

kierkegaard the sickness unto death

kierkegaard the sickness unto death represents a profound exploration of despair and the human condition by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. This seminal work delves into the complexities of selfhood, faith, and existential anxiety, articulating despair as a fundamental sickness of the spirit. Kierkegaard the sickness unto death is not merely about physical death but rather a metaphysical death tied to the loss of self or failure to become one's true self. This article provides an in-depth analysis of Kierkegaard's concepts, exploring the nature of despair, the structure of the self, and the pathway to overcoming this existential affliction. Additionally, it examines the theological underpinnings and the relevance of Kierkegaard's insights in contemporary existential philosophy. The discussion is structured to offer clarity on Kierkegaard's dense philosophical ideas while maintaining a focus on the keyword kierkegaard the sickness unto death and its semantic context.

- Understanding Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair
- The Structure of the Self According to Kierkegaard
- Types of Despair in Kierkegaard's Philosophy
- The Role of Faith and Religion in Overcoming Despair
- Contemporary Relevance of Kierkegaard the Sickness Unto Death

Understanding Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair

Kierkegaard's concept of despair is central to his work the sickness unto death. He describes despair not as a mere feeling but as a sickness of the spirit, a condition where the self is in conflict with itself.

Despair arises when the individual fails to align with their true self or their relation to God, resulting in a form of existential anguish. Kierkegaard emphasizes that despair is an inherent part of human existence, but it becomes pathological when the self is unaware of its condition or refuses to confront it. This sickness is existential because it pertains to one's very being and identity, not just transient emotions or external circumstances.

Despair as a Condition of the Spirit

In Kierkegaard the sickness unto death, despair is portrayed as a spiritual malady that affects the self's unity and coherence. The self is a synthesis of finite and infinite elements, freedom and necessity, and despair reflects a failure to properly integrate these aspects. This failure leads to a disintegration where the individual experiences alienation from themselves and from the divine. Kierkegaard states that despair is "the sickness unto death" because it is a deadly condition that threatens the eternal nature of the soul.

The Existential Importance of Despair

Despair serves an important existential function by revealing the tension between the individual's current state and their potential for becoming a true self. It acts as a catalyst for self-reflection and transformation. Kierkegaard suggests that recognizing one's despair is a crucial step toward authentic existence. Without awareness of this sickness, the individual remains trapped in inauthenticity and spiritual stagnation.

The Structure of the Self According to Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard the sickness unto death expands on the complexity of the self, describing it as a relation that relates itself to itself. This self-relation entails a dynamic interplay between various dimensions, including the finite and infinite, the temporal and eternal, and freedom and necessity. The self is not a static entity but an ongoing project requiring continuous self-realization and choice.

The Self as a Synthesis

The self, according to Kierkegaard, is fundamentally a synthesis of opposing elements that must be balanced for authentic existence. The finite aspect relates to the physical, temporal life, while the infinite concerns the spiritual and eternal dimensions. The self must navigate between despair and hope, ignorance and knowledge, and despair and faith to maintain its integrity. Failure to achieve this synthesis results in despair, the sickness unto death.

Self-Relation and Self-Awareness

A critical feature of the self in Kierkegaard's philosophy is self-relation or self-awareness. The self must be conscious of itself to exist fully; without this awareness, the self is fragmented or in despair. Kierkegaard emphasizes that the self's relation to itself is mediated through choice and commitment, highlighting the existential responsibility inherent in human existence.

Types of Despair in Kierkegaard's Philosophy

Kierkegaard distinguishes multiple forms of despair in the sickness unto death, each reflecting different ways the self fails to become itself or relate properly to its source. These types elucidate the varied manifestations of the existential sickness and provide a framework for understanding human psychological and spiritual struggles.

Despair of Not Being Conscious of Having a Self

This form of despair occurs when the individual is unaware of their selfhood or the possibility of selfhood. It is a state of ignorance or unconsciousness where the person lives superficially, disconnected from the deeper existential reality. Kierkegaard regards this as the most fundamental despair, as it prevents any movement toward authentic existence.

Despair of Not Willing to Be Oneself

Here, the individual is aware of their selfhood but refuses to embrace it, often due to fear, shame, or avoidance of responsibility. This form of despair involves a rejection of one's potential and an unwillingness to commit to the self's development. It is a paralysis that leaves the person in existential limbo.

Despair of Willing to Be Oneself but in the Wrong Way

This type describes those who strive to be themselves but base their identity on finite, temporal, or superficial grounds rather than the eternal or spiritual self. They attempt self-realization through external validation, material success, or other ephemeral means, which ultimately leads to despair because these do not satisfy the true nature of the self.

Summary of Despair Types

- Unconscious despair: Ignorance of selfhood
- Refusal despair: Rejecting selfhood
- Misguided despair: Embracing selfhood in an inauthentic way

The Role of Faith and Religion in Overcoming Despair

Kierkegaard the sickness unto death situates faith as the crucial resolution to despair. The philosopher argues that only through a relationship with God can the self achieve true synthesis and overcome the existential sickness. Faith represents a leap beyond rationality and despair, enabling the individual to reconcile the finite and infinite elements of the self.

Faith as the Cure for Despair

Faith for Kierkegaard is not mere belief but a passionate commitment and trust in God that transforms the self. It allows the individual to accept their limitations and paradoxes without succumbing to despair. Through faith, one embraces the eternal aspect of the self and restores harmony between the temporal and spiritual dimensions.

The Concept of the "Self Before God"

The self's relation to God is foundational in Kierkegaard's solution to despair. The self must stand before God in humility and acceptance, recognizing its dependence and finitude. This theological perspective redefines despair as a condition that can be healed by divine grace and personal surrender.

Contemporary Relevance of Kierkegaard the Sickness Unto Death

The themes explored in Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death* remain deeply relevant in contemporary philosophy, psychology, and theology. Despair as an existential condition continues to resonate with modern discussions about identity, mental health, and the search for meaning in a secularized world. Kierkegaard's insights provide a framework for understanding the complexities of human existence beyond surface-level interpretations.

Influence on Existential Psychology and Psychotherapy

Kierkegaard's analysis of despair has significantly influenced existential psychology and therapeutic practices. Concepts such as existential anxiety, authenticity, and the search for meaning draw heavily on his work. Therapists often engage with clients' struggles in terms of despair and self-realization, echoing Kierkegaard's philosophies.

Philosophical and Theological Impact

Philosophers and theologians continue to engage with Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death* as a foundational text in existential and Christian thought. Its exploration of faith, selfhood, and despair challenges secular and religious perspectives alike, encouraging ongoing dialogue about human nature and spiritual fulfillment.

Key Takeaways

- Despair is a fundamental existential condition affecting the self.
- The self is a dynamic synthesis requiring integration of finite and infinite elements.
- Faith and the self's relation to God offer a pathway to overcoming despair.
- Kierkegaard's work remains influential in multiple modern disciplines.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of Kierkegaard's 'The Sickness Unto Death'?

The main theme of *'The Sickness Unto Death'* is the concept of despair as a sickness of the spirit, emphasizing the struggle of the self to become itself through a relationship with God.

How does Kierkegaard define despair in 'The Sickness Unto Death'?

Kierkegaard defines despair as a misrelation within the self, a sickness of not being in proper alignment with one's true self and with God, leading to a state of existential despair.

What role does the self play in Kierkegaard's 'The Sickness Unto Death'?

The self is central in Kierkegaard's work; it is a relation that relates itself to itself and to God. The self is in despair when it fails to achieve this proper relation.

Why does Kierkegaard call despair 'the sickness unto death'?

Kierkegaard calls despair 'the sickness unto death' because it is a spiritual condition that leads to the death of the self, a state worse than physical death due to the loss of true selfhood and relation to God.

How does Kierkegaard distinguish between different types of despair?

Kierkegaard distinguishes despair into stages: unconscious despair, despair of not willing to be oneself, and despair of willing to be oneself but without God.

What is the solution to despair according to 'The Sickness Unto Death'?

The solution to despair is to become a self before God by embracing faith and recognizing the self's dependence on God to achieve true selfhood.

How does 'The Sickness Unto Death' relate to existentialist philosophy?

'The Sickness Unto Death' is foundational to existentialist philosophy as it explores themes of selfhood, despair, individuality, and the meaning of existence in relation to faith.

What is the significance of faith in Kierkegaard's conception of the

self?

Faith is crucial because it allows the self to relate properly to God, overcoming despair and achieving authentic selfhood beyond despair and existential anxiety.

How does Kierkegaard's concept of despair differ from psychological despair?

Kierkegaard's despair is existential and spiritual, concerning the self's relation to itself and God, whereas psychological despair typically refers to emotional or mental distress without necessarily involving spiritual dimensions.

Additional Resources

1. *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition of Edification and Awakening* by Søren Kierkegaard

This is the original work by Kierkegaard himself, exploring the concept of despair as a sickness of the spirit. Kierkegaard delves into the nature of the self, defining despair as a misrelation within the self in its relation to itself and to God. The book combines philosophy, theology, and psychology to analyze the human condition and the possibility of spiritual awakening.

2. *Kierkegaard's Concept of Despair: A Critical Analysis* by C. Stephen Evans

Evans provides a thorough examination of Kierkegaard's notion of despair as presented in *The Sickness Unto Death*. The book explores how despair relates to the self and the human struggle to become oneself in relation to God. It also discusses the existential and theological implications of despair in Kierkegaard's thought.

3. *Despair and the Self: Kierkegaard's Philosophy in Context* by Merold Westphal

Westphal situates Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death* within the broader tradition of existential philosophy. The book analyzes despair as a fundamental existential condition and discusses how Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism offers a unique response to it. It is a detailed study of the self,

faith, and authenticity.

4. *Existential Despair and the Human Condition: Kierkegaard and Beyond* by Patrick Stokes

This work explores Kierkegaard's insights into despair and how they resonate with contemporary existentialist thought. Stokes discusses the psychological and existential dimensions of despair, drawing connections between Kierkegaard's philosophy and modern understandings of selfhood. The book also addresses the relevance of Kierkegaard's ideas for today's readers.

5. *The Self and Despair: Kierkegaard's Legacy in Modern Psychology* by Søren Overgaard

Overgaard examines the influence of Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death* on modern psychology and psychotherapy. The book discusses how Kierkegaard's concept of despair parallels certain psychological conditions and therapeutic approaches. It bridges philosophy and psychology to shed light on the human struggle for selfhood.

6. *Kierkegaard and the Crisis of the Modern Self* by John D. Caputo

Caputo explores the challenges of modern identity and how Kierkegaard's analysis of despair remains relevant in contemporary times. The book investigates the existential crises faced by the modern self and the possibility of renewal through faith and authenticity. It offers a critical interpretation of Kierkegaard's existential theology.

7. *Theological Dimensions of Despair: Kierkegaard's Sickness Unto Death in Dialogue with Contemporary Theology* by Merold Westphal

This book dialogues Kierkegaard's concept of despair with current theological thought, emphasizing its spiritual and existential significance. Westphal discusses how despair reveals the human need for divine grace and the transformative power of faith. It provides a rich theological context for understanding Kierkegaard's work.

8. *Despair and Faith: Kierkegaard's Existential Psychology* by Robert L. Perkins

Perkins offers an accessible introduction to Kierkegaard's existential psychology, focusing on despair as described in *The Sickness Unto Death*. The book highlights the interplay between despair and faith, showing how Kierkegaard envisions faith as the resolution to despair. It is suitable for readers new to

Kierkegaard's thought as well as scholars.

9. *Becoming Oneself: Kierkegaard's Exploration of Selfhood and Despair* by Gordon D. Marino

Marino investigates the process of becoming oneself as central to Kierkegaard's philosophy in *The Sickness Unto Death*. The book discusses despair as a turning point in the formation of authentic selfhood and the role of existential choice. It provides a comprehensive understanding of Kierkegaard's existential psychology and ethics.

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