

KIERKEGAARD ON DESPAIR

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Abstract. *This study displays a first instance hermeneutic: explaining the meanings of the French version – *Traité du desespoir* – of Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death*. Theological/religious interpretation is permanently accompanied by results and consequences of a metaphysical nature. We can assert that Kierkegaard's discourse is attached to Christian symbols and scenarios in order to, but its conclusions go beyond the strict boundaries of religious faith, rendering ideal structures that propose diagnostics and solutions for the contemporary men crises.*

*“Men that have never tasted the bitterness of despair,
have missed the meaning of life,
no matter how beautiful and full of joy it has been”
(Sören Kierkegaard)*

Key words: *despair, melancholy, anxiety, God, faith.*

Jean Wahl thought that Kierkegaard meant that despair is, in a certain way, dependent upon the aesthetic manner of living life (Wahl, 1938, p. 69-72). This is all about the spirit's undertake to get far from the existential immediateness. Inasmuch as one implies a critique of romanticism, one can accept – as an origin of despair – the restless that shape the melancholic attitude. Kierkegaard himself says that melancholy “is the hysteria of spirit. There is a moment in all men's life when presence is full and the spirit demands a superior form in which it must notice itself as such. Man, as an immediate spirit, depends on the entire earth life, and the spirit, gathering, so to say, over itself, wants to separate from all this spreading over and to transform itself. Its personality wants to become aware of itself with respects to its eternal validity. If this does not happen, then the movement is stopped, and if stopped, then melancholy springs” (Kierkegaard, 1943, p. 487-488). Something ineffable, a “whatever” that overwhelms life with a vague pain that deepens from itself, without being blocked by oblivion, work, entertainment, etc. Since this disposition occurs even in the case of calm and cool people, Kierkegaard says that melancholy “is explained by the fact that no man can become accessible to himself” (*Ibidem*, p. 488) – and this is the source of existential metamorphosis. Melancholic background chooses despair; if someone can doubt without choosing doubt, despair is no longer possible unless it is a choice by which the individual is searching for himself beyond the immediateness of life. “Doubt is the despair of spirit, despair is the doubt of personality”; doubt – posed as ground and method of speculation by modern philosophy – is a movement inside spirit itself, but, says Kierkegaard, “in my doubt I am as impersonal as possible” (*Ibidem*, p. 504): despair activates some other levels and resources of the soul. If doubt is based on difference, despair is build out of the absolute. “One must have talent to doubt, but there is no need of talent to despair”, just because despair exists only due to the freedom that relies on the absolute. “Choosing an absolute meaning, I choose despair, and within despair I choose the absolute, because I myself am absolute, I set up the absolute and I am absolute”; in other words: “I choose the absolute that chooses me, I establish (*je pose*) the absolute that establishes me (*me pose*)” (*Ibidem*, p. 505).

Thus, if, unlike methodic doubt, despair assumes choice, its object can be no other than the absolute, i. e. “I myself in my eternal validity. I can never choose something different from me as absolute because, if I choose something different, I choose it as something finite, thus I do not choose it in an absolute manner” (*Ibidem*, p. 506). The choice of the self (of that I myself) means freedom; its value is not blessing, but own torture – as an infinite reality that proves the choice of freedom. It is wrong to believe that the individual can continuously change, always remaining identical inside, like an algebraic quantity that refers to something. Freedom – which is, at the same time, extremely abstract, but also concrete – confronts us with own self which, due to its immediate concrete character, detaches from finite meanings and changes according to the imperatives of the infinite. This “I myself”, who exists only by choice, is absolute different from the anterior “I” and implies two simultaneous movements: “what is chosen does not exist and exists only due to choice, and what is chosen exists, otherwise that would no longer be a choice”. What I choose somehow pre-exists to choice; otherwise, one would speak not of choice, but of creation; or, says Kierkegaard, “I do not create myself, I choose myself”, and this “possesses an infinite richness” since “it has a history that accepts the identity with itself” (*Ibidem*, p. 507). This “I myself” (the self) “is neither abstraction, nor tautology” (*Ibidem*, p. 512), but has a strong concrete character, which is endless regarding intension and the intension of existential validation. The particularity of despair is imposed by (and proposed by) the manners in which individualities assume life, the dispersion of settlements can be ideologically dominated; the maximum polarization is evidenced between despair into (for, to) finite and the despair of the self evaporated into an infinity that eliminates all interest for concrete (character).

Anxiety and despair are inner ambiguous experiences that are spiritually shaped. But, while anxiety is based upon the existential reflex of the dizziness of freedom (Wahl, 1938, p. 255-256 says that “spirit is essentially anxiety” and “within anxiety the spirit projects (his) ghosts beyond itself; it is reflected in itself, it deepens, discovers his abysses and finally it stumbles on what is beyond itself”), freedom aims towards an awareness of itself centered around some constitutive determinations of man. Kierkegaard sets the Christian doctrine regarding sin as a reference point.

Unlike the speculative detachment – expressly impartial, deliberately rigorous, activated by a “non-human curiosity” of the understanding – Christian thought joins life in order to give man clarifications regarding his true meaning: “seriously dare to be himself, dare to realize an individual, not merely one or another, but this one, lonely in front of god, lonely in front of the immensity of his effort and his responsibility”. Christian heroism is grounded on a clarifying concern: “worry is the true attitude towards life, towards personal reality” (Kierkegaard, 1949, p. 52). Despair is considered as a disease, not as a remedy. In ordinary language, people understand death as being the end of all things; but, for a Christian it must be more than that: it implies a lot more hope than life, no matter how full of hope and power this might be; since true faith is always joined by the hope for Redemption, nothing is considered to be a deadly disease; “but in exchange Christianity discovered a nothingness that man as man ignores: and this is the deadly disease (*la maladie mortelle*)” (*Ibidem*, p. 57)

Kierkegaard starts from the premise that man is spirit, and the spirit sets up the I (the self, the individuality of man). On the other hand, man is taken as a synthesis between finite and infinity, between temporary and eternal, between freedom and necessity. As one can notice, a synthesis is a report between two terms. “The I is a report that relates to itself” (*Ibidem*, p. 61) – in other words the I is not identical with the report (i. e. with the synthesis of the two terms), but assumes the returning over itself, i. e. “inner orientation of this report”. In an abstract manner, we might say that this return

introduces a third term – as a negative unity – and this and the two terms of the report aim towards the report itself, thus “they refer to the report, each existing onto its relation with the report”. Such a report that relates to itself – being, thus, fundamental for the I, i. e. to the individualization man can reach only at a spiritual level – can be set up only by itself or by another. In this second case it is obvious that the report – besides the fact that it refers to itself – relates to who has set it up (i. e. established and grounded as a report). “The I of man is such a report, i. e. derived or set up: a report that refers to itself and thus, to another. This is why there are two forms of authentic despair. If the I had set itself up, there would have been just one: to not want to be itself, wanting to get rid of itself; and he would not know how to handle this another one: the desire to be itself”. Thus, the entire report that represents the I is derived, the derived condition renders intelligible “the incapacity of the I to reach an equilibrium and rest only by means of his own forces: he can due to his relation to itself, only relate to whoever set up the report.” (*Ibidem*, p. 62). This state of affairs grounds the second form of despair – the will to be a self (yourself, individuality) – which is the main one, since all other forms of despair turn and cancel out in this one. If within this effort to become themselves all men rely only on themselves, all reach the conclusion that they cannot succeed, that the very desire is fake and all persistence deepens them more and more into despair. The failure of such a stubborn attitude is the result of the fact that despair is not a mere discrepancy between the terms that set up the synthesis of the I, but one that depends upon and relates to that third term which sets up that synthesis. “The discrepancy of this report which exists in itself is moreover infinitely reflected within its relation with its author.” “The I of man is derived – in other words: it is build up of syntheses (reports between terms) that are set up by another one; this is why the tension between terms (lack of agreement, discrepancy, contradiction) is infinitely doubled and deepened; besides, since the I does not ground itself, the very suspension of despair, although it is implied in and assumed by the structures of interiority, it is conditioned by the manner in which the real I discovers in itself, receives and practices the existential imperatives that go beyond limits. Despair originates in the very debate man has with himself among his limits and in his capacity to state, only by own powers, the agreement between the extreme terms that tear him apart. If despair belongs to spirit, also the healing is spiritual. “This is the formula that describes the state of the I when despair is taken away: orienting towards itself, wanting to be itself, the I sinks (*plonge*) along his own appearance, into the power that has set him up.” (*Ibidem*, p. 63. Since man is a synthesis, “disorganizing one factor has an effect on the rest of them”, Kierkegaard, 1935, p. 125).

Despair activates the dialectic of individuality; beyond existential advantages and disadvantages, one must notice that it places man above the animal level, imposing on him other goals that limited life and comfort of the soul; despair is a search for himself that cannot be repressed or resolved, and it influences the evolution of man within his strive to be a man; Kierkegaard calls it “the mark of out infinite verticality or of the sublime character of our spirituality”. At the same time, the infinite character of this availability to despair compels us to notice a danger: “despair is not the worse from our afflictions, but also our perdition” (*Ibidem*, p. 64).

One must notice that if, regularly, the passage from possible (desired) to real (accomplished) is considered as a success, in the case of despair one speaks about a falling: despair exists just as long as the possible precedes the real; when real is considered a full realization of the possible one reaches the point where despair is absent; or denying despair cannot have the same logical strength and the same existential meaning as not being cripple or blind, since “if not despairing means the absolute lack of despair, the progress means despair. Not being despaired must mean the

destruction of the capacity to exist”, i. e. canceling by man of the possibility that exists in himself. There is, of course, a real in which the possible lives, a real that can be understood as a confirmed or acting virtual. But, within the structure of despair, “the real (not being despaired), i. e. a negation, belongs to the powerless and destroyed virtual; usually, the real confirms the possible; here, it denies the possible.” (*Ibidem*, p. 65).

The synthesis contains the possibility of the disagreement between terms and implies their discrepancy; despair consists of the actualization of this separation when the synthesis turns towards itself. Despair is not accidental, but essential to our nature, i. e. structural, and comes from the fact that God, making man a report in which the synthesis relates to itself, “let man escape, and here one build the responsibility upon which all despair depends, as much as it is.” (*Ibidem*, p. 66).

The duration of the discrepancy does not come from the distance between the terms of the synthesis, but from the fact that the synthesis turns towards itself – in other words from the fact that the report relates to itself as if it related to another one. All manifestation of a discrepancy always directs towards (always returns to) the report in which it grows, and this report (the synthesis) is always in a reflexive doubling with itself (the I). Thus, real insistence and concrete instance of the tensions of despair are reduced, each and every time, to their possible hypostases, or, as Kierkegaard says, “each moment one despairs, one gets (*on attrape*) despair.” (*Ibidem*, p. 67.).

Kierkegaard warns us that the idea of deadly disease must have a special meaning. Literarily, it refers to an evil whose end is death, being synonymous to an illness that leads to death. But this is not Kierkegaard’s meaning, since for a Christian death itself is a closure of pains caused by diseases, but it is not an end as such, but merely an episode, a passage towards life; this is why no physical evil is, as such, a deadly disease. “A deadly disease *stricto sensu* means a disease that leads to death with no further continuation. This is despair. But in another meaning, a stronger one, we refer to a deadly disease. Because apart from the fact that one literarily dies or that this evil ends with physical death, on the contrary, its torture consists of the fact that one cannot die, just like the agonizing person who struggles alongside death without being able to die. Thus, being sick to death means not being able to die, but here life does not accept hope, and lack of hope is lack of death. Inasmuch as there is the supreme risk, one hopes into life; but when one discovers the infinite character of another danger, one hopes into death. And when the danger increases such as death transforms into hope, the despair is the fear of not dying”. Thus, according to the latter meaning, despair is a fatal disease: a contradictory torment, an “evil of the I” consisting of eternally dying without dying, because “dying means everything has ended, but dying own death means living own death; and living for a moment means living for eternity. To die of despair as if of a disease is what is eternal within ourselves, within the I, one should be able to die just as the body does. Illusion! Within despair, the fact of dying always converts into living. Whoever despairs cannot die.” (*Ibidem*, p. 69-70).

Despair – “immortal worm”, “endless fire” – can never consume eternity of the I that supports it; the tendency it to destroy itself, without being able to do it; missing the destruction of the I, it shapes as an accumulation of being or, so to say, law of this accumulation: “the acid, the gangrene of despair, this torment whose peak, turned inside, deepens us more and more in a powerless self-destruction” (*Ibidem*, p. 71); the failure of the despaired one to destroy himself becomes a torture that amplifies: he can neither cancel himself, nor get rid of his I., but remains shaped by this “disease of the I”. Basically, we refer to a separation and a irreversible tension of the self by the inner “another” – the internal double that the spirit foresees as an alternative – hoping towards the loss of own I.

“Socrates proved the immortality of the soul by the powerless of the soul’s disease to destroy itself, as the disease of the body does. One can also prove the eternity of man by the powerless of despair to destroy the I, by this extreme contradiction of despair. Without eternity in ourselves, we could not despair; but if the I could be destroyed, then it would not have despair at all”. Kierkegaard refers not to the psychological aspects, but to the anthropological dimension of despair: “an evil of the self, a deadly disease (fatal disease), a disease into death from which man cannot escape even by death, the pain grounded on the very fact that one cannot die; thus, one does not refer to a mere evil, but to an evil planted by the spirit by which the highest strive begins, a strive of the being convinced that death is not the end of all trouble, but an endless finish.” (*Ibidem*, p. 74).

In relation to eternity, man conceives himself as a being that sticks to his I, which one cannot deny – although he gives himself the illusion that he might; the torment of despair breeds the following evolution, since “this I, our possession and being, is at the same time the supreme infinite concession of the Eternity of man and its claim towards him.” (*Ibidem*, p. 75).

No man is exempted from despair; all men has a worry, a disturbance, a discrepancy, a belief in something ineffable he dears not know, a belief in an occasion that comes from inside or outside himself. Just like a physician deals with a disease, one might say that “man broods in his spirit an evil whose presence is seldom revealed – like a flashlight – by an unexplainable dread”. The humanity is characterized as possessing “a grain of despair.” (*Ibidem*, p. 77). Unlike current opinions – which consider despair as a demoralizing source in life and, consequently, dilute the problem, leaving aside the important and really significant aspects that allow a lucid understanding of the goals of man – Kierkegaard postulate the legitimate universality of despair, since by this attitude man is dealt upon according to the supreme criterion that is destined to him (as a man): that of being (becoming) a spirit. The absence of the despair symptoms does not show the absence of the fundamental evil; when considered and evaluated as spirit, man is always in a “critical state”; despair – on which one can speak only using the categories of spirit – amplifies the inner dialectic, its manifestation proving its pre-existence. “Physical health keeps us in immediateness, there is no dialectic unless there is a disease, and thus we can refer to a crisis. But, at a spiritual level, or when dealing with man at this level, sanity and disease are both critical and there is no immediate sanity of the spirit.” (*Ibidem*, p. 82). Only by turning attention from spiritual destination may one see in man a mere synthesis of soul and body.

Even when life is tasted within its immediate innocence, relying upon happiness, anxiety is present, despite apparent certainty and illusive tranquility. The fear that has no object, perceived as a vague danger is, usually, ignored or hidden in a fake carelessness, by means of simulated joy of living a. s. o., and indicates that reflex and primary innocence is not enough to go through life. The unconsciousness of most of the people regarding their spiritual fate does not exempt them from despair; when one assumes that only those that feel this way are affected by despair, this is just a powerless simulation, since there are no exceptions; anxiety – lurking from beyond the most innocent and satisfying dispositions – sends man in front of nothingness, and the subtle and unavoidable traps of anxiety are witnesses for the presence of despair within the most delicate contents of happiness. The fact that many go back from the reflexive deepening generated by the contact with nothingness is not enough to consider that despair is temporary, but it indicates only a fake and illusively protective escape from the chance to reach a lucid consciousness regarding the goals by which man can gain singularity. “Only a severe reflection or, more likely, a deep faith would know how to endure nothingness, i. e. to reflect infinity.” (*Ibidem*, p. 83). The benefit of such a perspective renders axiological and existential clarifications; first of all, it shows the way

of authenticity by means of spiritual imperatives that render man infinite; secondly, without expressly continuing with an anthropology of failure – as in the case of atheist existentialists – the relation with eternity/infinity grounds the conclusion that, faced to the incapacity revealed by despair nothing really matters, all is lost, each individual being stuck into his own I (self) torn up by despair.

Kierkegaard analyses various forms of despair starting from the factors that build up the synthesis of the I and from the manner in which consciousness intervenes. In fact, one abstractly detaches the characteristic of some forms of despair, dominant attitudes and basic orientations being unitary explained by models that cover the entire possible range of spiritual behaviors. The typology is legitimated by the understanding of the I as a synthesis of finite and infinity – thus as a report that relates to itself, implying freedom; the I – considered as freedom – is dealt upon from the perspective of the dialectic of the categories of possible and necessary. In the same time, one refers to the category of consciousness, noticing essential differences between the awareness of being desperate and that in which the inner self does not react a clarifying reflexivity; but, although it is obvious that despair as such implies (is organized and assumed by) an adequate consciousness, lucid tensions of spiritual life, this does not mean that he who experiences despair – being called desperate – also is aware of own despair. Nevertheless, the presence – even a gradual one – of awareness is a decisive element. “A man without will has no I”; if Nietzsche means the will of power, Kierkegaard always means the power of the will.

The conscious synthesis of infinity and finite aims to evolve by the very relation to God. The I tends to become itself, he looks for and sets up his concrete character by means of an evolution that presupposes “the indefinite detachment from himself for the sake of turning the I infinite, and to indefinitely come back to himself thus turning himself infinite. In exchange, the I that does not become himself remains desperate, either he is aware of this or not.” (*Ibidem*, p. 89-90). In fact, the virtual I does not really exist, but refers to what he could be and must be; since the I is rather a possibility to be than reality in which he is fully developed, the synthesis finite-infinity cannot accomplish itself and this is why it amplifies the tensions of despair within the background of despair.

The dialectic of the synthesis of the I – of the I as a synthesis – always engages the passing of a factor within its contrary or, so to say, the expansion of a term until the annihilation/suppression of his own contrary. One can thus discern two types of despair: that focused on infinity, therefore on the absence of the finite; that enclosed into finitude – in which one misses infinity, thus being absent the aptitude of rendering the self infinite. “In all human life ... that one already believes or wants to believe infinite, every single moment is despair. This because the I is a synthesis of the finite that sets limits and of the infinity that eliminates limits. Despair that loses itself into infinity is that belonging to the imaginary, to the inform.” (*Ibidem*, p. 90). For instance, lack of honesty in front of own despair unbalances the I, pushing it towards being absorbed into God.

Generally speaking, imagination is the “agent of turning infantile”; it substantially modifies the contents of feeling, knowledge and will, inventing the field of that possible that attracts man towards infinity, thus averting him from the reality of the I that deviates his interest from coming back to finitude. The despise for limits is the source to the I’s “evaporation”, even if life seems to follow its natural course and the danger of braking with the concrete is not noticeable.

When finite is substituted to his contrary, the human aspiration is diminished, since despair springs from “moral narrowness and poverty”; the spirit is emasculated: it worries only about “giving an infinite value to indifferent things” (*Ibidem*, p. 94), that are small and trivial; the stakes can only be minor: man “radically encloses himself into the

finite and instead of an it becomes only a cipher, one more human being, one more repetition of an eternal zero" (*Ibidem*, p. 95). This category comprises those willing to comfortably adapt; following current wisdom – which is, in fact, mediocre – they plunge into the waves of the world always looking for success; briefly, we refer to the man that “rolls everywhere like a coin”, and his way to despair “follows life instead of embarrassing it” (*Ibidem*, p. 96).

The I becomes only if it is free; this is why, next to the infinity-finite synthesis one must also mention the categories of “possible” and “necessity”. Just like finitude – as reported to infinity – limits, the necessity refrains the field of possible. The I – as a synthesis of the finite and infinity – is first of all settled, as a possibility; in order to become, it projects on the background of imagination that reveals the possible the infinity; the potential I – thus the I regarded as a potency to be – contains both possibility and necessity, since no doubt it is itself, but it also has to evaluate. Becoming is a still movement when the I remains – due to the deficit of necessity and, respectively, to the flee from real – “a possible abstract. (*Ibidem*, p. 99). The mirage of I’s escape from what it effectively is, its wandering into a possible that is not related to necessity is attached either to desire, nostalgia, or to imagining melancholy (hope, belief or anxiety). “Instead of reporting possible to necessity, desire leads it forward until the road of returning to itself is lost. Within melancholy the contrary occurs in the same way. The man of melancholic love engages himself into following a possible of his anxiety that ends up in averting love from himself and turning it off within this anxiety or even into the other end, in which it feared so much that it could disappear.” (*Ibidem*, p. 101).

“If you assume that straggling into possible is compared to tender age stammering, then lacking the possible means being mute. Necessity seems to be only consonants but, in order to pronounce them, one needs the possible.” (*Ibidem*, p. 192). Determinist perspectives and fatalism imply such a lack of possible, that everything becomes trivial, and life itself a platitude. Or, Kierkegaard says “personality is a synthesis between possible and necessity. Thus, its duration depends, like respiration (*re-spiratio*) from an alternation of breath. The I of the determinist does not breathe, since one cannot breathe pure necessity, which definitively asphyxiates the I. The despair of the fatalist is – as his God is lost – to have lost his I; lacking God means lacking the I. the fatalist is Godless or, in other words, his god is necessity; since everything is possible to God, God is pure possibility, the absence of necessity. Therefore, the cult of the fatalist is one more interjection and, essentially, muteness, mute submission, incapacity to pray. Praying means to still breathe, and the possible is within myself, just as oxygen is in our lungs.” (*Ibidem*, p. 105-106). The philistines are emptied of all spiritual orientation, and the absence of the possible is simulated by the placing within the field of the probable (where the spiritual always finds refuge).

Given this context there is one remark of Kierkegaard that deserves special attention: “within the possible, the believer eternally and surely holds the antidote to despair; as God can do all at every moment. Here we find the sanity of faith that solves the contradictions.” (*Ibidem*, p. 104).

The increase in awareness increases despair. “That of the devil is the most intense of all, that of the devil which is a pure spirit and, due to this fact, he is absolute consciousness and sheerness; having nothing obscure – which might serve as an excuse or decrease; this is why his despair is the peak of defiance. This is the maximum. At the minimum there is a state, a sort of innocence – as one might be tempted to say – without even the suspicion of the existence of despair.” (*Ibidem*, p. 109). Thus, the highest level of unconsciousness (the non-consciousness) corresponds to the lowest level of despair, so weak as we can ask ourselves if we can still refer to despair. Kierkegaard says that this form of despair – which is ignored, we are not aware of it – is the most frequent; man

that possesses a reduced awareness of the fact that, as a man, he must assume himself as a spirit, in fact leads a vegetative life, multiplied under the pressure of many temptations. Although, in time, one reaches an extinction of spiritual goals, the despaired appears due to ignorance, but for his own loss, against consciousness and this is why he is “in the strong claws of despair.” (*Ibidem*, p. 113).

In fact, “despair itself is a negativity and the ignorance of despair is the same” (*Ibidem*, p. 112); despair without awareness is just with one more negative step further than truth and salvation. If within the pure dialectic one can simply make a value hierarchy between despair that ignores itself and that aware of itself, in moral dialectic one can surly say that he who willingly remains in despair is farther from salvation – since his despair is more intense – “but the ignorance is so secluded from breaking despair or to turn it into non-despair that, on the contrary, it may, due to this, be the form with the most important dangers.” (*Ibidem*, p. 113). Only this way one can maintain that the ignorant desperate is “in the strong claws of despair”. Besides, all hypostases of ignorance are filled with anxiety: “the anxiety of spiritual nothingness is precisely recognized within the empty certainty of spirit” (*Ibidem*, p. 112), and where anxiety is, despair is lurking, just to spring up the moment the spell of innocence is stumbling and the deceits of the meanings are fading away. This intermission between anxiety and despair that lacks awareness may be noticed within the aesthetic style of life (characterized by the absence of spirit), within paganism (which, according to Kierkegaard, does not know the modeling virtues of spirit, but is oriented towards it), and also in the case of natural man (present everywhere along Christendom) who – by means of averting from the meanings of interiority and betraying the stakes of authentic life – is a modern pagan, definable by “the true nothingness of spirit.” (*Ibidem*, p. 116).

Despair that is aware of its existence – thus aware of the fact that the I possesses within itself some eternity – has two forms of manifestation: firstly, that in which one refuses to be oneself; and that in which one wants to be oneself. The first is a “weakness-despair”. The second can be called “defiance-despair”.

“Weakness despair” – clarified by Kierkegaard within the spiritual category of femininity – is first of all occasioned by temporary things; the man who is fixed within the world and life by means of spontaneous dimension has and perceives within himself only a deceiving appearance of eternity; even if he wants, he remains a dative: “to me”, with no other internal dialectic than that of agreeable and disagreeable; thus he does not have the infinite awareness of the I, of despair and of the despaired state he finds himself into, abiding by to a quantitative reflection in terms of happiness, disaster and fatality; in fact, the despair itself is passive, since it comes from outside; not being an action generated from inside, it reduces to incoherent accumulation of reflex pain – as primary reactions imposed by the stream and pressure of circumstances. Depending on the immediate justifies the will of not having an I (any more), the desire to be an other, the unsure expectation for an other I, the nostalgia of having been different a. s. o. The gradual removal from immediateness is possible by increasing the reflection over own condition, without passing over the margins of passive submission to external causes. Briefly, one can say that weakness-despair consists of a “a self pain, contrary to the despair the I affirms itself.” (*Ibidem*, p. 128). Eventual games, the progress in perceiving the inner difference between self and outer world a. s. o. do not change almost anything: the individual “completely turns his back to the interior road he should have followed in order to really be an I” (*Ibidem*, p. p. 129-130); having nothing to support it, the delicate background of the soul is opened towards real and active life, which its accomplishment is linked to; the effective depriving of temporary things is imaginatively continued on and on, despair having as pretext the temporary *in toto* and thus expressing a certain advancement within self consciousness.

Next – not by accumulation, but by separation – another kind of weakness-despair; if so far the object was provisional – meaning that one despairs for a certain temporary thing or by temporary character itself – the change in perspective is generated by the fact that despair is relative to eternity; the accent of the glance is changed: “from...” is replaced with “relative to...”; despair that is linked by something (and always something else) that is fleeting passes in a posture in which it is related to the problem of eternity. In this new posture, man despairs for his weakness, but without reaching defiance. The awareness of constitutive fragility deepens inner life until it breeds the belief that despair itself is no more than the missing of eternity and itself. Moreover: despair is no longer a passive evil, but an action, it does not come from outside, but from the depth of the I, without any chance of forgetting or healing.

“Defiance-despair” – in and by which man wants to be himself – is placed under the mark of masculinity: virility of will and sharp lucidity of the spirit. Defiance is possible thanks to eternity; “the despaired abuses the eternity that is inherent to the I in order to be himself” (*Ibidem*, p. 146), “he finds the courage to lose himself in order to find himself”, “he pretends the consciousness of an infinite I which is not, in fact, more than the most abstract form of the I, the most abstract of its possibilities. At this level the I is the desperate who wants to be, separating it from any relation with the power that settled it, uprooting it from the idea regarding the existence of such a power” (*Ibidem*, p. 147). The spirit claims its autonomy, refusing to accept any higher power and, ambitiously attentive, attempts to manipulate itself, to create the I it wants to become, accepting from the concrete I only what is suitable. Since, initially, the infinite form – self projection – is merely the negative I, the human activism experiments, thus pretending to render his an interest and an infinite meaning. Multiplication is, in fact, the search within the boundaries of the I, and thus one cannot reach the point where one experiments the posing as God; since this dialectic has no fixed point, the persistence in self building can fail – precisely due to subjective arbitrariness – in a more and more hypothetic “I”: “within his desperate effort to be itself, the I deepens in his contrary, until he ends up into not being an I any more” (*Ibidem*, p. 149). This temporary posture by which man sets himself as absolute master of his I, unveils a seriousness – meaning “gravity” – which is fake, since despair integrates (and also gets) what should no longer be characteristic for itself: satisfaction, pleasure, use, advantage a. s. o. Seduced by the activism of a “king without a kingdom”, “the I, in its despair, wants to exhaust the pleasure of creating itself, of developing itself, of existing by means of itself”, “briefly, to have known so well how to understand itself” (*Ibidem*, p. 150). But, since it denies divine alterity, the persistence in creating own I ends up into vague self comprehension, existential proteism and pedestrian infinitization.

Still, this cannot be only a return to the domain of immediateness in order to find salvation in entertainment, self mockery or humble resignation. More likely we are confronting a special type of refusal: “one does not want to admit consolation, nor healing by means of eternity”; “one attaches such a value to what is temporary that eternity cannot be a comfort” (*Ibidem*, p. 151), but the poverty of what is temporary offers no ground for ascension. Once accepted, these contradictions occasion “turning all existence into a scandal”: by defiance man wants to be himself, not despite despair, but enclosing it into all his life and extracting insolence without any ordeal, without relying on a chance to have an assistance, not even from God – for whom all is possible. It happens that man who suffers no longer looks for the best thing to help him, but one he wants; the support from above – the divine one – can be experienced as the humiliation to be compelled to accept it as such – as it is and how much it is – without conditions, man feeling nothing in the hand of the “savior”; as long as he is looking for help, he seems to be compelled to give up to being himself. Condensing pain directs despair

towards demonic anger. Man no longer wants salvation, it comes too late, anyhow – even from God; thus, “he rather despise everything, to be the illegitimate victim of men and life, to remain he who justifiable watches for keeping pain at his disposal” (*Ibidem*, p. 153-154) in order not to be deprived. The fear of eternity starts to express the very fear of not being deprived from what he considers to be a mark of infinite superiority in comparison to other people, and furthermore a justification of being who he is.

The spiritualization of despair means deeper and deeper interiorization till the closure of subjective world and indifference from the appearances that hide despair. But demonic tact proves to be especially meticulous in subtracting the hermetic character of inner side by means of ordinary appearances, as meaningless and neutral as possible, under which it hides. Thus disguised, simulated, spirituality confronts reality with “an enclosed place, a world only for itself, a world in which the desperate ego, as restless as Tantalus, preoccupies with being itself” (*Ibidem*, 1. 155). Following this line Kierkegaard says one reaches the most condensed form of despair. The demonic does not practice exaggerated self admiration or idolatry, as the Stoics did; the excellence is aimed towards and desired “out of hatred towards existence and according to its nothingness”, “in order to compromise God; by rebellion it does not want to separate from the power that created it, but to impose on that power, to violently penetrate it, to diabolically force against him”. “By the very rebellion against existence – says Kierkegaard – the despaired praises himself in having a proof against that and against its kindness. He takes himself as a proof and, since he wants the proof to exist, he thus wants to be himself, along with his pain, because by this very pain to completely deny life”. While weakness-despair is hidden in consolation, the demonic despaired wants to know nothing about eternity and, besides, “this consolation would destroy him, would ruin the general objection against existence” (*Ibidem*, p. 156).

Sin is a condensation of despair; weakness or defiance direct towards and relate with the supreme power, the awareness of being in front of God, or the fact of having the idea of God clarify and intensify the dialectical, ethical and religious nature of sin such that this can be called “qualified despair”. Psychologically, the highest peak seems to be reached by the life of the religiously oriented poet: within his resignation the idea of God does not miss, but there is no belief in the strict sense of the word; he has only the primary component of faith: despair, and this expressed a strong nostalgia for religion; contradictory configuration of the soul background tempts him to rather dream than live, towards an imaginative relation with good and evil which suspends the real report that should be created by his own life.

Kierkegaard does not follow the path of psychological description of “qualified despair”, but unveils its dogmatic relevance. In fact, he operates a change of perspective by which it becomes possible to detach from the accomplice explanation of different modes to despair; continuing the anthropologic analysis of despair, Kierkegaard resorts to metaphysical postulates along with which the very phenomenon of despair is granted with a meaning within the space of possible solutions. The dimension of eternity from man and the dialectic of turning the self infinite are subtracted from the states of existential suffocation and clarified in a seemingly exterior field, although lately it proves to be immediately involved in all fibers of the self searching drama. Hardly the modification of perspective gives back despair the amplitude and meaningful existential structure. The gradation of self consciousness – in fact, the progression by leap from ignoring the eternal I until the hypostases of self consciousness in which there is some eternity – are displayed from the viewpoint of the human I. Kierkegaard is interested into those spiritual conversions that show up when the I itself tried to judge upon itself in front of God, thus relates to the idea of God. Consequently, the quality of man is unveiled according to God’s system of measurement. The change in the analytic register

seems justified, inasmuch as the radiography of various settlements and directions of evolution of despair prove the dilemmatic nature of human condition, and witness the incapacity to exit from the logical paradox of existential polarizations that are produced by the spirit – which means that man, inasmuch as he accepts within the equation of life the essential challenge of infinity and eternity, he cannot find only by himself authentic solutions. Under this circumstance, we remind that despair is taken as “fatal disease”, “fatal illness”, “disease, and not remedy”, and in God Kierkegaard unites the function of a metaphysical postulate that allows the “antidote of despair” (*Ibidem*, p. 53). In fact, one introduces a new etalon of the human condition. “Despair is proportionally condensed with the consciousness of the I; but the I is condensed proportionally with its etalon, and when the etalon is God, it infinitely condenses. The I increases the idea of God, and reciprocally the idea of God increases along with the I. Only the awareness of being in front of God turns our concrete and individual I infinite; and then, this infinite I is that which errs in front of God” (*Ibidem*, p. 165-166; Since “God is *not* exterior to us, as, for instance, a police agent”, “*all* sins are in front of God”, *Ibidem*, p. 165). Relation to God is clarified within the experience of personal interiority, inasmuch as an exterior entity cannot be at stake, but the idea of God the I has in itself, and the idea does not remain exterior to the individual will, but is merged into the ensemble of existential experiences. Sin is a category of the spirit; it does not merely consist in perverting human nature, in flesh and blood debauchery, but in consent of the spirit to this perversion. And since despair exists only in front of God, “the contrary of sin is not at all virtue, but faith” (*Ibidem*, p. 169). The opposition sin-faith changes all ethical concepts. The supreme criterion of the Christian consists in judging upon himself being or not in front of God – which implies the absurdity, the paradox, the possibility of logical scandal by which Christianity protects itself in front of all speculation. The scandalous assumes that the reality of man consists of Solely (*Isolé*) existing in front of God; then, that the sin of the single man should concern God. If the philosophers render the individuals of a species universal, thus dissolving the singular, Kierkegaard gives a metaphysical importance to the permanent and direct report – face to face – of the individual with God; the join of the two orders (or existential regimes) creates the paradox, even only because man cannot rationally understand and explain this report. The paradox of “intimately living with God” is easier to understand in relation to envy – interpreted by Kierkegaard as “an admiration which hides”; “admiration is a happy abandonment of himself, envy – an unhappy claim of the I”; “what from a man to a man is admiration-envy, from man to God becomes adoration-scandal” (*Ibidem*, p. 175-176).

If the capacity to understand represents man’s opening towards man – the distance spirit can reach in welcoming humanity – faith grounds man’s relation to divinity; being a scandal to spirit, faith witnesses the fact that the report is and remains incomprehensible. “Thus, for the Christian, sin lies in will, not in knowledge, and this corruption of will passes over the individual’s consciousness” (*Ibidem*, p. 190). After God’s revelation through Jesus trains man regarding the nature of sin, the sin in front of God is precisely man’s despair to not want to be himself or to want to be himself.

“Sin – says Kierkegaard – is ignorance, lack of knowledge of own nature” (*Ibidem*, p. 191). It consists less in not being able to understand what is just, fair, right, legitimate, grounded and more in the fact that man does not want to understand it, man does not want what is right. The life of the spirit is endless; if what is right is not accomplished and assumed in the very moment of its recognition, knowledge starts to fade away, and will-desire – that directs the inferior nature of man – engages a cunningness of postponing and temptation, ending by imposing its own etalon to the entire spiritual life. Simplifying, we could say that despair is the fatal sickness of the spirit generated by will’s falsifications (sicknesses) such that man falls into the sin of

forgetting his own nature. Kierkegaard's text is rather obscure, but seems to accept this kind of interpretation.

The difference of nature between God and man grounds all forms of paradox, at the same time justifying the only viewpoint that can display sin's positive nature: if the progression of despair implies, on the one hand, the progress of self consciousness and, on the other hand, the increase in intensity starting from passivity till conscious act – expressing, in fact, the inner origin of despair – sin – as it implies an I strengthened through faith – it impulses towards a maximum of awareness of sin as an act. This is why “sin is a position” – not a denial, it is an attitude, a condition man assumes, a way of existential settlement; the positive character of sin follows precisely from “being in front of God” (*Ibidem*, p. 197).

No doubt most of the men live in a mediocre indifference which is so remote from good and faith such that their life contains more a-spirituality in order for the sin to be at stake, and too less inner force in order to allot despair. In contrast with this life sunk in mediocrity, one must not consider the fact of being a sinner as a merit, but the important thing is to find an essential awareness of sin. Persistence into sin is one more sin since it lacks remorse, thus renewing sin, such that it becomes a second nature. Amplification of sin by itself renders unimportant the new sins taken as isolated, and emphasizes continuous state of sin, its perpetuation and perseverance; at the same time, the law of condensing sin marks – as Kierkegaard says – “an inner movement towards more and more intensity of consciousness” (*Ibidem*, p. 213). Each and every time the new awareness of sin intensifies the state of sin and despairing for own sin expresses the enclosing of sin into its own perseverance.

“Sinning means separating from good; despairing for sin is a second detachment, that squeezes out of sin, as out of a fruit, the last demonic forces” (*Ibidem*, p. 215). Man is caught in a double closure: besides good, remorse and forgiveness being emptied, one also sees them as dangers against which one needs arms, just as a good person does with temptation. By itself, sin is the fight of despair, and despair is that very sick experience of spirit that protects the temptation of sin to maintain in a state of accelerated falling. Thus, despair is a source of power, a demonic constraint over the self that saves the energies of sin from exhaustion.

Moreover: the fact of despairing for own sin is amplified by despair related to absolving from sins since, in front of Christ, man does not dare, he does not risk to believe (weakness-despair) or refuses to believe (defiance-despair). Changing the system of reference – respectively: the fact that man is no longer merely searching for himself according to human etalon, but as a sinner, placed as imperfection in front of divinity – determines changes of interpretation of weakness and defiance. These are granted with meanings contrary to the usual ones. Thus, if usually weakness is attached to that despair by which man does not want to be himself, the given context – related to the postulate of sin, which settles human being according to divine etalon – obviously becomes defiance, since man refuses to be what he is; and if, in ordinary thought, defiance indicates a despair by which somebody wants to be himself – the category of the demonic being active, man wanting only himself, nothing else – within the changed perspective – becomes a sign of weakness, since remaining in oneself assumes the will to be a sinner.

Despair that is configured around the problem of sin is, at the same time, the “essential element of faith” (*Ibidem*, p. 117) – inasmuch as its dialectics proves to be a movement towards faith; but when it rebounds in front of the idea of God and turns its back to faith, it becomes a new sin. The same way, scandal as an abolished possible announces the faith's curdling, but it still pertains to sin.

Circumscribing the ambivalent tendencies that tension the fluxes of interiority, Kierkegaard activates the latent sources of spiritual awakening against a Christianity that feels comfortable in what concerns the soul. The doctrine of sin is used to display the doctrine of the individual, and the individual is beyond concept, a becoming that cannot be reduced to definitions and logical schemas. Although common to all people, the sin of species cannot be rendered by a flattened concept but – we could say – is distributed without being divided among individualities, such that everybody must be considered as a sinful individuality (*Ibidem*, p. 232: “The gravity of the sin consists in its presence into the individual”). Each and every man is (and must assume himself as) irreducible reality, and “sin is the only predicate of man that cannot be applied to God” (*Ibidem*, p. 234); faith deepens just inasmuch as it accepts the consequences that follow from the certitude of a difference between man and God. The transfer of the attributes between the two essentially distinct worlds – on the one side, the sacred, and at the opposite pole the humanity from within the individual – is unacceptable. The infinite distance from the two existential regimes is precisely the ground of the scandal through personal subjectivity springs onto clarifying itself; finally, the alternative is simple: “adopt scandal attitude or believe!” (*Ibidem*, p. 235; following: “not one more word; this is all”).

The I raises at the highest level of despair in his sin against the Holy Spirit: “a war between man and God, in which man changes tactics” (*Ibidem*, p. 240), he no longer backs out, is completely absorbed by the sin that becomes more and more himself. “Despairing for the forgiveness of sins is a positive attitude in front of an offer of divine compassion; this is no longer a sin in reflux, not even a mere defensive. Getting rid of Christendom as of a legend and fiction means offensive. All preceding tactics granted the adversary superiority. Now, sin is the attacker.” (*Ibidem*, p. 241). The possibility of scandal is not abolished but strengthened by the Christian dogma of God incarnated in Man: affinity between God and man – placed under the mark of love, of Christ’s sacrifice – is accompanied by the possibility of scandal – as a guarantee of God’s protection against human familiarity (this is the source of Christ’s sadness). The very belief that takes the form of adoration – inasmuch as between believer and God there is always an infinite gap – includes the risk of scandal, as an instrument needed for deepening and grounding faith itself.

“God and man are two different natures separated by an infinite qualitative difference. All doctrines that do not take this into account are madness for man, and to God a blasphemy” (*Ibidem*, p. 242). If paganism reduces God to man – imagining him according to human etalon (anthropomorphic gods) – in Christianity God becomes man, but only under the condition of scandal (that ensures the precise separation of the two existential regimes). Kierkegaard considers that the authenticity of Christian belief is proved by the very existential transfiguration of this ontological difference – which inevitably implies the proof of the scandal, of the paradox; to be more precise: personal pronouncement regarding the double nature of Christ. If in the lowest form, an innocent form, the problem is left unsolved, if, continuing that, one adopts a negative embodiment of the scandal – by a pain fixed within paradox – the most acute formula – a positive one – treats Christian dogma as a fiction, saying that Christ has only a human appearance, without effectively being a person, or that he is no more than a mere person. The mystery of the double nature – thus, the ground of paradox – is therefore decided by means of aggressive expansion of a condensed dispersion by deliberate fixing into sin.

At this level it is obvious the maximum contrast between despair and faith; the disjunction between these non-equivalent and qualitatively different alternatives limit, in fact, the space of self searching. The state in which despair is completely absent is thus characterized: “within his report to himself, wanting to be himself, the I sinks by means of own transparency into the power that settled him” (*Ibidem*, p. 251). This formula is

the very definition of faith. The religious/theological reference of Kierkegaard's text has, in its very ideal core, a metaphysical value/relation since God expresses/means the Absolute itself, the infinity. According to all these, Alasdair Hannay remarks: "By making the God-man the model and the relationship to God the sense of the «eternal» in oneself, Kierkegaard pushes fulfillment beyond the reach of our natural capacities" (Hannay, 1998, p. 346-347). Accordingly, "*before God*" could be replaced with "*something eternal in the self*", since we deal with the reporting by which the self becomes aware of the fact that it has "a stupendous reality" (*Ibidem*, p. 342). Following this possible interpretation, faith does not annihilate despair, but re-signifies it. Without assuming such a conclusion, Hannay utters that "the problem facing Kierkegaard himself was that even when the «measure» is God, one still does not know whether one is in despair or not" (*Ibidem*, p. 344).

Convinced that the fulfillment of man in all individuals is a (impossible to render into concepts) matter of reporting the eternal from within own person, Kierkegaard sadly remarks: "how rare are man whose inner consciousness keeps continuity! Usually, their consciousness is no more than an intermittency, which succeeds only in serious matters, but remains enclosed into the daily life; man does not exist, as a spirit, more than an hour a week... obviously an animal-like type of spiritual existence. Despite this, continuity is the very essence of eternity, and it requires from man to be aware that he is spirit, and to believe." (Kierkegaard, 1949, p. 107-108).

"Boredom is demonic pantheism" (Kierkegaard, 1943, p. 226); if usually pantheism is fulfilled, in case of boredom the things go the other way around. "Boredom is grounded on that nothingness which is thrown along existence, its dizziness is infinite like that one feels when looking in an infinite abyss" (*Ibidem*, p. 227). The entertainment, the search for pleasures resolve nothing, since they are "sounds without echo"; the change is possible only by "parceling": one excludes extensive change and changes the method of exploitation; limiting oneself changes imagination, and satisfaction does not consist of extension, but intensity. Such a change implies interiority, being placed inside the report of recollection with forgetfulness.

If hope eliminates limits, attempts to flee from reality, the real art of recollection and forgetfulness implies a lucid attention for the manner we live, enjoy life and assimilate the experienced events, without making selections ordered by pleasure and pain. Parceling is a technique of limitation within own existential experiences in order to get a deepening into oneself and the unique consistency of the humanity from within own person. Here, the "repetition" has a categorical function, indicating "reality, the seriousness of existence" (Kierkegaard, 1990, p. 67).

Kierkegaard notices that in modern philosophy "repetition is the decisive term in order to express what reminiscence was to Greeks", the difference being that, although they are an identical movement, they have different directions: what pertains to reminiscence was, since it is all about "a backwards repetition" (*Ibidem*, p. 65-66), while "repetition as such is a forward recollection", from future and possible; this is why repetition, if [and when] it is possible, brings man joy, while recollection makes him unhappy; he who does not look for pretexts to avoid the seriousness of life goes around both sweet melancholy of recollection and also reflex hope. "He who wants only to hope is coward. He who wants only to remember is voluptuous. And he who wants repetition is virile". The "round-trip of life" from the sphere of the possible prefigures the existential coherence and the process-like consistency of the self. This is why "hope is a joyful fruit that never saturates; recollection is a sore provision that does not saturates; but repetition is the every day food, a blessing that allays the hunger" (*Ibidem*, p. 66-67) of searching and self fulfillment.

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