

In search of the self's grounding power:
Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death* as dogmatics for unbelievers

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Abstract

Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death* can be read as an attempt to present the Christian message in a way that makes sense for unbelievers without violating the integrity of the Christian faith. This is done by exploring the psychological implications of the lack of faith in a way that is supposed to make sense even for those who take offense at the Christian message and do not accept the anthropological implications of the story of the incarnation as their basic point of orientation. It is argued that this attempt is successful, and that this can be demonstrated both by the consistency of the argument and the breadth of its *Wirkungsgeschichte*.

1. On becoming a Christian

Looking back at his extensive authorship, Søren Kierkegaard came to the conclusion that it was all related to the question of becoming Christian.¹ This, he had discovered, was not as easy as one might be inclined to think, the basic problem being related to the fact that faith tends to change the perspective from which one looks at everything else. One thus either perceives the world from within the perspective of faith, having already solved the problem of the transition, or one perceives faith and everything else from the perspective of disbelief, from which the confession of faith may not make sense at all. There simply is no neutral state from which an evaluation of the alternatives can be performed. If not paying attention to this fact, one may therefore commit the error of exploring the faith perspective according to the ontological and epistemological principles of its rejection.

Kierkegaard was not the first to come to this conclusion, and the history of the

¹Søren Kierkegaard, *Skrifter* (København: Gad, 1997) (hereafter *SKS*), vol. 16, p. 11: ' . . . at hele min Forfatter-Virksomhed forholder sig til Christendommen, til det Problem: at blive Christen'.

Christian church does not lack attempts at solving it.² He maintained, however, that the general awareness of the dilemma was in decline. He found that among his Danish contemporaries, the majority of which confessed the Christian faith, there were but a few who understood the implications of their confession. This necessitated a new strategy on part of the Christian author; the direct explication of faith had to be combined with an indirect method where the author, following in the footsteps of Socrates, would let the readers discover for themselves the inconsistencies of their own situation as disbelieving confessors. In *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Kierkegaard then lets Johannes Climacus, a man allegedly without faith, explore the implications of revelation as incarnation, with the perspective of faith gradually becoming more outspoken through *Repetition*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *The Concept of Anxiety*, the last of these works being explicitly presented as a discussion of the dogmatic problem of original sin.³

Within this development, *Sickness unto Death*⁴, which was written after the summary of the authorship referred to above, represents a new and decisive step. The pseudonymous author, Anti-Climacus, is a Christian,⁵ the book is presented as a study in Christian psychology for upbuilding and revival,⁶ and the title refers explicitly to the story of one of

²For a selection of some of the possibilities, see Knut Alfsvåg, 'On the Unexpectedness of Salvation in Maximus, Cusanus and Luther', *Lutheran Quarterly* 26 (2012), pp. 271-294.

³SKS 4:309.

⁴SKS 11:115-242. In my translations and summaries of Kierkegaard's text into English, I have made freely use of the suggestions in Søren Kierkegaard, *The sickness unto death: A Christian psychological exposition for upbuilding and awakening*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, vol. 19 (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980) without necessarily following them literally. Hong's translation refers to the page numbers of the first edition of Kierkegaard's collected works in Danish; for a concordance table of the page numbers in this text and SKS, see <http://SKS.dk/sidek/sko-SD.htm> (accessed 6 May 2013)

⁵For a discussion of the significance of the pseudonym Anti-Climacus in the context of Kierkegaard's works, see Gregor Malantschuk, *Dialektik og eksistens hos Søren Kierkegaard* (København: Reitzel, 1990), pp. 316-321.

⁶'En christelig psykologisk Udvikling til Opbyggelse og Opvækkelse', SKS 11:115.

Christ's most important miracles, the resurrection (or revival)⁷ of Lazarus. Still, the Socratic perspective is retained in the sense that the book's topic is the discovery of the (disbelieving) human's (lack of) self-understanding; the goal of the book is to make Lazarus aware of his being in his grave. In this way, the book presents itself as the believer's analysis of the situation of the disbeliever intent at obtaining the latter's appreciation without compromising the perspective of belief as the frame of reference for the discourse. The book could thus be considered as the theological equivalent of squaring the circle: Its discussions are supposed to make sense within frameworks that are in fact incompatible. What is, then, Anti-Climacus's strategy for presenting faith for disbelievers, does the project succeed in the sense that Anti-Climacus' argument is both consistent and relevant, and what are the implications of this attempt for the understanding of the difference between faith and disbelief? These are the questions I will try to clarify in this essay.

2. The Christological foundation

The one observation that anchors the reflections of *The Sickness unto Death* is the understanding of the person of Christ as the union of the infinitely different. This is not established in so many words until the final part of the work, but is, as will presently be shown, what governs it from the outset.⁸ In the last chapter Anti-Climacus maintains that 'the doctrine of Christianity is the doctrine of the God-man' founded on the presupposition of the infinite difference between the two.⁹ This is an obvious reference to the two-nature Christology of the Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds¹⁰ made even more explicitly so by the identification of one of the positions analysed in *The Sickness unto Death* with the positions rejected by the old church, i.e., Docetism, which rejects Christ's humanity, and rationalism, which rejects his divinity.¹¹

⁷There is thus a clear connection between *The Sickness unto Death* being written for 'Opvækkelse' (p. 115) and Christ going to Lazarus 'for at opvække ham' (p. 123); what Christ did for Lazarus, Anti-Climacus wants to do for his readers.

⁸The significance of the second part of the book is emphasized by Louis H. Mackey, 'Deconstructing the self : Kierkegaard's Sickness unto death.', *Anglican Theological Review* 71 (1989), pp. 153-165, p. 160: '. . . the repetition is offered as the true beginning: the origin of the origin.' Also Marius Timmann Mjaaland, *Autopsia: Self, death, and God after*

The implication immediately drawn from this is that the realization of what it is to be truly human can only be found in and through the relationship with God; by becoming human in Christ God points to this particular person and says: 'Look, this is what it is to be (truly) human.'¹² One thus in the person of Christ finds oneself confronted by the manifestation of divinity in a way that points toward the full realization of the potential of one's own humanity. In Christ, one has the possibility of finding oneself as grounded in the reality of the divine conceived as the origin of all there is including oneself; in Christ, one finds 'one's self transparently grounded in the power that established it'¹³ in a way that cannot be replaced by any other. Without neglecting the difference between Christ and the ordinary human Anti-Climacus still considers the paradoxality of the union of the divine and the human in Christ as the possibility of the manifestation of the truly human for every human person.

The realization of what it is to be truly human is therefore a mystery that can only be

Kierkegaard and Derrida, trans. Brian McNeil (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), p. 190, is aware of the unsaid Christological foundation of the first chapter of *The Sickness unto Death*.

⁹'Christendommens Lære er Læren om Gud-Mennesket . . . Gud og Menneske ere to Qualiteter, mellem hvilke der er en uendelig Qualitets-Forskjel' (*SKS* 11:236-237). Contrary to what is maintained in Kristen K. Deede, 'The infinite qualitative difference: Sin, the self, and revelation in the thought of Søren Kierkegaard', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 53 (2003), pp. 25-48, p. 33, sin is therefore not the reason of this difference, but its misrepresentation.

¹⁰This 'ready acceptance of orthodox Christological confessions' is a common feature of all Kierkegaard's works; see Murray Rae, *Kierkegaard and theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 58, and a number of other authors cited in Sylvia Walsh, 'Kierkegaard's Theology', in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 292-308, p. 297. A rejection of the paradoxality of Kierkegaard's Christology as maintained in K.E. Løgstrup, *Opgør med Kierkegaard* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968) thus borders on a rejection of the Christology of the ecumenical confessions.

¹¹*SKS* 11:242.

¹²'Af Kjærlighed bliver Gud Menneske; han siger: see her, hva det er at være Menneske' (*SKS* 11:238).

¹³' . . . grunder Selvet gjennemsigtigt i den Magt, som satte det. Hvilken Formel igjen, hvorom oftere er mindet, er Definitionen paa Tro.' *SKS* 11:242.

approached through faith, as this is the only way of approaching the infinite quality difference between God and human as manifest in the person of Christ without subverting it.¹⁴ In relation to this message, there is therefore no neutral position; worship is the only appropriate reaction to the effect that both explicit rejection and the futile attempt at not answering¹⁵ are interpreted as expressions of offense, which is the opposite of faith. There is therefore no way of escape; one either accepts the story of Christ as it presents itself and thus as the unsurpassed possibility of finding the God-given ground of one's own self, or one takes offense and rejects. Even the attempt at grasping the divine presence in Christ conceptually and thus mastering it is described as offense;¹⁶ there is in Anti-Climacus's view no substantial difference between rejection, studied neutrality or the attempt at mediating the truth of the Christian story rationally. Either way, the presence of the infinite is not appropriately recognized.

From one point of view, this exacerbates the problem of becoming Christian; how is one supposed to explore one's own existence as being anchored in the realm beyond the rationally explorable as manifest in the story of Christ if this is a perspective that does not make sense? For Anti-Climacus, however, the story of Christ as the manifestation of the truly human opens the possibility of a new way of applying the Socratic method. If Christ is the true human and faith is the only way of appropriating this truth, lack of faith will prevent the realization of the truly human in a way that supposedly is psychologically explorable. The approach chosen in *The Sickness unto Death* is thus a kind of *via negativa* whereby the author explores the psychological consequences of faith's absence in the hope of evoking recognition in his readers, thus finding an indirect route to showing the relevance of a Christ-centred anthropology. The main topic of the first part of the book is therefore an investigation of the lack of faith, which by Anti-Climacus is called despair, and which in his view is offense at the Christian message made manifest as the sickness unto death.¹⁷ The book thus

¹⁴Den . . . som ikke forarges, han tilbeder troende. Men at tilbede, hvilket er Troens Udtryk, er at udtrykke, at Qvalitetens uendelig svælgende Dyb dem imellem er befæstet.' SKS 11:239.

¹⁵SKS 11:240-241.

¹⁶SKS 11:240.

¹⁷On the relation between doubt, despair and offense in this work, see further Mjaaland,

tries to elicit acknowledgement from its readers by describing their lack of faith as despair in a way that has recognizable psychological manifestations.

For this to work, the explicitly Christological foundation of human anthropology that is presented on the final pages of *The Sickness unto Death* has in the introduction to be given in a less explicit, though still unmistakably Christian form. This is done by defining the self from the outset as a relation that relates itself to itself as 'a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, or temporal and eternal, or freedom and necessity'¹⁸ and thus as 'grounded in the power that established it'¹⁹. While this is an understanding of the human that is structured according to the understanding of the person of Christ as the union of the eternal and the finite and thus follows the doctrine of Christ as the true human, it is still given in a form that is sufficiently generic to be considered as generally relevant, at least within the context of a 19th century folk church culture. In the introduction of the book, however, this Christological foundation of the anthropology of *The Sickness unto Death* is not made explicit. This is not done to hide it; as already shown, *The Sickness unto Death* presents itself as a Christian book from the

Autopsia, pp. 214-215.

¹⁸. . . en Synthese af Uendelighed og Endelighed, af det Timelige og det Evige, af Frihed og Nødvendighed, kort en Synthese.' *SKS* 11:129. The finite is further determined as soul and body and their relation, described as a negative, i.e., finite unity; see Malantschuk, *Dialektik og eksistens*, pp. 325-326, the finite framework of the soul/body distinction freeing it from any kind of Gnostic or Cartesian associations (so Robert L. Perkins, 'Ultimate reality and meaning in the thought of Kierkegaard.', *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 6 (1983), pp. 283-299, pp. 289-290). One could, as is done in John J. Davenport, 'Selfhood and "Spirit"', in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 230-251, pp. 234-235, maintain that the hylomorphic opposites make out the human being, while the self 'is a *reflexive structure* that transcends the first-order relation . . . between these poles.'

¹⁹The definition of faith from SK 11,242 is given already in the introduction in almost exactly the same form: 'Dette er nemlig Formelen, som beskriver Selvets Tilstand, naar Fortvivlelsen ganske er udryddet: i at forholde sig til sig selv, og i at ville være sig selv grunder Selvet gjennemsigtigt i den Magt, som satte det.' *SKS* 11:130. For a detailed analyses of the whole passage *SKS* 11:129-130, see further Mjaaland, *Autopsia*, pp. 155-190, who also has an interesting reflection of why God as the foundation of the self is not even identified in the first chapter of *The Sickness unto Death* (pp. 182-185).

beginning. But what Anti-Climacus is aiming at, is not to develop a positive understanding of the life with Christ as seen from the inside,²⁰ but to show the relevance of a Christian anthropology by analysing the implications of faith's absence, and for this purpose, a less explicit, though still unmistakably Christian, anthropology serves him better.

The one thing Anti-Climacus does not do, either in the introduction or the conclusion, is to give a rational defence of the Christological foundation of the argument. This is the one thing that cannot be done, as this would make faith as grounded on the story of the incarnation dependent on rational and timeless categories of thought. To maintain its integrity, the exposition of the Christian faith must be done *in medias res*. In this sense, *The Sickness unto Death* clearly remains faithful to Kierkegaard's program as an author.

3. Despair as human predicament

Despair is in the first chapter of *The Sickness unto Death* defined as the difference between the reality of one's (God-given) self and one's identification with it. If the relation to the eternal were irrelevant in the sense that the human self established itself, there would only be one kind of despair, and a rather trivial one at that, as despair would then consist in the inner conflict of not wanting to be what one has decided oneself to be.²¹ 'Who do I want to be today?' would then be the only significant human question.²² Any attempt at a deeper understanding of despair presupposes the establishment of the self through its relationship with the eternal, and the establishment of the relationship with the eternal through one's

²⁰This is arguably the task of *Works of Love* and some of Kierkegaard's other, non-pseudonymous works.

²¹Michael Theunissen, *Der Begriff Verzweiflung: Korrekturen an Kierkegaard* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993) tries to reduce the significance of the relation to the eternal in *The Sickness unto Death*. For a critique of Theunissen, see Mjaaland, *Autopsia*, pp. 169-179.

²²In *On the Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard criticized this as the attitude of Romantic literature; see K. Brian Söderquist, 'Irony', in *Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 344-364, pp. 358-360.

relationship with oneself.²³ It is only this perspective that opens the possibility of wanting to be oneself, but not being able to, as the establishment of the self's true identity is then despairingly beyond the grasp of the human. In so far as this seems to be a relevant description of the human predicament, the relation to the infinite as its foundation is confirmed. The significance of this (not properly integrated) relation to the eternal is repeatedly emphasized in the first part of *The Sickness unto Death*,²⁴ but there are, apart from the Christological argument of the final chapter, given no *a priori* reasons for its adequacy. One either finds the perspective relevant, or one does not. The implication of Anti-Climacus' argument is, however, that they who do not thereby reduce the potential depth of human experience in a way that is demonstrably inadequate.

One could of course object to this reasoning that it is one thing to grant the relevance of the relationship to the eternal as presented in the first chapter of *The Sickness unto Death*; it is something entirely different to accept its unambiguously Christological identification as given in the last. It is, however, inherent in Anti-Climacus' *in medias res*-perspective that one has to relate to the eternal in the shape in which it has chosen to make itself manifest; to reserve for oneself the right to judge the appropriateness of the mode of manifestation of the eternal is to take offense and thus a perfect of example of despair as investigated in this work. One may explore the reality of human despair without explicitly referring to the person of Christ, and this is what Anti-Climacus does in the first part of *The Sickness unto Death*, but one will, after having being exposed to the story of the incarnation, never solve the problem of despair without finding in Christ as the union of the divine and human the model of one's own self's being grounded 'in the power that established it'.

After having established despair as a general perspective on human existence,²⁵ Anti-

²³' . . . kun ved i at forholde sig til sig selv . . . [kan Selvet] forholde sig til Det, som har sat hele Forholdet.' *SKS* 11:130. It is therefore correct as emphasized by Mackey, 'Deconstructing the self', that since the self's relation to itself can thus only be granted as gift, despair is universal as long as the self only relates to itself.

²⁴Despair is thus the human attempt to 'to tear one's self away from the power that established it' (*SKS* 11:136).

²⁵Cf. the chapter titles: The possibility and actuality of despair (Part One, A, B; *SKS* 11:130); The universality of despair (Part One, B; *SKS* 11:138).

Climacus analyses despair according to the elements of the synthesis (the temporal and the eternal)²⁶ and according to the level of consciousness of one's despair.²⁷ The analysis is thus structured according to the definition of the self as reflection on the synthesis, and of faith as having one's self transparently, and thus to a certain extent consciously, grounded in the power that established it.²⁸ Both the investigation of the understanding of the elements of the synthesis and of one's (lack of) awareness of their realization are therefore necessary for a complete analysis.

The elements of the synthesis are finitude and infinity;²⁹ despair can thus be characterized as the lack of either of these elements. Lacking finitude, one has a self-based, and thus false, relation to the infinite issuing in escapism. Religiously, such a person can become intoxicated by infinity, but lack the ability to live it; this is the religiosity of the enthusiasts.³⁰ In this analysis of religiosity without embodiment there may be elements of the traditional understanding of *akedia*,³¹ while a literary character that seems to correspond well to the description within a more secular context, is Hjalmar Ekdal in Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*.

Lacking infinity one attributes infinite worth to the indifferent; this is thus the

²⁶Part One, C, A; *SKS* 11:146-157.

²⁷Part One, C, B; *SKS* 11:157-187.

²⁸As observed by John D. Glenn, 'The definition of the self and the structure of Kierkegaard's work', in *International Kierkegaard commentary: The Sickness unto Death*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Ga: Mercer Univ Pr, 1987), pp. 5-21, p. 6, 'the definition of the self provides the structure of the rest of the work'. Like Mjaaland, *Autopsia*, p. 189, I am, however, skeptical of his attempt at reading the theory of the stages into the introduction.

²⁹According to Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's relations to Hegel reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 579-580, Anti-Climacus here develops a dialectic that is Hegelian in the sense that the categories determines each other. For a critique of Stewart's position, see Mjaaland, *Autopsia*, pp. 244-245.

³⁰*SKS* 11:146-148.

³¹Cf. Merold Westphal, 'Kierkegaard's psychology and unconscious despair', in *International Kierkegaard commentary: The Sickness unto Death*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Ga: Mercer Univ Pr, 1987), pp. 39-66, p. 64: 'Spiritually speaking, the self falls into despair because it is lazy.'

problem of idolatry.³² The difference between humans is then the only thing that matters. Such a person may therefore live rather well in the world, being well adjusted to secular wisdom. But instead of becoming a self, one has become a mere repetition of the meaningless,³³ a perspective that was later developed by Martin Heidegger in his analyses of 'das Man' in § 27 of *Sein und Zeit*.³⁴

True to the Christological point of orientation of his anthropology, Anti-Climacus does not conceive the synthesis of the infinite and the finite as a soul-body dualism, but as an exploration of the self's relation to, and possible transcendence of, its own finite situation.³⁵ This lets him analyse the synthesis from another angle that is philosophically even more interesting, namely as a synthesis of possibility and necessity.³⁶ Anti-Climacus here opposes the 'the philosophers' explanation of necessity as the synthesis of possibility and existence. This implies an understanding of reality as the realization of the possible, and limits according to Anti-Climacus possibility to what is rationally thinkable: Only what can be thought to be possible, can ever be true.³⁷ According to Anti-Climacus, this is incompatible

³²As emphasized by Deede, 'The infinite qualitative difference', 30-31, infinity must here refer to God, not to human imagination.

³³SKS 11:149-151.

³⁴Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 11 ed. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1967), pp. 126-130. On Heidegger's dependence on Kierkegaard, see further Heido Schulz, 'Germany and Austria: A Modest Head Start', in *Kierkegaard's International Reception I: Northern and Western Europe*, ed. Jon Stewart (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 307-419, p. 358, and Clare Carlisle, 'Kierkegaard and Heidegger', in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. John Lippitt and George Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 421-439.

³⁵On this perspective, see further Glenn, 'The definition of the self', p. 8. For a reading of Kierkegaard as critique of both naturalism and idealism, see also Kyle Roberts, 'Reinhold Niebuhr: The Logic of Paradox for a Theology of Human Nature', in *Kierkegaard's Influence on Theology II: Anglophone and Scandinavian Protestant Theology*, ed. Jon Stewart (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 143-156.

³⁶The significance of this distinction for Kierkegaard's dialectical method is emphasized by Malantschuk, *Dialektik og eksistens*, pp. 151-161.

³⁷SKS 11:152. The philosophically most precise analysis which Anti-Climacus here is alluding to, is Kant's analysis of modality (possibility, existence, necessity) as one of the

with the orientation from the infinite that structures *The Sickness unto Death*. Anti-Climacus therefore replaces it by an ontology which understands reality as the union of the (infinitely) possible and the necessary, thus opening the perspective for the reality of the manifestation of the infinite.³⁸ If not, the idea of an incarnation is null and void.

Necessity is by Anti-Climacus understood as limit and situatedness. Possibility without necessity thus corresponds to eternity without finitude³⁹ and necessity without possibility corresponds to the trivially secular.⁴⁰ Possibility is, however, divine possibility, and therefore infinite: 'for God everything is possible'.⁴¹ To the infinity of possibility one can then only relate adequately in faith. This equals the understanding of salvation as a reality beyond the humanly possible. To experience the reality of faith one must therefore accept the definitivity of one's limitation and still believe. Divine help is thus experienced as a miracle of grace to the extent that one with the passion of reason has understood that help is humanly impossible. This kind of faith is the infallible antidote for despair; this is the faith that resolves contradictions.⁴²

The importance of not excluding the reality of the infinite is recognized both by Plato⁴³ and of Christian thinkers of an apophatic persuasion.⁴⁴ In his discussion of the reality

categories of reason in *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* § 10; the approach is, however, basically the same in, e.g., Aristotle and Hegel. See the commentary in <http://SKS.dk/SD/kom.xml#k184> (accessed 6 May 2013)

³⁸According to Schulz, 'Germany and Austria', 358, this has informed Heidegger's discussion of the relation between facticity ('Geworfenheit') and transcendence ('Entwurf') in *Sein und Zeit* § 38 (pp. 175-180). On the relation between Kierkegaard's and Heidegger's understanding of transcendence, see further Carlisle, 'Kierkegaard and Heidegger', p. 432.

³⁹SKS 11:151-153.

⁴⁰SKS 11:153-157.

⁴¹SKS 11:153.

⁴²Carlisle, 'Kierkegaard and Heidegger', p. 425, thus discusses the distinction between possibility and actuality in relation to the Lutheran understanding of the Christian as 'at once righteous and sinner.'

⁴³One could here think of Plato's concept of *tò exaiphnes* (the instant) as investigated by Vigilius Haufniensis in *The Concept of Anxiety* (SKS 4, pp. 391). Mjaaland, *Autopsia*, p. 233,

as the unity of (infinite) possibility and (finite) necessity Anti-Climacus thus has predecessors both in philosophy and theology; this is not an exclusively Christian observation. True to his intentions of investigating the implication of the lack of faith, however, Anti-Climacus is primarily interested in manifestations of despair as lack of possibility.⁴⁵ One may lack possibility either in the sense that everything seems necessary (determinism) or in the sense that everything seems trivial, the latter being similar to the secular perspective investigated above ('das Man'). Determinism or fatalism is characterized by lack of prayer; one has no God, or one's God is pure necessity, which for Anti-Climacus is more or less the same – this may be intended as a critique of Spinoza, who had a significant influence among the German philosophers who were Kierkegaard's basic point of orientation.⁴⁶ But whereas even the determinist may have kept enough imagination to let the lack of possibility induce a sense of despair, the philistine ('Spidsborgeren') has no understanding of the possible whatsoever beyond mere probability. Being locked to the trivial, the philistine thus lacks the imagination which lifts the human above the merely probable, and without which one will never be aware of either one's self or God.⁴⁷

This is a key passage in *The Sickness unto Death* and central in its attempt at squaring

relates it to the expression *epékeina tes ousías* (beyond being), the Platonic origin of which is discussed in Knut Alfsvåg, *What no mind has conceived: An investigation of the significance of Christological apophaticism*, Studies in philosophical theology 45 (Leuven, Paris, Walpole: Peeters, 2010), pp. 10-11.

⁴⁴Cf. the discussion of this topic in Alfsvåg, *What no mind has conceived*.

⁴⁵SKS 11:153-157.

⁴⁶This is strongly emphasized in Fredrick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1987).

⁴⁷According to Westphal, 'Kierkegaard's psychology', p. 64, we are here 'on the verge of the attack upon Christendom.' For a demonstration of the attitude Anti-Climacus here describes as a rejection of *The Sickness unto Death* based on a preference for the triviality of probability (and the author does not even seem to be ironic!), see Haim Gordon, 'A rejection of Kierkegaard's monism of despair', in *International Kierkegaard commentary*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Ga: Mercer Univ Pr, 1987), pp. 239-257.

the circle.⁴⁸ What Anti-Climacus here aims at, is to make plausible the lack of a robust faith in the reality of the impossible as a deficiency of perspective that inevitably disables any attempt at realizing the truly human. He thus describes the lack of eternity understood as unimaginable possibility both in the life of the determinist and of the philistine in an attempt at waking them from their dreamless slumber. He is obviously in serious doubt, though, concerning the feasibility of the project as far as the philistine is concerned; he seems after all to have more hope for the determinist. But he does not reduce his goal according to the expected capacity of his audience; in this way, Anti-Climacus remains true to his own project.

The analysis of the consciousness of despair focusses on its three possible levels:⁴⁹ Ignorance of having a self, despairingly not wanting to be oneself, and despairingly wanting to be oneself.⁵⁰ By insisting that ignorance is in fact despair one maintains what Anti-Climacus calls 'the obstinacy of truth'⁵¹: Ignorance is truly a kind of despair, but for those who live in ignorance, it does not seem to be. They prefer ignorance for truth and do not want to be confronted with the realities of their situation. Despair is a diagnosis, not a symptom.⁵² The despair of which one is ignorant still manifests itself, however, when the seemingly stable foundations of one's life disintegrate.⁵³ This again essentially corresponds to the

⁴⁸The significance of this passage for the understanding of the structure of the book is emphasized both by Arne Grøn, 'The Relation Between Part One and Part Two of "The Sickness unto Death"', *Kierkegaard Studies: Yearbook* (1997), pp. 35-50, and by Mjaaland, *Autopsia*, pp. 223-230, who finds this passage to be the 'turning point' of the dialectics of *The Sickness unto Death*.

⁴⁹For a summary of the discussion whether Anti-Climacus here transcends Hegelian phenomenology or not, see Mjaaland, *Autopsia*, pp. 243-247.

⁵⁰The boundary between these levels is, however, in practice somewhat ambiguous; see Westphal, 'Kierkegaard's psychology', pp. 53-54.

⁵¹'Sandhedens Rethaveri', *SKS* 11:157.

⁵²As observed by Westphal, 'Kierkegaard's psychology', p. 50, this implies a rejection of the Cartesian assumption that mind is transparent to itself.

⁵³*SKS* 11:157-162. For an interesting discussion of the psychopathology of spiritlessness in relation to some of Kierkegaard's other works, see Kresten Nordentoft, *Kierkegaards*

perspective of the philistine.

Despair as something one is aware of manifests itself either as despair in weakness (not wanting to be oneself in one's eternal significance) or as despair in defiance (despairingly wanting to realize one's eternal significance by oneself). Despair in weakness is thus determined by one's relation to the eternal as something one does not dare to acknowledge; it will often manifest itself as what Anti-Climacus calls 'Indesluttethed' (reticence, encapsulation) as opposed to the philistine immediacy of being lost to life's circumstances.⁵⁴

The one who despairs in defiance, however, has grasped the infinity of the self and wants to realize it, but wants to do it on one's own and in so doing severs the self from any relation to the power that established it.⁵⁵ It is thus very close to truth and at the same time infinitely far away from it.⁵⁶ Faith is characterized by the self's courage to lose itself,⁵⁷ whereas in defiance the self despairingly wants to be itself. This kind of self thus relates to itself through imaginary constructions which get their apparent significance from nothing beyond what is attached to them by the self – this may be intended as a critique of Kant's grounding the self in its analysis of itself. One will thus never build anything but castles in the air, and, being limited to one's own resources, one will, in experiencing the troubles of life, lack the hope that temporal ills can come to an end. The one who despairs in defiance will thus rather experience all agonies of hell with one's self intact than submit to the hope

psykologi (København: Reitzel, 1995), pp. 320-331.

⁵⁴SKS 11:177. According to Nordentoft, *Kierkegaards psykologi*, pp. 382-397, this is informed by Kierkegaard's self-analysis to an even greater degree than other aspects of despair.

⁵⁵Og det er dette Selv han fortvivlet vil være, løsrivende Selvet fra ethvert Forhold til en Magt, der har sat det, eller løsrivende det fra Forestillingen om, at der er en saadan Magt til.' SKS 11:182.

⁵⁶Men just fordi den er Fortvivlelse ved Hjælp af det Evige, ligger den i en vis Forstand det Sande meget nær; og just fordi den ligger det Sande meget nær, er den uendelig langt borte.' SKS 11:181.

⁵⁷Philosophically, this implies a critique of the idea that one establishes one's relation to the eternal through human conceptualities; it thus implies the deconstruction of metaphysics. See Mjaaland, *Autopsia*, p. 263.

for help in virtue of the absurd that for God everything is possible.⁵⁸ Parts of this description of the enlarged self of the godless thus reads like an anticipation of *Der Übermensch* in Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*.⁵⁹

Through this analysis, Anti-Climacus has shown that if one is lacking an appreciation of eternity as unlimited possibility, one either becomes a determinist or a philistine. Becoming conscious of the problem, one is on one's way to solving it, though Anti-Climacus, being true to the understanding of the impossibility of transition as a merely human possibility, is clearly aware that there might be a long step, indeed an eternal one, between awareness of the problem and its solution. The weakness within which one here may find oneself is thus precisely the weakness of not being able to save oneself, issuing either in retraction from the world ('reticence') or one's being lost to its fleeting temporality. Or one may in defiance insist on one's ability to solve the problem alone, thus burden oneself with the sheer impossibility of manifesting infinity on one's own.

The analysis is precise, consistent and true to the starting point of the deliberations, and there is no doubt, judging from its influence on philosophy, literature⁶⁰ and psychology, that it has been found relevant.

⁵⁸The influence of this particular part of *The Sickness to Death* on Norwegian literature is emphasized in Thor Arvid Dyrerud and Marius Timmann Mjaaland, *Kierkegaard og Norge* (Oslo: Press, 2013), pp. 151-161, the probably most famous example, however, the discussion of aerial castles in Ibsen's *The Master Builder*, is not discussed by them.

⁵⁹Cf. Glenn, 'The definition of the self', p. 12: 'Every word of Kierkegaard's analysis here can be read as a prophetic critique of the atheistic existentialism of thinkers such as Nietzsche and Sartre'. And, one could add, Heidegger, who for all his dependence on Kierkegaard, as argued in Carlisle, 'Kierkegaard and Heidegger', p. 434, in this respect is closer to Nietzsche, at least as far as *Sein und Zeit* is concerned.

⁶⁰For an interesting study of Ibsen's appropriation of this particular work, see Øivind Nygård, 'Peer som fortvilet: Ibsens Peer Gynt fortolket i lys av Kierkegaards Sygdommen til Døden' (Master thesis, University of Bergen, 2009).

4. Despair as disbelief

The first part of *The Sickness unto Death* investigates the perspectives established by an incarnation-based anthropology, exploring the lack of faith in its different manifestations. In the second part, the same perspectives are applied on the human's situation before God. Lack of faith or despair then appears as sin, which Anti-Climacus defines as 'before God . . . despairingly not wanting to be oneself, or wanting to be oneself'.⁶¹ The typology is thus the same,⁶² but a new level of seriousness⁶³ is added by now having God as the measure of the human; sin is thus considered as intensified weakness or defiance. Sin and faith are in this way analysed as opposites; for Anti-Climacus, sin is not a morally deficient work, but a deficient relationship with God.⁶⁴ One then adds to one's sins just by remaining in the state of sin and not merely through the addition of sinful works.⁶⁵

This setting of the divine as the measure of the human, whereby every human being

⁶¹'Synd er: for Gud, eller med Forestillingen om Gud fortvivlet ikke at ville være sig selv, eller fortvivlet at ville være sig selv.' *SKS* 11:191. Walsh, 'Kierkegaard's Theology', p. 301, understands 'the psychological analysis of original sin . . . in *The Concept of Anxiety* and of sin as despair . . . in *The Sickness unto Death*' as 'Kierkegaard's most original contribution to Christian thought.' If Carlisle, 'Kierkegaard and Heidegger', p. 437, however, is correct in interpreting this expression as a confirmation of the understanding of Kierkegaard's anthropology as voluntarist, remains an open question.

⁶²Both Grøn, 'The Relation Between Part One and Part Two', and Deede, 'The infinite qualitative difference', pp. 37-38, emphasize that the analysis of sin in part two is very closely related to the analysis of the consciousness of despair in part one.

⁶³Anti-Climacus calls it 'eet Udtræk mere'; *SKS* 11:196.

⁶⁴*SKS* 11:196-201.

⁶⁵*SK* 11, pp. 218-220. This raises the problem of original sin, which is the main subject of *The Concept of Anxiety*. Both Nordentoft, *Kierkegaards psykologi*, p. 235, and Louis Dupré, 'The sickness unto death: Critique of the modern age', in *International Kierkegaard commentary: The Sickness unto Death*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Ga: Mercer Univ Pr, 1987), pp. 85-106, pp. 94-95, detect what Dupré calls a Pelagian tendency in this former work which has disappeared in *The Sickness unto Death*, whereas Mjaaland, *Autopsia*, p. 315, works from the supposition that there is no such difference between the two books.

gets his or her infinite value, is revealed through the story of God being born, suffering and dying for the sake of every single human. In this way, the significance of Christology for anthropology is even more explicit in this part of the work, but without substantially changing the perspective under which the human predicament is studied.⁶⁶ Confronted by the value the Christian story thus attaches to the human, one either humbly believes or takes offense at the immensity of the dignity of the human that is revealed therein. In this way, offense is in the second part of the work understood as a kind of unhappy admiration; it is a form of envy that is directed against oneself and expresses the inability of the natural human being to accept what one is accorded by God.

In addition to making itself manifest as lack of faith or sin, this inability to accept one's eternal significance may also manifest itself as despair over one's sin or about forgiveness.⁶⁷ The reason for despair over one's sin is pride; one has discovered the difference between ideal and reality concerning one's own self and despairs.⁶⁸ In complaining of one's sin as unforgivable one may appear pious, but it is in reality nothing but the inability to accept that one actually is a sinner. This issues in the establishment of a facade behind which all evils are hidden; it is the psychology of the Pharisee and corresponds to the psychology of the reticent in the first part of the book.⁶⁹

In addition to despairing in pride over one's sin, one may also in weakness despair

⁶⁶The relation between the two parts of Kierkegaard's work is the main topic of James L. Marsh, 'Kierkegaard's double dialectic of despair and sin', in *International Kierkegaard commentary: The Sickness unto Death*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Ga: Mercer Univ Pr, 1987), pp. 67-83; it is here maintained that 'the religious dialectic becomes the whole of which the philosophical dialectic is a part' (p. 78). This is emphasized even more strongly by Mackey, 'Deconstructing the self', p. 160: 'The whole work is in Christian scare quotes. And it is seen to be so at the end, when it is revealed that only revelation could have enabled this reading of the human condition from the first.' For a different, and in my view less convincing approach, see Dupré, 'The sickness unto death', p. 92.

⁶⁷Anti-Climacus explicitly asks his readers to pay attention to the difference between despairing over one's sin and about the forgiveness of sins: 'Man bemærke Forskjellen at fortvile over sin Synd, og at fortvile om Syndernes Forladelse' (SKS 11:225).

⁶⁸SKS 11:221-224.

⁶⁹So Nordentoft, *Kierkegaards psykologi*, pp. 376-379.

about the forgiveness of sin,⁷⁰ the object of one's despair now being God in Christ.⁷¹ By retaining the significance of the Christian message while declaring one's inability to believe it, one in Anti-Climacus' view misuses God as an instrument of one's own inflation, and the difference between God and human disappears. This is the situation of those who entertain the possibility of there being a God while still finding themselves to have advanced beyond the position where they simply accept the corresponding obligation of faith; what is investigated here is the psychology of the one who is in love with one's own doubt. In paganism, this attitude does not exist; it presupposes the incarnation and turns it against God as an accusation, as if God by becoming a human have let humans become gods who reserve for themselves the right to decide what to believe and what to reject.⁷²

The danger of this being the outcome of the proclamation of the story of Christ can never be taken away; the danger of offense is in fact what keeps the Christian faith from being reduced to speculation.⁷³ Christ therefore repeatedly warns against offense: 'Blessed is he who takes no offense at me.'⁷⁴ The danger is real, though, the outcome of one's being confronted with the story of Christ may well be that one falls victim to the ultimate inflation of one's self and takes offense by rejecting even the possibility of incarnation and positively declare Christianity to be untrue – 'what a tremendously despairing conception of itself that

⁷⁰The relation between weakness and defiance is inversed from the first to the second part of the book; what appear as weakness in relation to oneself (lack of recognition of one's eternal significance) is defiance in relation to God (prideful non-acceptance of oneself as a sinner), and what appears as defiance in relation to oneself (the attempt at being one's own God) is weakness in relation to God (no acceptance of the forgiveness of sin); see *SKS* 11:225.

⁷¹*SKS* 11:225-229. In the useful typology of the consciousness of despair in the first and second parts of *The Sickness unto Death* in Nordentoft, *Kierkegaards psykologi*, p. 279, the difference between despair over one's sin and over the forgiveness of sin is lost.

⁷²*SKS* 11:232-236. Dupré, 'The sickness unto death', maintains that Kierkegaard in his emphasis on individuality shows himself to be captured by the very modernity he works to undermine. This is wrong, however; Anti-Climacus is clearly aware of the danger of using one's being aloof from the implications of faith as inflation of one's own self.

⁷³'Forargelsen er det Christelige Værge mod al Speculation.' *SKS* 11:197.

⁷⁴*SKS* 11:239, quoting Matt 11:6.

self must have!⁷⁵ According to Anti-Climacus, this equals the sin against the Holy Spirit for which there is no forgiveness;⁷⁶ the proclamation of the gospel then having left the human in a worse position than he (or she) was in before. The only way of avoiding this outcome is to accept the absurdity and believe in Christ as God and human and thus as the manifestation of divine love.⁷⁷

This, then, is the ultimate limit of the method of *Sickness unto Death*. The Socratic analysis of the implications of disbelief can only take us so far. Anti-Climacus shares with Socrates an understanding of sin as ignorance; humans sin because they do not know how to avoid sinning. As determined by the Christian paradox of the unity of the finite and the infinite, both the good life and the failure to fulfil its obligations are to be revealed and believed,⁷⁸ it is not something to be mediated through a carefully balanced use of human rationality. In this way, Socratic ignorance is considered as a guardian of the difference between God and human.⁷⁹

However, Anti-Climacus' emphasis on the irreducibility of offense implies that Socrates is wrong in maintaining that the problem of sin is solved through the abolition of ignorance.⁸⁰ For Anti-Climacus Socrates in this way merely reveals his lack of a category for appropriately exploring the transition from knowing to doing. This, Anti-Climacus maintains, is caused by Socrates' lack of theology; what is absent in the Socratic equation of knowledge and reality is precisely the manifestation of the infinite as a reality beyond the humanly and

⁷⁵. . . hvilken uhyre fortvivlet Forestilling om sig selv maa det Selv have!' SKS 11:236.

⁷⁶Matt 12:31-32. According to Mjaaland, *Autopsia*, p. 282, this gives the last part of the book a Trinitarian structure: Despair over one's sin before the Father, despair over forgiveness of sin before the Son, finally issuing in despair as sin against the Holy Spirit.

⁷⁷SKS 11:237.

⁷⁸The significance of revelation in Kierkegaard's thought is emphasized in Perkins, 'Ultimate reality and meaning in the thought of Kierkegaard,' p. 297.

⁷⁹That ignorance is the essential element in Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates is emphasized by Söderquist, 'Irony', pp. 353-354.

⁸⁰SKS 11:201-208.

rationally possible.⁸¹ Modern philosophy often repeats this error through its identification of thinking with being; it is, however, made considerably worse by the added mistake of pretending that what is the outcome of this immanentist reductionism is in fact Christianity.⁸² But Christianity cannot, Anti-Climacus insists, in spite of Socrates and Descartes, be reduced to the idea of identity between thought and reality, its being grounded in the infinite implies the identity of faith and reality⁸³ and thus the reality and doability of the unthinkable. In his critique of the limit of the Socratic method Anti-Climacus thus repeats the critique of the restraining of reality to the thinkable that is the essence of his discussion of the relation between (infinite) possibility and (finite) necessity. The impossibility of realizing transition from disbelief to faith by means of human rationality, and indeed by anything human, is thus consistently maintained.

⁸¹As emphasized by Mackey, 'Deconstructing the self', p. 163, this is a conclusion no human can draw, 'because if there is such a discontinuity between knowing and being, one could not know this. For all knowledge presupposes a continuity of the knower and the known.'

⁸²The immediate target of this critique is Hegelianism and its theological heirs, which replace the doctrine of forgiveness with conceptual speculation, but it could easily be given a wider application. Stewart, *Kierkegaard's relations to Hegel reconsidered*, pp. 560-570, maintains that Anti-Climacus is criticising the Danish Hegelians more than Hegel himself. For a critique of Stewart's position, see Mjaaland, *Autopsia*, pp. 277-285.

⁸³' . . . thi det er dette: cogito ergo sum, at tænke er at være; (christeligt derimod hedder det: Dig skeer, som Du troer, eller, som Du troer, saa er Du, at troe er at være).' SKS 11:206.

5. Summary and conclusions

According to Anti-Climacus, the significance of the Christian message of the incarnation consists in its being the ultimate demonstration of the dignity of the human being. This significance can only be maintained by believably worshipping the reality of the divine as the grounding of the human self, whereas both the understanding of the transition from disbelief to faith as rationally mediated and the rejection of its possibility as divine gift represents variations of offense at the message of the incarnation. This offense issues in despair which in this work is explored both as an anthropological and a theological predicament. In its anthropological manifestations, despair makes itself known as the self's one-sided orientation from either the eternal or the temporal; by considering this even as the dichotomy between the possible and the necessary, Anti-Climacus also demonstrates the Christian message's incompatibility with an ontology restricted to the possibility of the finite and the probable.⁸⁴ The lack of awareness that one's own self consists in one's relation to this synthesis of the infinite and the finite issues in despair which manifests itself either in weakness as the unwillingness to be oneself as this relation, or in defiance as wanting to realize one's eternal dignity without a relation to the eternal.⁸⁵

In its theological manifestations, despair makes itself known either as despair over one's sin, thus taking offense at God's ability to eradicate it, as despair about the forgiveness of sin, thus taking offense at God's ability to forgive it, or as the sin of simply abandoning Christianity as untrue. Particularly interesting is here despair about forgiveness, as this opens

⁸⁴On the possible significance of this observation, cf. the comment by Mackey, 'Deconstructing the self', p. 159: 'And one might, without stinting charity, ask that even a post-modern thinker leave open the possibility that what is humanly inconceivable may still be possible in a sense no man can conceive. One might especially ask that the post-modern mentality, which has finally (!) disabused itself of all illusions about the totalizing and finalizing powers of human reason, also relinquish its infatuation with its own insight.'

⁸⁵Nordentoft, *Kierkegaards psykologi*, pp. 419-421, raises the challenging question whether Anti-Climacus through the typology of despair performs exactly that kind of rational speculation he otherwise rejects. His answer is that Kierkegaard is acutely aware of the problem, and has consciously devised elaborate communicative strategies in order to minimize it.

the perspective for the analysis of a particular, and probably quite common, kind of theology that combines a defence of the significance of the Christian message with a lack of either the will or the ability to believe its radical emphasis on the reality of the impossible, replacing it with attempts at inflating the finite self. These perspectives fall behind even what Anti-Climacus identifies as the Socratic by applying the identification of thought and reality, which is incompatible with theology, directly on Christianity, whereby the reality of the infinite, which can only be apprehended in faith, loses its significance.

Anti-Climacus's strategy for presenting faith for disbelievers is thus to show the deficiencies that follow from neglecting it. The significance of faith can only be demonstrated by taking faith for granted; the neutral ground of a universal rationality is for Anti-Climacus an illusion. The human being is, however, still the given field of investigation for all relevant world-views; there is no world view, faith grounded or not, that makes sense without a trustworthy interpretation of the ambiguity of the human predicament. Anti-Climacus's contention is that the perspective of the Christian faith presents itself as particularly meaningful in this context; as founded on the understanding both of the human as created by God and of the truly human as manifest in the God-man Jesus Christ, a Christian anthropology is both sufficiently realist to make sense in the context of everyday human experience and informed by the eternal to the extent of always transcending it. In comparison, competing perspectives will therefore appear as shallow and one-sided.

This is the conviction that carries *The Sickness unto Death*.⁸⁶ This does not imply that its writer expects its readers to be convinced of the truth of this particular perspective; the Christian faith in the reality of the eternal as manifest in the incarnation of Jesus is not something to be obtained through a specific number of theological arguments or spiritual exercises. But by showing the possibility of interpreting the ambiguities and contradictions of human existence as the sickness unto death he has the hope that his readers, by in fact finding themselves on the way to the grave, even may experience something equivalent to Lazarus's resurrection. Anti-Climacus is aware that the power of curing people from the sickness unto death is not his to grant or withdraw; he may, however, give what he finds as the adequate

⁸⁶According to Perkins, 'Ultimate reality and meaning in the thought of Kierkegaard,' p. 299, it carries Kierkegaard's authorship in its entirety: 'Kierkegaard's theory of ultimate reality and meaning is finally and utterly Christocentric.'

diagnosis in the hope that the patients will even experience the cure. The task of the Christian author is to confess the faith and unpack it in a way that hopefully is relevant for the readers; anything beyond that is to be left to him that actually raised Lazarus from the grave.