The Sickness unto Death – Soren Kierkegaard (Anti-Climacus)

Preface

In the preface, Anti-Climacus asserts that all things Christianity should serve to edify. In this respect, Christianity is quite opposed to the contemporary, dis-interested scientific approach. Rather, it is serious. It demands that one be “oneself, an individual human being, this specific individual human being alone before God”.

Introduction

In the introduction, Anti-Climacus discusses what the “sickness unto death” could mean. It does not refer to an illness (either physical or spiritual) which leads to our physical death because for a Christian, death is not the end, nor does it refer to any earthly or temporal suffering. Christianity has discovered something far more terrible than anything else that might lay claim to be the “sickness unto death”. And it will be revealed in Part One.

Part One – The Sickness unto Death is Despair

A. That Despair is the Sickness unto Death

A

Anti-Climacus starts this section with a fairly detailed description of the self, which he considers another name for spirit or the essence (to use an Aristotelian term Anti-Climacus doesn’t use) of a human being. So what is the self? It’s a “relation which relates to itself, or that in the relation which is its relating to itself.” So the important point here is that the self is not the actual relation but the relation’s relating to itself.

Anti-Climacus also notes that a human being is a synthesis of three pairs of opposites; the infinite and the finite, the temporal and the eternal, and freedom and necessity, but since a synthesis is a relation between two terms, a human being is not yet a self (a relation which relates to itself) just by virtue of being a synthesis.

While Anti-Climacus doesn’t go so far as to explain exactly how these three syntheses come together in a human being, he does talk about the relation between the soul and the body as comprising the self. We are encouraged to imagine the soul and the body connected by a relation R. But this relation, R, is not the self. When R relates to itself, this relating is the self.

What’s more, this self-relating relation must have been established by something else (God) and so must stand in relation to that something. It is this full relation which is the human self; “a relation which relates to itself, and in relating to itself relates to something else.”

The final formula describing the self here is that which describes it completely free of despair (despair being an ‘imbalance’ in a relation of synthesis (a self) in which the self wants to be rid of itself); “in relating to itself and in wanting to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the power that established it.”

B

This section discusses the possibility and actuality of despair and whether it is a merit or defect. Considered abstractly (without reference to a specific despairer), despair is a merit. That despair is a possibility for us is what distinguishes humanity from animals. However, when despair becomes actual for an individual, it is the greatest misfortune and misery.

We have seen that despair is an imbalance in the “relation which relates to itself” but this relation, or synthesis, is not the imbalance itself. If that were true, there would be no such thing as despair for it would just be part of human nature in general. So where does the imbalance (despair) come from then? “From the relation in which the synthesis [relation] relates to itself”; that is to say, from the relation of the self with God, specifically the denial or rejection of this relation in some way.

One consequence of this is that the imbalance is not self-perpetuating; that is, despair is not due to the imbalance. Rather, every moment of despair must be brought about anew by the despairer. This is because despair is an aspect of spirit (self) and therefore to do with the eternal, which is by definition, something an individual can never rid himself of. If one is in despair or not in despair, both of these states must continually be brought about by the individual.

C

Why is despair the “sickness unto death”? Anti-Climacus explains that to be sick unto death means to be unable to die but also bereft of the hope of life. It is the hopelessness of not even being able to die. This is so because, as we saw above, despair is of the self and the self is eternal, thus despair is never able to consume the self (see below).

It seems that people despair over *something* but this is only an illusion. Despair is always over *oneself* and it is always a wanting to be rid of that self. The example Anti-Climacus gives is of someone who despairs because he didn’t become Caesar. At first glance, it seems like the despair is over something in the world, however, what he really despairs over is his self, i.e. this self which did not become Caesar and which he cannot be rid of. He hates this self he is but cannot do anything about it. This is in despair not wanting to be oneself.

However, even if he were now to become Caesar, he would be no better off because in becoming Caesar, he would now want to be the self that he is (which is actually the opposite of despair), but in this case it is still despair because he wants to be his self *despairingly*. So, what does it mean to say he wants to be his self *despairingly*? It means that he wants to be his self in the way he wants to be it; that is, to tear his self away from the power which established it; God. This indicates that despair is not to do so much with the content of what one wants but *how* one wants it. If he wants in despair to be himself then he wants to be a self he is not, that is to say, he wants to be rid of himself.

The above gives us the two formulations of despair; in despair not wanting to be oneself and wanting in despair to be oneself. The latter however always reduces to the former. It also explains what was meant when we earlier said that despair can never consume the self. Despair, as a desire to get rid of the self, is always trying to “consume” itself, but because the self (spirit) is eternal, this is impossible. This futile desire is precisely the torment of despair.

B. The Generality of this Sickness (Despair)

Almost everybody is in despair to one degree or another. Anti-Climacus tells us that we can’t trust people’s own opinions of themselves because it is easy for people to be deceived about their own despair.

Despair, as a sickness of the spirit, differs from physical illness in a couple of ways. First, if someone ever falls in despair, it is therefore true that they have been in despair their whole life. This is because despair is a “characteristic of the spirit” and so related to the eternal. To be in despair once is to have always been in despair.

Second, despair is dialectical, which here means acting through opposites. So, not to be in despair may actually mean that one is in despair but it may also mean having been saved from despair. “A sense of security and repose may mean that one is in despair; that very security, that very peace, can be despair.”

Anti-Climacus sees our task as human beings to come to know that we exist as spirit, before God (the relation relating to itself, grounded transparently in the power that established it). Despair is essentially the failure to come to know oneself in this way. However, despair, despite being the most miserable thing a human being can endure, is also the most important thing because the “infinite gain [to know oneself as spirt before God] is never come by except through despair.”

C. The Forms of this Sickness (Despair)

In this section, Anti-Climacus analyses despair by the factors which make up the synthesis that is the self. He considers despair under the aspects of finitude/infinitude and possibility/necessity but takes particular care to consider despair under the aspect of consciousness because it is whether one is conscious of despair or not that particularly distinguishes one form of despair from another.

A(a) – *Finitude/infinitude*

The self is never a static thing, never present actually. Rather, it is a *becoming*, what is to come into existence. Despite this, a self does become something concrete. This means it becomes a particular synthesis, *this* particular synthesis. In this case, it is a synthesis between the finite and the infinite. The movement for this is “infinitely coming away from oneself, in an infinitizing of the self, and… infinitely coming back to oneself in the finitization.”

Despair under this aspect can take two forms; of the infinite and of the finite.

*Infinitude’s despair is to lack finitude*

This occurs when an individual has lost the grounding of the finite and loses oneself in the infinite, the fantastic, the boundless. This is clearly related to the imagination for that is the medium through which one carries oneself into the fantastic. One’s emotion, understanding and will can all be seduced by the fantastic. Each case results in an imbalance which carries one away from the finite.

*Finitude’s despair is to lack infinitude*

This is the opposite of the above and involves despairing confinement and narrowness. In this case, one becomes completely finitised, becoming just one more person, another cog in the machinery. In this form of despair, one loses oneself in the opinions and actions of “the others” and proceeds to busy oneself in worldly affairs “find[ing] it much easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, along with the crowd.”

A(b) – *Possibility/necessity*

In order to ‘become’ anything, possibility and necessity are both essential. While the self *is* in one sense itself (or it wouldn’t be at all), it also has to *become* itself (because the self is a constant becoming). “To the extent that it is itself, it is necessary; to the extent that it must become itself, it is a possibility.”

*Possibility’s despair is to lack necessity*

When possibility becomes too dominant, the self becomes an abstract possibility which has lost the grounding of necessity. The self can never get anywhere precisely because the ‘where’ is in the necessity. As more and more becomes possible, less and less becomes actual, until the self is completely swallowed up in nothing more than abstract possibility.

Anti-Climacus points out that while it seems the self lacks actuality, actually it lacks necessity. People typically believe that where possibility and actuality unite is the necessity, but this is not true. Rather, where possibility and necessity unite is the actual. So, what is missing from this individual is the strength to “yield to the necessary in one’s self, what might be called one’s limits.”

*Necessity’s despair is to lack possibility*

Anti-Climacus holds the expression “for God everything is possible” to be the central factor in this aspect of the despair. This becomes particularly important when some situation seems to be (and is for a human being) impossible to overcome. At times like these one must have *faith* in the possibility even in the face of an overwhelming impossibility.

Lacking possibility has two forms; either everything has become necessary or everything has become trivial. The determinist falls prey to the former. Anti-Climacus seems to think that the link between the self and God, to whom it must exist in relation to (and for whom everything is possible), guarantees possibility. The petty bourgeois fall prey to the latter and they find themselves absorbed in the probable based on their trivial experiences.

B – *Despair as an aspect of consciousness*

In general, the more consciousness one has of being in despair, the more intense the despair is. The categories of this kind of despair are as follows:

1. *Despair which is ignorant of being despair, or the despairing ignorance of having a self and an eternal self* – A person living in this kind of despair lives a life confined to the categories of sensation, completely bereft of any awareness of itself as spirit. This kind of despair is spiritlessness.
2. *Despair which is conscious of being despair, which is therefore conscious of having a self in which there is something eternal* – This requires first, some understanding of what despair actually is and second, some clarity about the self. However, this awareness occurs on a continuum and, in most cases, the individual only has a dim conception of one or both of the above. This category can be further divided:
   1. *In despair not wanting to be oneself. The despair of weakness:*
      1. *Despair over the earthly or over something earthly* – This, Anti-Climacus categorises as pure immediacy or immediacy with a little reflection. This despair is characterised by passivity in response to external pressure. This person is aware only of herself as soul and as something included in the temporal and worldly. As such, she really has no self. Despair in this sense comes about when something unpleasant happens to the immediate self; a frustrated desire, a loss of some sort, etc.

Now, being an external, worldly concern this seems like it wouldn’t actually be despair (despair being a loss of the eternal) and as far as the despairer is aware it isn’t. But, unbeknownst to the despairer, she is really concerned over her eternal self, hence it *is* despair. This is manifest in the way the immediate person wishes she could be someone else.

This same form of despair can also occur with some degree of reflection. In this case, the despair does not require an external jolt but can come about through reflection. This person has a closer understanding of his self so doesn’t desire to be someone else, rather he maintains a relationship with his self but works externally to overcome his despair. The problem is that to truly overcome despair he needs to turn inwards, not outwards, and so although he may think he has won, in his victory, he is still mired in despair.

These forms of despair can arise out of both hope (the adolescent) and recollection (the adult).

* + 1. *Despair of the eternal or over oneself*

This kind of despair is an improvement because rather than the self being weakness, it is now consciousness *of* its weakness. Here, the individual is conscious of having a self *and* of what despair is. This makes this form of despair *active*.

The problem with this despair is that, despite being aware of itself and its weakness, it doesn’t turn to God. Rather, the individual engrosses herself in despair, becoming reserved. The danger here is suicide.

* 1. *The despair of wanting in despair to be oneself. The despair of defiance*

This typically arises after progressing through the two stages of ‘weakness’ despair above to a point where the individual grasps everything about despair and the self. This form of despair comes from the self (as opposed to the external world) and is totally active (as opposed to passive). It wants to be itself, but the self it wants to be is only an abstract possibility and therefore divorced from any relation to the power which established it; i.e. God. It wants to be its own creator, rejecting the limits, necessities, aptitudes, predispositions, etc. inherent in any concrete set of circumstances. Anti-Climacus notes that this self is hardly a self because it is totally arbitrary; at any moment this self can start all over again. There is nothing firm in its existence. In wanting to be itself in this way, it is in despair.

This individual wants to make itself according to its own desires but inevitably runs up against some limit it cannot change. This fact that constrains his existence becomes something that offends him and he uses this to take offence at, and defy, all existence. He will never ask for help or turn down the path of faith because he would rather be himself even with all the despair that brings.

The danger with this type of despair is that it may become “demonic” which means the individual grows so angry that he turns on existence and no longer even wants to sever the relation with God; rather he wants to keep God in the picture just so he can rally against Him. In the end, he uses God as an opposition against which he can define and justify himself.

Part Two – Despair is Sin

A. Despair is Sin

Sin is despair with one difference; it is despair *before God*.

“Sin is: *before God, or with the conception of God, in despair not wanting to be oneself, or wanting in despair to be oneself.* Thus sin is intensified weakness or intensified defiance: sin is the heightening of despair.”

Chapter 1

Up until now, we have been concerned with the human individual “within the category of the human self, or of the self that has man as its standard of measurement.” With sin, we are elevating the standard the self is to be measured against, infinitely, to the level of the Divine. Anti-Climacus calls the self in this relation, the “theological self”. Given that sin is before God; that is, with a conception of the Divine, non-Christians can’t really sin.

The final point of interest in this chapter is the idea that virtue is not the opposite of sin. The opposite of sin is faith.

Addendum - *Offence*

Anti-Climacus notes how easy it is for people to be offended by Christianity because it is so severe. This he takes to be a form of Christian protection against speculative thought (philosophy, particularly Hegel) which cannot imagine the reality of the *particular* human being, *any* human being; husband, wife, servant, barber, etc., standing directly before God or that God should concern himself with humanity’s sins or the paradoxical doctrine that God came into the world, suffered and died. Instead, speculative thought universalises particular human beings into an abstract concept, the human race, removing the specification ‘before God’ as it does so.

Christianity is offensive to some, not because it is severe or dark, but because it holds humans to a non-human standard and makes of the human individual something so extraordinary that the average person cannot even grasp. Anti-Climacus therefore criticises those who try to remove the offending parts of Christianity to make it more palatable. It is precisely these parts that make it great.

Anti-Climacus now turns to a brief account of envy and offence. “Envy is concealed admiration.” Someone who admires something but feels unable to surrender herself to it envies that thing. She then disparages the thing in an attempt to console herself. “Admiration is happy self-surrender, envy is unhappy self-assertion.” Offence, on the other hand, is “unhappy admiration”. The more one admires the thing therefore, the more offended one gets.

This section concludes with Anti-Climacus saying it is “extraordinarily stupid… to defend Christianity”. All this does is make “Christianity out to be some miserable object that in the end must be rescued by a defence.”

Chapter 2 – *The Socratic definition of sin*

For Socrates, sin is ignorance. Anti-Climacus notes that the defect with Socratic sin is that it fails to account for the origin of sin. Ignorance cannot be sin because sin is precisely consciousness (of being before God). If one is therefore ignorant of what is right and so does what is wrong, no sin can be said to have occurred. The Socratic notion of sin is missing the will, the defiance, that characterises it.

Anti-Climacus also points out that the Socratic notion of sin fails to make a logical connection between knowing and acting. It assumes that these aspects are two sides of the same coin. Christianity, on the other hand, sees the transition occur in the will. If a person does not immediately do what is right as soon as she knows it is the right thing to do, the will springs to life giving its opinion of the knowledge. Now, if the will doesn’t like the knowledge, it seldom rejects it outright to do the opposite; rather, it delays the action. The longer the action is delayed, the more obscure the knowledge becomes until the knowledge manages to conform itself to the will and suddenly, what the will wants is what is right. It seems “the good must be done immediately”.

Of course, Socrates would simply say that all this merely proves that this particular person has not actually understood what was right. If he had *really* understood what was right, he would have acted differently. Anti-Climacus agrees that this is the furthest a human being can come. In truth, no human can say what sin is because “sin is the very thing he is in.” It is for this reason that Christianity starts by saying that humans only know what sin is because there has been a “revelation from God, that sin does not consist in man’s not having understood what is right, but in his not wanting to understand it, and in his unwillingness to do what is right.” In doing this, Christianity goes one step further back than Socrates and locates the sin in the will, not the knowledge.

Can any of this be *comprehended*? No. Comprehension holds sway in humankind’s relation to each other. Humanity’s relation to the divine, however, is mediated by belief.

Chapter 3 – *That sin is not negative but affirmative*

This chapter is concerned with proving that sin is not actually negative, but affirmative; i.e. a positive expression.

The first thing to note is that the idea that sin is affirmative cannot be comprehended. Comprehending something means to raise oneself higher than the thing comprehended. The concept posited is affirmative but the act of comprehending it negates it. This means that the Christian principle that sin is affirmative is a paradox which has to be believed, on faith. However, Anti-Climacus does go ahead and say that for sin to be affirmative means that it is *before God*.

Appendix to A – *Sin as a rarity*

After all of this, it is clear that sin is quite rare in the world. Yet, Christianity wants this “sin-consciousness” to be prevalent because the road to faith passes through sin. Most people are “so immersed in triviality and chattering mimicry of ‘the others’” that they are too “spiritless” to be in sin or to have a sin-consciousness.

But it doesn’t end there. Christianity holds people responsible for their being spiritless. Nobody is born spiritless.

Anti-Climacus finishes this appendix by crushing the defenders of Christianity again, this time with an analogy to someone in love. Such an individual would never dream of mounting a defence to prove that he is in love, or think of ‘reasons’ to justify it. She doesn’t need to defend her love, she is just *in* love.

He also takes particular pleasure in pointing out that contemporary priests give *reasons* to demonstrate that a thing is beyond all understanding; i.e. precisely *beyond* reason. Here Anti-Climacus highlights his dislike for contemporary Christianity by giving it the mocking name, “Christendom”, reserving “Christianity” for true believers, the few that there are.

B. The Continuation of Sin

Most people don’t live continuously conscious lives. By this Anti-Climacus means we are only rarely conscious of ourselves as spirit; when we have to make a major decision, for example. Aside from this, we live more like animals, unconsciously acting and reacting out of habit. In short, we live lives lacking spiritual continuity; unconscious for the most part but punctuated by moments of consciousness.

So, when it comes to living a conscious life, the continuity that can be had here is either that of faith or sin. However, very few people live in a continuous state of faith. Most people, rather, are sinful. Their lives are therefore a continuous state of sin. The problem is they don’t realise this continuity but rather live unconsciously sinful lives, that is, unconscious for the most part but punctuated by moments of consciousness of their sins. These moments are when they actually commit a new sin. So, when thinking back over their lives they see a sin here and a sin there, but not a life lived in a continual state of sin, which is the way it really is.

This prompts Anti-Climacus to say that “[b]eing in a state of sin is always new sin”. The continuous state of sin is ‘new’ because every moment a sin goes unrepented the state of sin increases. “Far from being correct in thinking that only every new sin increases the sin, it is his being in a state of sin that, in Christian terms, puts the sinner in the greater sin, it *is* the new sin.” Being in sin is worse than the particular sins. The sinner’s whole life is sin because the whole life is, and must be, a lived continuity.

Anti-Climacus has a nice analogy for this whole state of affairs. Most people “join in life’s game but never have the experience of putting everything together, never come to a conception of an infinite consistency in themselves.”

This also explains why the believer has an infinite fear of sin because she has infinitely much to lose. She understands sin doesn’t begin and end with a single act but seeps into life because life is continuously lived. Interestingly enough, the “demonic person” also has a totality to lose. His life is lived in the continuous state of sin/despair and he fears the good because it can change his life so that he may never be the same again.

A – *The sin of despairing over one’s sin*

Sin is already despair but to then despair over one’s sin is to go one step further into sin, it is an intensification of the sin, something not unlike doubling down on one’s sin. This intensification makes one look at repentance and all that is good as not just empty and meaningless, but as the enemy. On the difference between sin and despair over sin, Anti-Climacus says that “one could say that the former breaks with the good and the latter with repentance.”

In contemporary times, despair over one’s sin is often taken to be a sign of depth, but this is false.

B – *The sin of despairing of the forgiveness of sins (offence)*

Here, the self is directly before Christ. However, the self is still in despair, that is either as weakness (which, being offended, does not dare to believe) or defiance (which, being offended, will not believe).

The interesting thing here is that despair in weakness and despair in defiance trade places. Weakness (in despair not wanting to be oneself) becomes defiance because it is defiance for one not to want to be what one is, namely, a sinner. In this way, weakness dispenses with the forgiveness of sins. Defiance (wanting in despair to be oneself) becomes weakness because it is weakness to want to be what one is, namely, a sinner, in such a way that there can be no forgiveness.

This represents an intensification over despairing over one’s sins because here the self is directly before Christ who offers the forgiveness of sins. Moving the self into a direct relation to God/Christ intensifies the whole affair.

As with the sin of despairing over one’s sins, despairing of the forgiveness of sins is taken to be a sign of a deep nature by contemporary people.

Anti-Climacus claims that ‘Christendom’ has gone wrong by preaching the doctrine of the “God-man” (the kinship between God and man) so much that it is now taken in vain. The first and most important thing for Anti-Climacus is that “every human being is an individual human being [and] becomes conscious of himself as an individual human being.” Nowadays however, people become conscious of themselves in “the crowd”, which is an empty abstraction, but is now seen to be something real. Before long, this abstraction became God and then the “God-man” appeared, but as if it were something humanity itself had discovered, rather than coming from God.

However, ‘Christianity’ has protected itself from this blasphemy with the doctrine of sin, which, first, only applies to individuals; it makes no sense as an abstract concept, and second, clearly maintains a separation between God and man, as sin is only sin *before God*, and only God can forgive sins.

C – *The sin of abandoning Christianity and declaring it to be untruth*

This final form of sin is sin against the Holy Spirit. The intensification comes from the fact that it now takes the offensive. Despairing over one’s sin was a defence, despairing of the forgiveness of sins was opposed to God’s compassion and so partially offensive, but abandoning Christianity is an outright attack. This sin is the positive form of being offended.

This whole chapter turns on two concepts; the fact that God became man and the possibility of offence; the latter placing a limit on the former. God became man in the form of a lowly servant, a humble individual, so as to show that Christianity extends to everyone, but the possibility of offence in Christianity reminds one that there is an infinite difference between God and man.