

FIRST STUDY

The Existential Dialectical Basic Assumption of Kierkegaard's Analysis of Despair

I

1. In recent decades, our understanding of the philosophy of philosophers such as Kant or Hegel has been enriched by various attempts at a reconstruction that reveals the argumentative structure of fundamental texts and presents the ideas expressed in them more comprehensibly. Thus far, the philosophical interpretation of Kierkegaard has not exhibited any comparable attempts. The following considerations cannot fill the gaps, either. However, they might stimulate more productive engagement with Kierkegaard. I would like to reconstruct the representation of despair given by *The Sickness unto Death* (1849)¹ so that it can be grasped from a single premise.² The reconstruction is aimed primarily at exposing Kierkegaard's hidden intentions and facilitating a rational debate with his analysis of despair through a cautious correction of his conceptualization. Such a reconstruction may also demonstrate the line of argumentation of his analysis more clearly. Yet my essay can only be a first step on the path to the required translation into clearer concepts. Here, I have to make do with formulating the assumptions themselves in referring to—but also distanced from—the text, and I have to do without a conceptual restruc-

turing of the edifice supported by it. The self-restraint in fulfilling the task of transformation necessarily results from an economical circumscription of the material. In the framework of the first study, not much more than the introductory proposition to the analysis can be reformulated.³ The more advanced stages of the analysis are to be considered only insofar as Kierkegaard elucidates the fundamental principle [*Grundsatz*] in them. The concrete forms, whose description concludes his philosophy of despair, can be discerned from the start only in outline. The external scaffolding on which Kierkegaard hangs concrete terms by subsuming them under the initial schema is apparent, but the internal arrangement of the scaffolded edifice is not.⁴

The lack of awareness for the premise to be exposed is to be blamed for the lack of a fully or even historically convincing discussion of Kierkegaard's analysis of despair. In the philosophical interpretation of Kierkegaard, the prevailing tendency is to constrict the history of origin of this drastically underestimated thinker to his dependence on German idealism, and consequently to regard the history of his effect from a truncating perspective. From that premise, a perspective is opened onto a larger context of tradition. It is at least to be sketched at the end in a typological simplification. Moreover, it is to be indicated how and where Kierkegaard's approach entered into the later philosophy of existence. For a redefinition of the historical place of his treatise on despair, the comments about the history of his origin and effect perform a preliminary work at best. They would have to be expanded and deepened in various directions. Thus, in light of the interpretation offered here, it seems virtually imperative to compare the thesis of *The Sickness unto Death* with Schopenhauer's statement that we humans first say yes to life, to which we should say no. In terms of content, the relationship to Schopenhauer deserves even more attention than all references to Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, important as these may be in a formal respect. But alongside the recon-

struction placed in the center, and the localization pushed to the margins, are two further areas of study, which must remain completely untreated for the time being. Before we enter into the territory to be conquered, I should nonetheless delineate them for a comprehensive orientation.

One of the two fields we cannot enter here is, as it were, at the back of the area that can be developed. The attempt to derive Kierkegaard's analysis of despair from a single premise does not go behind this. The reconstruction stops where the premise itself would have to be questioned about its truth-content. It is left to another kind of reflection to test whether the premise holds up at all, and if it does hold up, how what is stated as fact in it is justified. The other of those two fields is not as directly related to the subject of this first study. We would get to it only in the process of transcending the basis of reconstruction. This is the field of an ultimate transcending critique. The reconstruction will also have to be critical. But an immanent critique flows merely into it, one that—more than correcting a conceptual framework not always appropriate to its own intentions—insists on asking what it is that Kierkegaard is committed to by his own premise. A transcending critique would, on the other hand, have to start by exposing all the premises hidden in the text, not only those that are basic for the reconstruction, and then to discover to what extent the analysis burdened with all these premises does justice to its subject matter. It is transcending especially in exceeding the phenomenon usually designated as despair. As a result of abstaining from it, the reconstruction remains within the boundaries of its designated approach.

2. According to the title, Kierkegaard's final analysis of despair is to be reconstructed from its existential-dialectical fundamental premise. Before I say what I think the analysis presupposes, I should mention briefly what *type* of premises I have in mind. Kierkegaard makes many assumptions in his 1849 book. His

theological preliminary decisions form one kind of assumptions, another is the three anthropological premises he introduces right at the start: that man is first a synthesis, second has a self, and third, one that is established by God.⁵ Even though the two types of premises are the most apparent ones, they are not my immediate subject matter. I already presuppose them. That means in the case of the theological preliminary decisions: I accept as a fact that the premise I select as a central theme is itself motivated by theological preliminary decisions.⁶ And for the anthropological premises, that means that I assume that the three initial theses, as I have tried to show on a previous occasion,⁷ are simply *hypotheses*, which formulate the necessary conditions man must fulfill to be able to despair, and that consequently, they find their later justification only later in the analysis of despair.

The premises with which Kierkegaard approaches the phenomenon itself shall be examined against the background of the theological preliminary decisions and the anthropological premises. The premises of this third type basically coincide with Kierkegaard's prejudgments about how we relate factually to the two dimensions of our being referred to by the anthropological premises, that is, to our being human and our established self. They fall into the sphere which Heidegger would contrast as the existentiell-ontical one of consummating Dasein against the existential-ontological sphere of the constitution of Being of Dasein. Contrary to Heidegger's view, Kierkegaard considers human Dasein both in an existentiell and existential way: his view is existential in the preliminary projection of those dimensions of Being, and existentiell in the analysis of our relation to them. The difference between the existential and existentiell perspective can be seen most clearly in the self, which for itself is nothing but a relating itself-to-itself.⁸ The person must also relate to the fact that he is determined purely as the relation's relating itself-to-itself, and this secondary relation is the existentiell one, into whose framework Kierkegaard inserts

despair. The search for a *fundamental* premise is informed by the supposition that all axioms of the third type can ultimately be traced back to a single one. I call this fundamental premise existential-dialectic not only because Kierkegaard designates his whole concern a dialectic of existence,⁹ but also because and primarily with regard to the dialectic of an existence that has a refracted relation to its own structure.¹⁰ The existential-dialectical principle of Kierkegaard's analysis of despair is: *We do not will to be directly what we are*. The principle clearly requires elucidation: (a) What does it mean to say *we* do not want to be what we are? About whom is Kierkegaard speaking?¹¹ (b) What does it mean to say that we do not will to be what we *are*? What kind of being is that to which we allegedly relate negatively? (c) How is it to be understood that we do not will to be *what* we are? And finally: (d) In what sense do we will all this *not to be*?

(a) According to Kierkegaard's self-conception, the question about the subject of the proposition could be answered adequately only by recourse to his theological preliminary decisions. That is, the only adequate answer for him can only be: we who live in the state of sin. But the inadequate answer we can give by disregarding Kierkegaard's theology of sin is not to be found in *The Sickness unto Death*, either. Only with the help of other texts can the subject of the proposition be supplemented somewhat historically: we who live in that Europe at the end of modernity which only imagines itself to be Christian. Nonetheless, the supplementation does not merely come from outside. In his 1849 treatise, Kierkegaard does not deal with the historical situatedness of the subject because he also presupposes it, and he does that for the same reason that he presupposes sinfulness.¹² He does both by restricting himself consistently to that point in the system granted to his treatise in the introduction to *The Concept of Anxiety*. In the secret systematic of Kierkegaard's works,

The Sickness unto Death assumes the position of a second ethics, whose classification in the whole follows the model of Schelling's second positive philosophy.¹³ Consequently, together with the dogmatics, of which Kierkegaard says this explicitly, *The Sickness unto Death* presupposes the whole facticity, which already for Schelling was a historical one and which goes as far back as the primeval fact of the loss of original nature.

The other questions about the fundamental principle can be clarified by means of the existential definitions of our text. However, even the methodological abstraction from Kierkegaard's theological preliminary decisions compels us toward the preliminary epoch of the definition of being established by God.¹⁴ On the other hand, it seems to make sense to differentiate Being over against the self and to place in it—beyond our being human—our pre-given Dasein. Kierkegaard never abandoned his originally dichotomous approach in his conception of self-becoming as a consummation of the pre-given Dasein in reality, but rather integrated it into the trichotomous schema, according to which the self overarches the two opposing elements of the synthesis.

(b) The being, to which we allegedly relate negatively, thus contains three aspects: we do not will to be what we are as a self, what we are in our being human, and what we are in our pre-given Dasein. Our Dasein is to be understood in a very broad sense. It is not only the Dasein *as what* we find ourselves, but rather also includes that *in which* we find ourselves.¹⁵ Characterized in this way, it is a Dasein that is in any case determined by the past. But the Dasein as what we find ourselves also has a bearing on the future, insofar as all our dispositions and potentialities belong to it, and the Dasein in which we find ourselves pertains to the whole present world. Here, even the presupposed history projects *into* the field of inquiry of *The*

Sickness unto Death. The Dasein *as what* we find ourselves is suffused with the traces of our life history, and the Dasein *in which* we find ourselves opens as a world toward its history, toward world history.

(c) Not least in view of its historical concretion is it to be taken seriously that Kierkegaard imputes to us a negative relation to *what* we are. The Being to which we allegedly relate negatively is hardly restricted to facticity, to pure Dasein. Along with Hegel, Kierkegaard at least explicates Dasein in terms of a determinateness which as such is a what-determinateness. Insofar as we do not will to be what we are in our pre-given Dasein, we relate negatively to our individual determinateness. Analogously, it could be said: insofar as we do not will to be what we are in our being human, we relate negatively to our particular determinateness, to what usually inheres in the specific difference of the human species vis-à-vis all entities, that is, to having a synthetically composed Being. Only on the level of the self does Being mean facticity. However, first this facticity is the special facticity of the self—that is, that we always already have to relate to ourselves—and second Kierkegaard considers facticity in terms of determinateness as *in-*determinateness.¹⁶ The self we directly do not will to be is the abstract or negative self, whose negativity is based on its indeterminateness.¹⁷ Kierkegaard commits the error of expanding this concept of self in the direction of a concrete self which in truth merely designates the Dasein that is without a place in the outline of the system.¹⁸ We need to correct his error because only the indeterminateness of the self explains the not-willing-to-be genuinely directed at it. It explains it from the fear of nothingness, which Kierkegaard tacitly takes from his first anthropological text over into the second.

(d) This not-willing-to-be reflects in itself the difference of determinateness and indeterminateness. We do not

want to be—that implies in relation to our pre-given Dasein and being human that we want not to assume and accept it. On the other hand, in relation to our self it implies that we want to get rid of it. As a result of that error, Kierkegaard makes the next one of expanding the concept of willing-to-get-rid-of-oneself to the not-assuming-and-accepting the pre-given Dasein. This error is also to be corrected. For, first, to refuse to assume and accept is temporally distinct from willing to get rid of oneself. The will to get rid of oneself is, as it were, at the end. We want to put an end to freedom, as Kierkegaard defines the self; we do not want to continue the process we are entangled in, insofar as each of us is always already installed in his self-establishing. On the other hand, not to will to accept oneself is at the beginning. We do not even want to begin to be the individuals and humans that we are. Second, to refuse to assume and accept is also distinct from willing to get rid of ourselves in terms of motive. It is motivated not by a fear of indeterminateness, but rather by a revulsion against the limitations of determinateness. In appropriating Hegel's insight into the determinateness of Dasein, Kierkegaard also changes it by identifying it with limitation. We do not want to accept our Dasein and being human because we revolt against the limitations thus set.

II

With this elucidation of the fundamental principle, the real tasks set for us by this principle are indicated at best. I can tackle here only the two I referred to at the beginning, the reconstruction of Kierkegaard's analysis of despair and the determination of its historical place. This is a reconstruction—which now means more closely reconstruction of the theory—as the analysis of despair of *The Sickness unto Death* may be regarded—
(continued)