrowed from the biblical story of

Lazarus, where Jesus says that the illness is not unto death but for the glory of God. Kierkegaard inverts this. Despair, he argues, is the sickness whose end is death, but a very specific kind of death. It is not the death of the body, but the death of the self. The despairing person is unable to die, yet they are unable to live. They are in a state of constant, agonizing dying. The great torment of despair is precisely that it cannot consume the self. The self is the sickness, and the self cannot die.

This is the paradox at the heart of Kierkegaard **The Sickness Unto Death**. If you are in despair, you are not truly alive, but you also cannot die to escape your despair. The suicide, for example, is often driven by despair. They want to destroy the self that is in such pain. But Kierkegaard would argue that suicide is a failure to understand the nature of the sickness. The self is eternal, and you cannot simply kill it. The despair persists. The "sickness unto death" is the torment of being a self that is rotting from the inside, a self that is consumed by a feeling of hopelessness, yet is eternally conscious of its own decay. Kierkegaard writes, "This is the torment of despair, that it cannot die." This unique formulation makes the book a stark and powerful diagnosis of the human condition.

The Two Forms of Despair: The Eternal and the Temporal

Kierkegaard provides a detailed taxonomy of despair. He analyzes it from multiple angles. One of the most important distinctions is between despair over the eternal and despair over the temporal. Despair over the temporal is when a person loses something finite and worldly—a job, a relationship, wealth, or reputation—and falls into despair because they have tied their entire identity to that finite thing. They believed they were nothing without it. When it is taken away, their self collapses. This is a common and easily recognizable form of despair.

However, the deeper form is despair over the eternal. This is when a person is not in despair because of something they lost, but because they refuse to be themselves. They are in despair over the possibility of being a self before God. This is a more spiritual and profound despair. It is a refusal of the self that God intended one to be. This form of despair can manifest as a quiet, stubborn defiance. The person does not want to accept their own limitations, finitude, or dependence on a higher power. They want to be self-sufficient. This is, for Kierkegaard, a form of rebellion. Understanding these two poles is crucial for grasping Kierkegaard **The Sickness Unto Death** in its full depth.

The Stages of Despair: A Ladder of Misrelation

Kierkegaard does not simply say "everyone is in despair" and leave it at that. He offers a detailed phenomenological description of the different levels of despair, moving from the most unconscious to the most conscious and defiant. This is a ladder of self-awareness.

- The Despair of the Finite and the Infinite: On one side, we have the despair of the finite. This person is too worldly, too concrete. They have lost the sense of the infinite, the imaginative possibility. They become a narrow, conventional, and predictable person. They are "a number" rather than a self. On the other side is the despair of the infinite. This is the person who is so lost in fantasy and possibility that they have no connection to reality. They cannot commit to anything finite. They live in a world of abstract dreams. Both are forms of despair.
- The Despair of Possibility and Necessity: Similarly, the self needs both possibility and necessity. The despair of possibility is when a person lives in a world of endless "what ifs." Everything is possible, so nothing becomes actual. They dissolve into fantasy. The despair of necessity is the opposite. This person is fatalistic, rigid, and crushed by circumstance. They believe nothing is possible. They have lost the spark of hope. Both are imbalances in the synthesis of the self.
- Consciousness of Despair: This is the most critical dividing line. In unconscious despair, a person does not know they are in despair. They think they are happy. Kierkegaard calls this the most dangerous form because it is the most insulated from a cure. In conscious despair, the person knows they are in despair. This is a higher form of existence because it is closer to the truth. However, it can be even more acute in its suffering.
- The Highest Form: Defiance: The most intense form of despair is defiance. This is when a person is fully conscious of their despair and instead of humbly accepting help, they defiantly choose to be themselves in their

despair. They reject God. They say, "I will be myself, even if it means I am in torment." This is the most spiritual form of despair. It is a demonic rage against existence. This is the "sickness unto death" at its most extreme.

The Cure for the Sickness: Faith and the Transparent Self

After this long and often painful analysis, Kierkegaard does not leave the reader in a state of hopelessness. He offers a cure. The opposite of despair is not happiness, pleasure, or worldly success. The opposite of despair is faith. Faith, for Kierkegaard, is the condition in which the self is grounded transparently in the power that established it. In other words, faith is the state of being a true self before God.

To be "transparent" means that there is no hidden misrelation. The self knows itself for what it is: a finite, temporal, necessary being that is also infinite, eternal, and full of possibility. And it accepts this self as a gift. It does not try to be self-sufficient or defiant. It rests in the power of God. This is not a blind, irrational leap. For Kierkegaard, it is the highest form of rationality, the only way to truly become a self. The person of faith is the person who has overcome the sickness unto death. They have died to despair and been reborn as a self that is free. This is the ultimate conclusion of Kierkegaard **The Sickness Unto Death**.

It is important to note that for Kierkegaard, this is not a one-time event. The struggle against despair is a constant task. The self is always in danger of falling back into misrelation. Faith is a continuous act of holding the synthesis together. It is a dynamic, passionate commitment. It requires courage, humility, and a deep acceptance of one's own dependence.

The Relevance of The Sickness Unto Death Today

One might think a 19th-century Danish book about sin, despair, and God would be irrelevant to a modern, secular audience. Nothing could be further from the truth. "Kierkegaard The Sickness Unto Death" remains a profoundly relevant text for our times. In an age of anxiety, depression, and identity crises, Kierkegaard's analysis of the self feels remarkably prescient.

Consider the modern obsession with identity. People struggle to "find themselves" or "create themselves." Kierkegaard would argue that this very struggle is a sign of despair. We are trying to be self-made selves, but we lack the grounding to do so. The proliferation of social media, with its curated personas and constant comparison, is a perfect breeding ground for the despair of the finite and the infinite. We try to be everything (infinite possibility) while being nothing concrete (finite reality).

Furthermore, the modern sense of anxiety and meaninglessness is a direct echo of Kierkegaard's despair. When people say they feel empty, lost, or that life has no purpose, they are describing the sickness unto death. They feel the misrelation within their own self, even if they lack Kierkegaard's theological language to name it. The book offers a vocabulary for this modern malaise. It validates the feeling of deep, existential unease.

Finally, the concept of defiance is everywhere. We see it in the cult of the individual who refuses any authority, who insists on total autonomy. This is a form of despair, a refusal to accept finitude and dependence. Kierkegaard **The Sickness Unto Death**is a mirror held up to the modern soul. It reveals the deep, structural problems beneath our surface-level contentment. It is a call to authenticity, to a deeper honesty about who we are and what we are meant to be.

Key Takeaways from Kierkegaard The Sickness Unto Death

To synthesize the core of this dense work, consider these essential points:

1. The Self is a Relation: The human self is a dynamic synthesis of opposites (finite/infinite, temporal/eternal) that must be actively held together.

2. Despair is Misrelation: Despair is not sadness but a failure of the self to relate properly to itself and to God. It is a universal condition.
3. The Sickness Cannot Kill: The torment of despair is that it is a sickness from which you cannot die. You are eternally conscious of your own decay.

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