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Kierkegaard on the Value of Despair

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ABSTRACT

I show how Kierkegaard's work offers a cogent alternative to the standard view which interprets despair as hopelessness and evaluates despair as unambiguously bad. On Kierkegaard's alternative account, despair is not to be equated with feelings of futility or hopelessness, or any other sort of psychological state. It is instead a distinctive sort of ability: the ability to give up on oneself, that is, the ability to decline or refuse to take up one's own life as a task. So conceived, despair inheres in the very structure of human selfhood, as a continually activated potential. While it may remain latent in a person's life, when despair comes thematically to consciousness, it has a vital role to play in disclosing self-becoming as a task – a task that requires continually resisting the pull of despair and acknowledging one's dependence on others. As a potentiality that is always at work in human life, and while thoroughly bad and destructive if allowed to become fully actual, despair can even be appreciated as a force for our good.

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Despair is a condition that we naturally regard as wholly negative – something to be avoided. An intuitive way to interpret this negativity is to conceive of hope as part of the human good and despair as the loss of hope. Most theoretical discussions characterize despair, accordingly, as hopelessness (Govier 2011, 247; Huber 2023, 84; Ratcliffe 2013, 597). My aim in what follows is to show how Kierkegaard's work offers an alternative perspective-one in which despair is neither equivalent to hopelessness nor unambiguously bad. I shall focus here on his major text on despair, *The Sickness Unto Death* [1849] (hereafter, *Sickness*). This book's subtitle – 'A Christian Psychological Exposition for Edification and Awakening' – indicates its therapeutic aims, beyond pure theory or diagnosis. Central to my

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argument, however, shall be the claim that these aims depend on a conception of the therapeutic value of despair itself.

As its subtitle also advertises, *Sickness* approaches despair from an expressly Christian perspective. This standpoint is further highlighted by the pseudonym 'Anti-Climacus,' the fictional author to whom Kierkegaard attributes the work. The significance of this name no doubt lies partly in its contrast with 'Climacus,' the pseudonymous author of *Philosophical Crumbs* and its lengthy postscript. In those earlier works, Climacus humorously and ironically approaches Christianity from the outside, as a philosophical observer. By contrast, Anti-Climacus represents its ideal insider – an exemplary Christian (something Kierkegaard felt he was himself far from being). While Climacus – befitting his name – climbs philosophically toward faith, Anti-Climacus descends from the standpoint of faith to offer an account of despair. Toward the end of this article, I will return to the difficult question of how far, if at all, his account of the value of despair can be separated from his Christian framework.

To help bring out the philosophical interest of Anti-Climacus's view, regarding the value of despair, I propose to focus on what I shall call, 'the Defect-Advantage Passage.' I'll begin by situating this passage, which comes early on *Sickness*, as both puzzling in itself and problematic for standard readings that treat Kierkegaardian despair as some sort of privation of spiritual health (§1). In the remainder of my discussion, I'll then address three pivotal questions arising from the Defect-Advantage Passage, concerning despair's nature, modality, and value (§§2–4). On the alternative account that shall emerge, despair's value lies in its dual capacity to disclose (i) one's life as a task; and (ii) the limitations of self-reliance in undertaking this task.

§1 Despair's Ambiguity

Critical discussion of *Sickness* has tended to focus on its point of departure in a certain model of human selfhood. This model is telegraphed in its notoriously compressed opening paragraphs, in terms of a 'relation that relates to itself' (2023 [1849]: 20). On this approach, selfhood is relational, adverbial, dynamic. That is, selves are to be understood not as fixed entities or products but as on-going processes – the processes through which individual human beings relate to their own lives.[1] Accordingly, to describe a particular 'self' is to describe *how* a person overall relates to their own life over time: the mode or style of their (more or less explicit and reflective) self-understanding. More specifically, it is to describe how they relate to their life in time, as a nexus of constraints and possibilities, situatedness and potentiality. What is at issue in questions of selfhood, in this approach, is how we

individually navigate such factors as our social and historical milieu, our family history, physiological makeup, creaturely needs, material conditions, and the like; and how we navigate these constraints on who we can be in relation to the social roles and ways of life that nonetheless become available to us in the courses of our lives.

For Anti-Climacus, however, what is at issue in questions of selfhood is, also and crucially, how individuals' relations to their own lives are shaped by their relationships to others. The role of others in the constitution of the self includes those human others before whom we live out our lives: parental figures, peers, friends, influencers, and so forth. Anti-Climacus supposes that, quite generally, our sense of who we are as individuals is indissociable from our self-awareness as social beings: we conduct our lives, as he says, 'before' others.[2] In his avowedly theological view, however, the constitutive role of others in processes of self-becoming pertains, ultimately, to one's relation to the absolute Other, God. So understood, selves are formed not only by how we relate to the constraints imposed by our natural and social environments, and to the possibilities that are nonetheless afforded to us within these constraints, but also, ultimately, by how we relate to God as the very source and ground of our being.

Basing his account on this relational model of selfhood enables Anti-Climacus to construe despair ontologically rather than (purely) psychologically. He does not deny that despair may become conscious through feelings of devastating loss, for example, or loneliness or futility. On the contrary, he offers rich descriptions of despair's conscious manifestations and its affective dimensions. But he denies that, as such, despair is to be identified with any episodic feeling or other conscious state.[3] As he conceives of it, 'despair' properly names an underlying disorder or sickness of the self, *qua* relation to oneself and to others. What exactly is this spiritual sickness supposed to amount to? Interpretations diverge at this point. Some critics see despair as a privation of personal autonomy, individuality or self-awareness (Davenport 2012; Helms 2022; Krishek 2022). Others see it as a lack of inner harmony, a kind of disequilibrium within the self. On one version of this view, despair is the psychic imbalance that arises when individuals one-sidedly identify with one or the other of the two 'poles' of the self: whether by one-sidedly identifying with that which is unchosen and unavoidable in their lives, as though they were wholly hemmed in, or by one-sidedly regarding themselves as sources of pure possibility and unconstrained choice (Furtak 2022). Still other critics interpret despair instead as a deprivation of faith or hope, conceived as attitudes in which we accept ourselves in our creaturely dependence on others – ultimately, on God (Hanson 2022).

While these debates continue, and isolated passages can be marshalled to support rival interpretations, critics have found less to say about the

following passage, which comes just three pages in, under the head, 'The Possibility and Actuality of Despair':

> The Defect-Advantage Passage
>
> Is despair an advantage or a defect? From a purely dialectical point of view, it is both. If one wanted to grasp the abstract idea of despair, without thinking of a despairing person, one would have to say that is an enormous advantage. The possibility of this sickness is the human being's advantage over the animal, and this advantage distinguishes him in a manner quite different from the upright gait, for it indicates the infinite uprightness or elevation of his being spirit . . .
>
> Thus, to be able to despair is an infinite advantage, and yet to be in despair is not merely the greatest misfortune and misery – no, it is perdition. The relation between possibility and actuality is not like this in other situations: if it is an advantage to be able to be something, then it is an even greater advantage to be it . . . Yet here, once again, *this category is ambiguous*. Not being in despair is not like being lame, or blind, or the like. If not being in despair means neither more nor less than not being in despair, then it means precisely to be in it . . . [I]n other cases, actuality relates to possibility as a confirmation – here it is a denial. (2023 [1849]: 21–22, my emphasis)

The Defect-Advantage Passage is puzzling. It presents despair as an 'infinite advantage' *qua* human possibility, as what elevates us above merely animal nature – even though, were it to be actualized in a person's life, this would be, for them, worse than the worst misfortune. But it appears to say more than that despair is to our advantage, so long as it remains a *mere* possibility: abstract, theoretical, unrealized. What is said to be to our advantage (Fortrin) is 'to be able to despair' – not the mere possibility of despair as something that might, but hopefully does not, befall us ('[t]hus, to be able to despair is an infinite advantage' (*idem*)). So, in what sense is despair an ability? How is this ability related to actual despair? And what is supposed to be so good about it?

But the most puzzling aspect of the Defect-Advantage Passage is the paradox upon which it appears centrally to rely: that *not* being in despair *is* being in despair. 'If not being in despair means neither more nor less than not being in despair,' Anti-Climacus declares, 'then it means precisely to be in it'. What could he mean? If his claim is intelligible at all, does it not entail that despair is unavoidable?

Alongside these general puzzles about it, the Defect-Advantage Passage presents a particular problem for standard readings of what constitutes despair, conceived as a sickness of the self. For, despite significant differences in diagnostic profile, the standard readings all interpret this sickness of the self as a kind of *privation*: whether of autonomy, individuality, self-awareness, psychic harmony, faith, or hope. This interpretative orientation is understandable, given Anti-Climacus' governing analogy between a sickness of the body and despair as a spiritual sickness. Nonetheless, the

Defect-Advantage passage appears expressly to deny that despair is a defective privation: '[n]ot being in despair', Anti-Climacus insists, 'is not like not being lame, blind, and the like' (idem). By the same token, we may add, being in despair is not like being lame, blind, and the like.[4] Accordingly, and despite his governing analogy, despair is *unlike* a sickness or disorder on any conception of a sickness or disorder as the privation of good health or proper function.

I believe that failing properly to attend to the Defect-Advantage Passage, and its significance for the overall approach of *Sickness*, has led critics to misconstrue Anti-Climacus' use of the analogy with a bodily sickness in ways that obscure his understanding of despair's axiological ambiguity and its place in the human good.

Accordingly, my aim in the remainder of this article is to work through the issues arising from the Defect-Advantage Passage, by addressing the following three questions:

Q1. What is despair, if not the privation of hope?

Q2. What can it mean not to despair?

Q3. What's so good about despair?

§2 What is Despair, if not the Privation of Hope?

According to Trudy Govier, 'despair is hopelessness'. Govier: elaborates '[t]o despair is to lose all hope, to be without hope, to be overcome by a sense of futility or defeat, to believe that there is no possibility at all of getting the desired object or outcome' (2011, 247). This standard interpretation of despair, as hopelessness, is primed by the Latin roots of the English word in 'desperare' – conjoining 'de', *down from*, with 'sperare', *to hope*—with its connotations of deprived or depressed hope. (Compare also, e.g., the French, 'désespoir'.) Notably, the despair-as-hopelessness paradigm also influences some interpretations of Kierkegaard in which 'despair' and 'hopelessness' are treated as synonyms (e.g. Fremstedal 2022). As other critics have observed, however, the Danish word, 'Fortvivlelse', has a notably different etymology. 'Fortvivlelse' follows the German 'Verzweiflung', where 'tvivl' / 'Zweifel' mean *doubt*; and the prefix 'for-' / 'ver- ' functions as an intensification (Podmore 2011, 20–1). This allows for a contrast between *desperatio* (hopelessness) and despair, where the latter can mean a condition of totalizing doubt approaching nihilism (Theunissen 2005, 47). And we can begin to see how the account developed in *Sickness* significantly diverges from despair-as -hopelessness if we recall the notion, central to the Defect-Advantage

Passage, of our human *ability* to despair. We should ask: what is this an ability *for*?

A plausible answer is that, in the view Anti-Climacus develops, the ability to despair is the ability to decline or refuse to take up one's own life as a task of self-becoming. Uncontroversially, the conception of self-becoming as a task is a major theme throughout Kierkegaard's writings. The following, from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, is representative:

> To become what one in any case is, yes, who would want to waste time on that, surely the most unrewarding of all life's tasks? Quite so, but just for that reason it is extremely hard, the hardest task of all, simply because every human being has a strong natural bent and urge to become something else and more. (2009 [1846]: 108)

In this view, 'becoming oneself' is not a natural inevitability, far from it. Instead, what comes most naturally to us is various forms of evasion in which we decline, if not consciously refuse, to take up the process of self-becoming as a task. 'What does your conscience say?', asks Nietzsche – and answers, 'to become who you are' (2001 [1882]: 270). We may likewise plausibly ascribe to Anti-Climacus a view in which self-becoming is a call of conscience: a task we can come to experience ourselves as beholden to take up, against the background of our default tendency to find ways to evade it or disavow it. Summarizing his understanding of human selfhood, he writes: 'The self is the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude that relates to itself, whose task is to become itself' (2023 [1849]: 39).

Anti-Climacus' description of despair as a human ability can therefore be read, accordingly, as a description of our ability – whether pre-reflectively or thematically – to disavow our own lives: that is, our ability to decline or refuse to take up the process of self-becoming as a task. On this proposal, the three major forms of despair distinguished in *Sickness* can then be read as forms of self-refusal, ways of resisting the call of conscience: (A) through evasive self-forgetfulness ('The Despair of Spiritlessness'); (B) through diffident self-withdrawal ('The Despair of Weakness'); (C) through defiant self-assertion ('The Despair of Defiance'). To show how this interpretation fits his analyses – and further to specify the core notion of an ability to disavow one's own life – let me briefly review Anti-Climacus' three major forms of despair, in turn.

(A) Despair as Evasive Self-Forgetfulness ('The Despair of Spiritlessness')

Anti-Climacus presents his threefold analysis of despair along a developmental axis, in terms of an ideal-typical process through which

despair comes to consciousness.[5] He begins with the 'quiet despair' of the individual whose life is absorbed in 'immediacy'. At this stage, the despair is 'quiet' in the sense that it is relatively unconscious and unarticulated. (Compare Thoreau's idea of 'lives of quiet desperation' (1997 [1854]: 9).) However, such latent despair is not wholly silent or hidden. On the contrary, it announces itself, albeit prereflectively, in the compulsive character of the drives that lead those in its grip incessantly to give themselves over to worldly pursuits and distractions ('immediacy'), insofar as this betrays an underlying fear of truly confronting themselves. To illustrate this latent form of despair, Anti-Climacus might well have quoted Pascal's descriptions of compulsive *divertissement*. For example:

> He who does not see the vanity of the world is himself very vain. Indeed, who do not see it but youths who are absorbed in fame, diversion, and the thought of the future? But take away diversion, and you will see them dried up with weariness. They feel then their nothingness without knowing it; for it is indeed to be unhappy to be in insufferable sadness as soon as we are reduced to thinking of self, and have no diversion.(2003 [1690]: §164)

On Anti-Climacus' account, despair does not occur only at those moments when diversions run out and we suffer experiences of the sort Pascal describes in terms of the 'insufferable sadness' of being 'reduced to thinking of self'. For, the underlying despair can be there all along in the background, albeit 'quietly'.[6] Accordingly, we may suppose that it is because they are haunted by the fear of truly confronting themselves that the distrait youths Pascal envisions are driven in the first place to flee into 'fame, diversion and the thought of the future'. Their frenetic lives are, in Anti-Climacus' terms, haunted by the Despair of Spiritlessness.

B. Despair as Diffident Self-Withdrawal ('The Despair of Weakness')

Anti-Climacus supposes that, while it may as it were run in the background, betraying itself in our attempts to distract ourselves, it is possible for despair to come far more acutely to consciousness. Our strategies of evasion can only take us so far: diversions diminish their returns, hopes get dashed, desires disappointed, projects defeated. In moments of crisis or 'breakdown', we naturally find ourselves besieged by dysphoric emotions such as frustration, disappointment, loneliness, grief, melancholy. Such affective states may at times approach what Govier describes as being overcome by 'a sense of futility or defeat' or Pascal's 'insufferable sadness'. Again, however, Anti-Climacus insists that, with respect to despair itself, such affective states are merely symptomatic. It remains the case that, ontologically, despair is self-refusal. But now, in the face of the breakdown of strategies of evasion, the refusal truly to face oneself – that is, to take up

the process of self-becoming as a task – must express itself differently: that is, otherwise than in the mode of evasive self-forgetfulness.

The Despair of Weakness is the first of the two further forms of self-refusal that Anti- Climacus distinguishes with respect to despair's degree of consciousness. This form crystallizes when, in the moment of crisis, a person comes consciously to identify, in a one-sided way, with the finite pole of the self: that is, when they come to regard themselves as dominated by factors beyond their control. In the limit case, a person in the grip of this form of despair comes to see their life as wholly cramped and constrained: as Anti-Climacus would say, purely under the category of necessity.[7] This form of despair characteristically expresses itself in such exclamations as: 'I can't goon!', 'There's no future for me anymore!', 'It's all too much!'[8] Why, and how, might such exclamations express a form of self-refusal? In a stylized way, we can illustrate Anti-Climacus' idea by envisaging how things might go for one of Pascal's distrait youths. Suppose such a person suffers a life-changing sports injury or chronic illness. As it might be, the despair that, *ex hypothesi*, has all along been behind their frenetic search for distractions now comes to the surface in the form of feelings of existential paralysis, as though their whole life were stuck. Since they can no longer go on in the same way, they feel they cannot go on at all. In that case, we could naturally say that they come to despair over their injury or illness, overwhelmed by 'a sense of futility or defeat'. But Anti-Climacus will insist that, at the ontological level, what they despair of or over is not primarily the injury or illness itself. What in the eminent sense they despair of and over is, rather, *themselves*. Confronted in a new way by the question of how to relate to their lives under these radically changed circumstances, they shrink back, wishing the question away. Now in a far more conscious way than was betrayed by their previous self-forgetfulness, they recoil from the task of self-becoming. Languished and sick of the world, they sink into the Despair of Weakness.

A further dimension of Anti-Climacus' account of this form of despair reflects his relational model of the self, as pertaining not solely to an individual's relation to their own life but thereby also to their relationships to others. He draws the implication that part of what it means consciously to disavow the task of self-becoming is, in a profound way, to cut oneself off from those 'before whom' this task presents itself as such. Having suffered a life-changing injury or chronic illness, we might envisage a person then retreating from their social world, wishing no longer to see or be seen, too ashamed to accept offers of help and support. In the moment of crisis, such a person, as we say, 'goes into their shell'. In Anti-Climacus' terms, they become 'self-enclosed'.[9] To the extent that it

involves such withdrawal from others, the Despair of Weakness can therefore also be described in terms of diffidence or pusillanimity.[10] From Anti-Climacus's Christian standpoint, what is ultimately at stake here is a refusal to take refuge in God, as an ever-present source of strength and succour, the one with whom all things are possible, however bleak things may otherwise look.

C. Despair as Defiant Self-Assertion ('The Despair of Defiance')

As we have seen, Anti-Climacus supposes that, when it expresses itself in diffident self-withdrawal, self-refusal rises more to the surface than when it remains latent in evasive self-forgetfulness. But he presents a further form of despair as more intensely conscious still. This – the so-called Despair of Defiance – can be understood as resulting from a certain way of trying to prevent oneself from sinking into Weakness. It crystallizes when, rather than one-sidedly identifying with its constraining ('finite') pole – as in the case of Weakness – a person instead gravitates toward the expanding ('infinite') pole of human selfhood. Refusing to regard themselves under the category of necessity–i.e. as finite, dependent, creaturely, constrained – they act as though they were pure possibility, that is, as though they were wholly unconstrained, powerful, self- creating. In the limit case, they confuse themselves with God. An archetype of this form of despair is provided by Shakespeare's Richard III, who responds to the humiliation of finding himself the object of everyone's loveless pity by defiantly asserting himself, violently lashing out at others. A motto for his form of despair might be: 'To hell with it all!' (Or, as Shakespeare gives him to say: 'I am determined to prove a villain' (Act 1, scene 1, line 39); 'March on . . . / If not to heaven, then hand in hand to hell' (Act 5, scene 3, lines 330–331); 'I shall despair' (Act 5, scene 3, line 212).[11]

A puzzle arises here for the interpretation I am pursuing. For, how can Defiance be a form of self-refusal, no less than Spiritlessness and Weakness? How could a form of self-refusal be self-assertive? This puzzle is soluble, however, if we suppose that self- refusal can assume a self-assertive form when that which is asserted is really only a fantasy-self. So understood, the sense in which Shakespeare's Gloucester asserts himself reflects, at a deeper level, a sense in which he has given up on himself. When he acts as if he were a god or a demon, what he asserts is not truly himself, as a humanly situated *locus* of potentiality.[12] What he asserts is instead a fantasy version of himself, born out of resentful self-loathing. In Anti-Climacus' terms, whereas Spiritlessness and Weakness manifest self-refusal in a mode of 'not wanting to be who you are', the fundamental orientation of Defiance is instead 'wanting to be who you are not'. From his distinctly Christian standpoint, however, what is again ultimately at

> stake here is a refusal to acknowledge one's own creaturely dependence on others, ultimately on God.[13]

The unity of the three forms of despair – Spiritlessness, Weakness, Defiance – can therefore be understood in these terms: they are all ways in which we can exercise our human ability to decline or refuse the task of self-becoming. And Anti-Climacus' core conception might be summed up in this way: *the ability to despair is the ability to give up on oneself*—whether in self-forgetful, self-withdrawing or self-assertive ways. So understood, despair is indeed an ability or set of abilities, not a mere privation of spiritual health: for, it variously manifests itself in exercises of the ability to distract ourselves, or to shut ourselves off from others, or to enact fantasy versions of ourselves.[14] And so understood, it follows from Ant-Climacus' account that despair is not hopelessness, given that the latter can be understood – not as any kind of ability to Φ but – merely as a privation of hope. Notably, it may even be intelligible, in Kierkegaardian terms, to *hope despairingly*. For, recall in this connection Pascal's distrait youths. In their pursuit of various goals, they presumably harbour various hopes and dreams, at times given to feelings of excited anticipation, confidence in the future, hopeful expectation. Indeed, in Pascal's description, they are characterized by a kind of fixated orientation toward future goals. Likewise, regarding Spiritlessness, Anti-Climacus remarks: '[i]n this kind of despair, [a person] can very well live on in temporality, indeed, actually all the better, can . . . be absorbed in all the temporal goals' (1980a [1849]: 35). But the hopes and hopeful feelings of Pascal's self-forgetful youths would still nonetheless reflect the fear of truly confronting themselves that, *ex hypothesi*, always haunts the dreams they chase.

None of this is to deny that despair can manifest itself in felt hopelessness. On the contrary, Anti-Climacus emphasizes the connection between conscious despair and a fevered state in which one hopelessly wants to be rid of oneself. He writes:

> For the person in despair, so far from being a consolation is the fact that the despair does not consume him, that it is precisely the opposite; this consolation is precisely the agony . . . for it is precisely over this that he has—not despaired—but is despairing: that he cannot consume himself, cannot be rid of himself, cannot be annihilated. This is the intensification of the formula for despair, the rising fever in this sickness of the self. (2023 [1849]: 26)

Thus, Anti-Climacus recognizes a tight connection between despair, as a way in which individuals can relate to their own lives, and intense feelings of hopelessness. Nonetheless, despair itself, he thinks, is something else: wanting to be rid of oneself; giving up on oneself; refusing to accept one's life as a task of self-becoming.

§3 What can it Mean *not* to Despair?

Having clarified how *Sickness* provides for a distinction between despair and hopelessness, we can now return to the paradox at the heart of the Defect-Advantage Passage. The paradox, to recall, is this: 'If not being in despair means neither more nor less than not being in despair, then it means precisely to be in it' (2023 [1849]: 22). This conditional is perplexing. But we can make sense of it, I propose, with the help of two key theses:

(T1) Because of the very structure of human selfhood, despair is never a mere possibility for us but is always activated as a potentiality.
(T2) Not being in despair requires a process of continually counteracting the potential for despair that is activated in our lives by default.

Let me elaborate these two theses in turn, to explain why I think they can be attributed to Anti-Climacus and how they help to make sense of his paradoxical claim that not being in despair 'means precisely to be in it'.

T1 makes use of the idea of activated potentiality. If some potential change is *activated*, in the relevant sense, then it is more-than-merely-possible: that is, it is more- than-merely-possible in the sense in which X is merely possible if it cannot be ruled out (e.g. on the grounds of incoherence). Even as activated, however, such a change remains potential: despite being more-than-merely possible, it is nevertheless also not-yet-actual, in the sense in which X is actual if it is the finished product of a process of actualization (i.e. the sense in which the statue that results from a process of sculpting, for example, is an actual product). Why suppose that Anti-Climacus relies on a notion of activated potentialities, whose ontological status falls between mere possibilities and full actualities? In the background of his discussion of 'the possibility and actuality of despair' is Kierkegaard's returning interest in Aristotle's definition of *kinesis* (movement/change) as 'the actuality of the potential, qua potential' (Phys. 201b4-6). To stay with the classic illustration, a sculptor skilfully transforms a given block of marble into a statue.[15] On the Aristotelian approach – at least, on this approach as Kierkegaard received and understood it – we need here to distinguish not only (i) the potential within the block of marble for being made into a particular statue from (ii) the actual product that results, the finished statue, but crucially also (iii) the actuality of the creative process itself, by means of which the sculptor works the marble into the statue. Applying Aristotle's formula, the potential for the marble to become the statue is, in and through the creative process, actualized *'qua* potential'. Once the creative process is underway, and for so long as it continues, the potential change is, in a word, *activated*.

I submit that Anti-Climacus' treatment of the modal status of despair relies on this Aristotelian notion of activated potentiality. That is, he

conceives of the ability to despair as always already at work in us *qua*... potential, just in virtue of our being the self-relating beings we are: whether this potential is activated in self-forgetfulness, diffident self-withdrawal or defiant self-assertion. This is what allows him to present despair as, in a certain sense, unavoidable. The sense in which despair is unavoidable is as a continually activated potential – in this sense, as Anti-Climacus sees it, despair inheres in the very structure of human selfhood. But this same approach is also what allows him to present despair as, in a different sense, contingent and avoidable. What is avoidable is the full actualization of despair. For, he further holds that despair's activated potentiality admits of being continually counteracted and so prevented from becoming fully actual. On the one hand, then, despair is more-than-merely-possible: its potentiality is active in human life just in virtue of our nature as self-relating beings. On the other hand, while we always already find ourselves in a process of actualizing despair, we do not have to give ourselves over to this process: we can – so Anti-Climacus supposes – continually work against its grain, resist it, counteract it.

Central to T2 is therefore the idea of a process of actualization that is both already underway and capable of being continually counteracted. This suggests an analogy with struggles against addiction. Just as, for the addict, 'keeping clean' requires continually resisting the potential to relapse, so not being in despair requires continually counteracting the potential to despair. And just as 'keeping clean' presupposes the activated potential to relapse, so not being in despair presupposes the activated potential to despair. No doubt, the comparison with addiction has its limits. For, unlike a destructive addiction, Anti-Climacus insists that the ability to despair is to our great advantage – that is, provided we exercise this ability in a self-negating way.[16] I shall shortly return to the question of the value of despair (in §4 below). But the analogy with addiction is nonetheless useful in helping to make sense of the paradox in which not being in despair 'means precisely being in it', given that an addiction can be both already activated, and so in this sense actual, and yet counteracted, and so prevented from becoming fully actualized. (It is notable in this connection that many recovery fellowships for addiction encourage individuals to continue to see themselves as recovering addicts, even after many years of abstinence.)

Interpreted with the help of T1 and T2, then, the idea to which Anti-Climacus gives paradoxical expression in the Defect-Advantage Passage is that not being in it could only mean a continual process of counteracting the potential for despair that is activated in human life by default. In my view, this idea is vital also for understanding his dynamic conception of *faith*, as the proper counterpoint to despair. While it no doubt seeks a condition of

rest and inner harmony – where, for Anti-Climacus, this ultimately means 'resting transparently' in God as the very ground of one's being – faith is not supposed to be a settled state, doxastic or otherwise. Instead, as Anti-Climacus sees it, faith is a dynamic process – the process of continually resisting the pull of despair.[17]

This dynamic view notably accords with the wider emphasis in Kierkegaard on the risky and embattled nature of genuine faith. Thus, Climacus in *Postscript*:

> Faith . . . is always in deadly peril in that collision of finite and infinite which is a mortal danger always for one who is composed of both.(2009 [1846]: 195)

Through its portrayals of Abraham and others, *Fear and Trembling* famously illustrates the sorts of 'collision' to which Climacus refers – and in which the threat of falling headlong into despair is never far from the scene.[18] It is likewise characteristic of the 'upbuilding discourses' that Kierkegaard published under his own name to portray authentic religious life as responsive to conditions of incessant spiritual trial and peril. In a number of places, for instance, he invokes the Biblical phrase which describes the eternally decisive moment as – not sometime, or yesterday, or tomorrow but – 'This very day!' (1990 [1843–1844]: 48; 200; 271; 356–7). He invites his reader to treat this phrase as like an 'angel of deliverance who stands there with his flaming sword, and every time the soul is about to rush out to the outermost boundary of despair it must pass by him' (1990 [1843–1844]: 200–201).[19] Such passages reflect an overall view I think we may safely attribute to Kierkegaard: that, far from being ours by default, spiritual health can be acquired only through an ongoing struggle against despair, experienced as an ever-present threat.

§4 What's so Good About Despair?

Having considered how Anti-Climacus understands the condition of despair itself, and what it could mean for a person not to be in it, we are now, finally, in a position to address directly the advantage part of the Defect-Advantage Passage. To recall, he maintains that 'to be able to despair is an infinite advantage' (2023 [1849]: 21). Strikingly, he presents this ability – rather than our ability to reason, say, or to communicate linguistically – as what truly elevates the human being, distinguishing us from 'the beast'. What, then, is supposed to be so good – infinitely advantageous, even – about the ability to give up on oneself?

It is no doubt part of Anti-Climacus' idea here that despair is possible at all only because of the relational structure of human selfhood – so that the latter is indicated by the very possibility of the

former. Referring to despair, he writes that 'the possibility of this sickness indicates the infinite uprightness or elevation of [the human being's] being spirit' (2023 [1849]: 21). On a deflationary reading, his claim here is simply that, while despair is by itself purely negative, its (mere) possibility is part of the greater good of human selfhood. Interpreted in this way, what Anti-Climacus deems valuable is not despair itself but rather the human capacity for healthy selfhood, understood on the relational model – and he tolerates the possibility of despair merely as a necessary evil, part of this greater good. (Compare theodicists who argue that the possibility of morally evil acts, although bad in itself, is part of the greater good of moral freedom (e.g. Plantinga 1974))[20]

But the deflationary reading cannot be the whole story. For, it makes no use of the notion of our ability to despair, which, as we have seen, is irreducible to the abstract possibility of a privation of spiritual health. And there is plausibly more to Anti-Climacus' claim for the positive value of despair that the deflationary reading allows. Specifically, what this reading occludes is his conception of despair's *disclosive power*, as a potential of human life that is activated by default. There are two main aspects to this:

(i) The power of despair to disclose one's life as a task: the task of self-becoming.
(ii) The power of despair to disclose the limits of self-reliance with respect to this task.

Both of these dimensions of its disclosive power require a process through which despair rises to consciousness. Anti-Climacus supposes that, in its latent form as evasive self-forgetfulness, despair is too 'quiet' for it to be revelatory in the way he thinks it can become. But when it comes to the surface – whether in diffident self-withdrawal or, still more acutely, in defiant self-assertion – despair's disclosive power comes into its own. Notably, the aim to raise despair to consciousness plausibly guides the concrete therapeutic ambitions of *Sickness* itself.[21] So understood, this book is not primarily concerned to defend a theory of despair nor to provide criteria for its diagnosis. Instead, the text is designed to work on its readers in such a way as to elicit and support a process in which latent despair can declare itself – and disclose what it has to disclose.[22]

Anti-Climacus' conception of despair's disclosive power is, first and foremost, simply the idea that, when we become aware of ourselves as continually activating its potential, despair can serve for us as a call of conscience. That is, when it rises to consciousness, our propensity to despair can make us aware of self-becoming as a task – the task we are prone to try to evade and prevent

from showing up as such. Anti- Climacus presents the positive role of despair as utterly vital in this connection:

> [S]o much is said about wasting a life: but only that person's life was wasted who lived in such a fashion that, deceived by life's joys or by its sorrows, he never became eternally, decisively conscious of himself as spirit, as self . . . an infinite gain that is *never attained except through despair* (2023 [1849]: 36, my emphasis.)

The argument that underwrites Anti-Climacus' claim that the active potential of despair is infinitely to our advantage is therefore this: any being who could never become aware of their propensity to decline or refuse it could never properly come to relate to their own life as a task of self-becoming. Rather than being a theoretically necessary correlate of human selfhood, conscious despair is therefore the very condition for awareness of self-becoming as task: for this reason, the path of genuine self-becoming cannot but pass through the consciousness of despair ('you must go to the self through the despair of the self' (2023 [1849]: 84)).[23]

Anti-Climacus is clear that it is only when it becomes conscious and available to reflection that despair can perform this disclosive function.[24] Moreover, he does not claim that conscious despair is *sufficient* to disclose selfhood as a task – only that it is necessary. Indeed, one might observe that, if I am right about Anti-Climacus' overall account of despair as self-refusal, it appears despair itself must already presuppose some form of awareness of that which it refuses, however inchoate or repressed this awareness may be. And, in the wider view of Kierkegaard's work, there may be a story to tell about how despair presupposes the type of anxiety that is described, in *The Concept of Anxiety*, as incipient awareness of 'the actuality of spirit' (1980b [1844]:42). Although I cannot fully address this issue here, I propose that, for Kierkegaard, anxiety and despair operate together – along with 'the earnest thought of death' – in the full disclosure of selfhood as a task.[25]On this view, anxiety on its own can reveal selfhood only in an indeterminate and elusive way – as 'freedom's possibility' – whereas despair's distinctive contribution is to reveal this possibility as a task that can be refused in determinate ways – and so also taken up in faith, as the task of refusing self-refusal.[26]

By the same token, Anti-Climacus holds that to become fully conscious of one's propensity to despair is to be confronted by the role of one's own agency with respect to this propensity. Importantly, this requires seeing through the illusion that despair is wholly non-agential, an unfortunate state that might (or might not) passively befall one, as though a mere patient. This illusion is no doubt natural, given that what brings despair to consciousness may well be some circumstance that lies wholly beyond one's control (e.g. suffering the loss of a loved one or a chronic illness.) But the

illusion is to conflate occasions of its manifestation with despair's originating source. Anti-Climacus puts particular emphasis on this point, which he admits exposes significant limitations of any use of the model of a physical sickness as a guide to despair (2023 [1849]: 23–24) Unlike being a patient in typical cases of physical illness, the person who allows despair to run its course in their life, unchecked, is in this respect active as well as passive.[27] Though he fully recognizes that the process need not be fully conscious or deliberate, Anti-Climacus insists that the despairing person continually brings their malady upon themselves, by allowing despair to realize itself.[28] And when it does become fully conscious, in defiant self-assertion, the agential aspect of despair only shows up all the more clearly.

This emphasis on its agential character is significantly qualified, however, by the second dimension of despair's disclosive power in Anti-Climacus' account: namely, its ability to expose the limits of self-reliance with respect to the task it presents as such. This further point reflects how, as we have noted, Anti-Climacus' relational account of selfhood builds in the idea that it is not in any solipsistic way that we become ourselves, but in and through our relations to others – ultimately, to God. Putting this idea together with his conception of despair as self-refusal, Anti-Climacus draws the implication that awareness of our ability to give up on ourselves can disclose to us the ways in which we depend upon, and need, others – ultimately, God. In short, conscious despair is apt to dispel illusions of individual independence with respect to the process of self-becoming.[29]

Illustrations of this idea may again be drawn from familiar sorts of therapeutic intervention into cases of addiction. Take, for instance, so-called '12-step programs', such as Alcoholics Anonymous.[30] The first step in such programs is always the need to acknowledge one's own powerlessness over the addiction, whereby addicts admit to having come to the end of themselves, having reached 'rock bottom'. The further steps then centre around acknowledging one's need for help from others (a 'higher power', 'sponsors'). Likewise, for Anti-Climacus, conscious despair is apt to disclose the limits of one's own independent agency and our need for help from others – ultimately, for divine grace. This specifies a sense in which giving up on ourselves may be exactly what is needed if we are truly to become who we are – before others, before God.

In the light of this case for its positive value, it might now seem that the problem becomes how to account for despair's negativity. For there must surely be something right in the intuitive idea that despair is deleterious for us, a condition to be avoided. Indeed, one might suspect that, contrary to what I have claimed, a deflationary reading of the sense in which despair is supposed to be an 'advantage' for us – such as that its mere possibility is a necessary correlate of the possibility of moral agency, say, or healthy selfhood – is only charitable, given the robust terms in which Anti-

Climacus himself describes despair's negativity. For, when we turn to Part Two of *Sickness*—in which the relatively abstract schema of Part One is filled out in expressly Christian terms – we quickly find the claim that, Christianly understood, 'despair is sin' (2023[1849]: 776ff). How could a Christian author suppose that that our capacity for sin could be to our 'advantage' (Fortrin) in anything but a highly attenuated sense of that term?

This tension eases, however, if we keep in view the crucial distinction between activated and fully actualized potentialities. It is clearly part of Anti-Climacus' conception of its axiological ambiguity that what is unqualifiedly bad for us is allowing despair to run its course, unhindered – whether by trying to silence the voice of conscience through distractions or by refusing to own up to one's dependence on others and need for help or by succumbing to a fantasy version of oneself. This – allowing despair to run its course – is what he identifies with perdition, ruination, sin. On this reading, then, that which Anti-Climacus deems axiologically ambiguous – good and bad, advantageous and disadvantageous – is the *activated potential* for despair: where this is good insofar as it discloses selfhood as a task, bad insofar as we let it run its course unhindered. Accordingly, he presents its endpoint, in which despair's potentiality is fully actualized, as the wholly negative condition of demonic self-enclosure. This is the fixed and fixated state he also associates with Jesus' teaching about 'the unforgivable sin', interpreted as the sin of having hardened oneself against the very possibility of grace and forgiveness (2023 [1849]: 163ff). All the while it remains an activated potentiality and not a finished result, he thinks it remains possible to counteract despair, through faith. In principle, however, it may become timelessly true of a person that they gave up on themselves – a condition that Anti-Climacus would be the first to agree is unambiguously bad.

It should be clear that, as he himself conceives and presents it, Anti-Climacus' account of the value of despair is theological through-and-through. 'The self is only healthy and free of despair', he declares, 'when, precisely by having despaired, it is grounded transparently in God' (2023 [1849]: 40). Moreover, he supposes that it is only when the activated potential of despair rises to consciousness that a person can truly gain 'the impression that there is a God', in the first place, 'and that "he," himself, his self, exists before this God'(2023 [1849]: 36). From these claims, Anti-Climacus draws the (characteristically Kierkegaardian) conclusion that theological discourse loses its existential grip when it becomes abstract and speculative, detached from an individual's lived experience of their need for God (2023 [1849]: 133ff). On this view, despair both requires and is required by authentic religious discourse.

Must we conclude that Anti-Climacus' view of the therapeutic value of despair is available only within a Christian framework – or, at any rate, a theological one? I shall not take up here the question in general of whether,

or how far, his overall account can be 'secularized'.[31] But we may observe in closing that his idea of despair's disclosive power, specifically, can be construed in a way that, while it admits of a theological interpretation, does not require one. So construed, despair discloses self-becoming as a task that applies to us as relational beings: that is, as self-relating individuals whose relations to ourselves are also thoroughly mediated by our relationships to others. For Anti-Climacus, we will never adequately counteract the pull of despair unless and until we learn to live our lives 'before God', in creaturely dependence on him. But it is also part of his account that we will never truly be able to become who we are if we fail to recognize our dependence, with respect to this process, on those human others with and before whom we live out our lives. Fundamentally, the value of conscious despair is its capacity to single us out as self-relating individuals, responsible for our own self-becoming, while also situating us as interdependent creatures, radically in need of one another.

Conclusion

While it can manifest itself in various ways, Kierkegaardian despair is fundamentally the ability to give up on oneself, i.e. the ability to decline or refuse to take up one's life as a task. From this core conception, it follows that, contrary to the standard view, despair is not to be equated with hopelessness. Under Kierkegaard's ontological conception, despair is not in essence a psychological state of any sort but instead inheres in the very structure of human selfhood, as a continually activated potential. As such, despair can be latent in a person's life, framing their overall experience of the world and, for so long as things are running smoothly, without showing up in any acute way. But when it comes thematically to consciousness, despair has a vital role to play in disclosing self-becoming as a task—one that requires continually resisting the pull of despair and acknowledging one's dependence on others. It therefore makes no sense for us to try to finally overcome despair, once and for all. As a potentiality that is always at work in human life, and while thoroughly bad and destructive if allowed to become fully actual, despair can even be appreciated as a force for our good. If we can learn to travel it aright, the very path that leads to spiritual death is also the only way to life and health.[32]

Notes

1. Anti-Climacus does not so much argue as assume that selfhood, as he understands it, is exemplified only by human beings and not by other animals.
2. A persistently influential line of criticism has it that human others play no essential role in Kierkegaard's account of selfhood, which problematically

idealizes the image of a single individual alone before God (Adorno ((1989) [1933]); Buber ((1947) [1936])). While the caricature persists, it has by now been amply shown to rely on a faulty interpretative basis (Pattison & Shakespeare 2016; Evans 2022; Fremstedal 2022.)

3. Though recognized by many critics, this crucial point is sometimes missed. Robert C. Roberts, for example, asserts that, for Anti-Climacus, despair is 'an unhappy emotion' (Roberts 2022, his emphasis)
4. It might be suggested that Anti-Climacus does after all define despair as a privation when, regarding despair's distinctive modal status, he writes of 'annihilated possibility' and 'negation' and 'denial' (2023 [1849]: 22–23). However, what he defines as a privation of possibility is not despair itself but, on the contrary, what it means not to be in despair. Not to be in despair, he claims, can only mean continually to 'annihilate' despair's possibility. I shall return to this latter idea in §3 below.
5. Anti-Climacus readily acknowledges the idealizing character of his approach in this regard, i.e. how his description of an ideal-typical process of despair's rising to consciousness abstracts away from real-life cases: '[a]ctual life is too multifarious merely to set forth such abstract oppositions as those between a despair that is utterly ignorant of being despair and a despair that is completely conscious of being so. Most often, the situation of a person in despair is likely one of semi-obscurity (though, here again, with many nuances) concerning his own condition.' (2023 [1849]: 63).
6. The idea that despair can be latent in a mode of self-forgetfulness is itself anticipated by Pascal. Compare: 'The only thing which consoles us for our miseries is diversion, and yet this is the greatest of our miseries. For it is this which principally hinders us from reflecting upon ourselves, and which makes us insensibly ruin ourselves.' (2003 [1690]: §171).
7. Among the main symptoms of despair identified by Anti-Climacus are feelings of spiritual suffocation: 'in the absence of possibility, it is as though a person cannot breathe' (2023 [1849]: 51).
8. Compare безысходность [bezyshodnost'], the Russian word for despair whose literal derivation is 'being without an exit'. (Russian has a different word for despair-as-hopelessness: отчаяние [otcháyanie].).
9. Compare the contemporary notion of 'existential loneliness' in studies of experiences of powerlessness in cases of chronic illness (Batho 2015).
10. In this respect, Kierkegaard follows the tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas in conceiving of pusillanimity both as a vice and as a form of despair: namely, 'pusillanimous despair over one's worth and abilities' (DeYoung 2004, 215).
11. In *Sickness*, Defiance is closely associated with 'the demonic'; and *Fear and Trembling* expressly invokes Shakespeare's Richard III to exemplify the latter (2006 [[1843]: 92).
12. Compare Anti-Climacus' general description of the defiant person: 'he does not want to put on his own self, does not want to see his task in the self that has been given to him: he himself wants to construct his self' (2023 [1849]: 88).
13. Notably, it is part of Anti-Climacus' argument that despair most fully comes into itself in the Despair of Defiance and that there is therefore a defiant dimension to despair in all of its forms. For a critical discussion of the priority he accords to Defiance over Spiritlessness and Weakness, see 'Theunissen 2005:' 34ff.

14. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify why the ability to refuse life as a task is not itself the privation of an antecedent ability to take up one's life as a task. The view I am attributing to Anti-Climacus reverses this priority: properly taking up self-becoming as a task is nothing more or other than – 'before God' – striving not to give up on oneself. As I shall discuss in §3 below, this view is the basis of Anti-Climacus' dialectical conception of faith as incessant struggle against despair.
15. A telling entry in Kierkegaard's journals runs as follows: 'The transition from possibility to actuality is a transformation; that is how Tennemann translates kinesis; if this is right, then the proposition is of the uttermost importance . . . kinesis is difficult to determine; for it belongs neither to possibility nor to actuality; [it] is more than possibility, less than actuality' (Kierkegaard 2007 [1842–3]: 393).
16. The idea of an ability that is all the more advantageous when it is negated is what lies behind Anti- Climacus' contrast between the ability to despair and ordinary cases in which 'if it is an advantage to be able to be something, then it is an even greater advantage to be it' (2023 [1849]: 22). Unlike e.g. being able to cook, which is all the more to our advantage when we actually cook, our ability to despair is all the more to our advantage when we continually strive against it.
17. This view is reflected in Anti-Climacus' claim, for example, that spiritual health is always 'critical', i.e. always in crisis: '[R]egarded as spirit (and if one is to speak of despair, one must regard human beings under the aspect of spirit), a human being's condition is always critical. People speak of a crisis in relation to sickness, but not in relation to health. And why not? Because bodily health is an immediate qualification that becomes dialectical only in a state of sickness, when one can thus speak of a crisis. But spiritually, or when a human being is regarded as spirit, both health and sickness are critical; there is no such thing as immediate health of the spirit.' (2023 [1849]: 33–34)
18. The theme of the ever-present threat of despair is introduced early on in *Fear and Trembling* by way of an alternative version of the Akheda in which Isaac notices that, as he draws the knife with his right hand, Abraham's 'left hand was clenched in despair' (2006 [1843]: 10).
19. In these discourses, the struggle against despair is associated not only with faith – and hope and love – but also, and by the same token, with a radical kind of patience. On the relevant kind of patience, and its active-passivity, see Watts 2022 and Watts 2025.
20. Compare also Daniel Dahlstrom's reading of *Sickness* in which progressive stages of despair provide opportunities for the advancement of human freedom, since 'freedom consists essentially in . . . the power of overcoming despair' (2010: 73).
21. This therapeutic aim also plausibly guides the first part of *Either/Or*. So understood, the portrayal of aesthetic life that reaches its demonic climax in 'The Seducer's Diary' is not merely a stylized depiction of the allegedly deleterious consequences of a certain lifestyle but a mimetic exercise in 'experimenting psychology.' As the author of *The Concept of Anxiety* explains, the good practitioner of this form of psychology – what we might now call a form of 'psychotherapy' – is one who can 'fictitiously invent' ideal-typical constructs and then deploy them therapeutically, in order to bring 'indescribable relief' to actual individuals who may come to recognize aspects of

themselves reflected in these mimetic constructs: a relief of the sort 'an insane person will feel when someone has uncovered and poetically grasped his fixation and then proceeds to develop it further' (Kierkegaard ((1980b) [1844]), 55–6).

22. Anti-Climacus, who is himself presented in the text as a kind of physician of souls, describes the work of such a physician as bringing despair to consciousness: 'The physician knows that just as there is sickness that is merely imaginary, so, too, is there health of this sort; therefore, in cases of the latter type, he first employs methods that will cause the sickness to manifest itself . . . . This is also the situation of the physician of souls in relation to despair' (2023 [1849]: 31–32)
23. I take it that this account of its constitutive role in healthy self-becoming contrasts with any view in which despair's value is purely instrumental. Compare, for example, Jakob Huber's argument that 'episodic despair' can be valuable as a means of protection against false hope (Huber 2023).
24. Is it despair itself that discloses self-becoming as a task – or rather consciousness of and reflection on the despair? I think we should say that, for Anti-Climacus, what is disclosive is the despair itself – but only when it becomes conscious and available for reflection.
25. For a sustained discussion of despair's relationship to anxiety in Kierkegaard, see (Beabout 1996).
26. Notably, limits on anxiety's disclosive power are emphasized in *The Concept of Anxiety* itself: 'The actuality of the spirit constantly shows itself as a form that tempts its possibility but disappears as soon as it seeks to grasp for it, and it is a nothing that can only bring anxiety. More it cannot do as long as it merely shows itself' (Kierkegaard (1980b) [1844], 42). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising the question of how, on my account, despair relates to anxiety with respect to the disclosure of selfhood as a task.
27. On the interplay between activity and passivity in Kierkegaardian despair, see also Fremstedal (2023, 715) and Grøn (2022): 1979ff). For a critical view, according to which Kierkegaard winds up both affirming and denying an ineliminably passive dimension to despair, 'see Theunissen 2005:' 69ff).
28. Anti-Climacus does not claim, implausibly, that the occasions for conscious despair are generally under our agential control. Moreover, he fully acknowledges that, in a person's lived experience, the affective dimensions of despair can befall them, more or less passively, due to circumstances beyond their control. He also does not claim that despair is, in general, under our control as conscious, reflective, deliberative, agents. His claim, rather, is that, to the extent that despair is actualized in a person's life, this expresses their fundamental existential orientation: away from the task of self-becoming as such.
29. On the theme of the limits of self-reliance in Kierkegaard, with particular reference to *Either / Or*, 'see Watts 2023.'
30. For a detailed account, see (Batho 2017).
31. A full discussion of this issue would need to treat a key structural feature of *Sickness*: namely, the contrast in approach between its two major parts. While both parts of the book make use of theological ideas, Part Two offers a distinctively Christian development of the more doctrinally neutral schema presented in Part One. This leaves open the possibility, in principle, for non-

Christian – perhaps even non-theistic – alternative ways of filling out Anti-Climacus' basic schema.

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