

DESPAIR AS A BASIC FORM OF SELF-ALIENATION: AN OUTLINE OF KIERKEGAARD'S DIALECTICS

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My paper follows the discussion opened by Jon Stewart's recent book on Hegel's concept of alienation and its influence on nineteenth-century thought, specifically in the chapter devoted to the concept of alienation in S. Kierkegaard. To begin the article, before I get to the central problem I will try to classify the two basic types of alienation we can encounter in the whole of Kierkegaard's work: the religious (or universal) alienation of the Christian from the world and the existential alienation of man from himself: despair. The core of the study is devoted to an analysis of Kierkegaard's concept of despair, which Kierkegaard understands as one of the basic structural moments of human subjectivity. Here I will focus particularly on portraying and analyzing the spiritual and dialectical nature of despair. My main intention, however, will be to interpret despair as a fundamental form of the self-alienated self. For despair expresses a state of existence in which the self is not oneself, a state in which the self seems to be separated from its own true self. This interpretation of mine corresponds to Stewart's view in its basic features. At the end of the paper I will attempt to outline my own understanding of despair as self-alienation within the broader dialectics of existence in Kierkegaard, using the Hegelian model of dialectics.

Keywords: Kierkegaard – Alienation – Despair – The Self – Spirit – Dialectics

Jon Stewart's recently published book *Hegel's Century* (Stewart 2021) has opened up a discussion of Hegel's notion of alienation and its influence on nineteenth-century philosophy. With my paper I would like to follow up on the chapter of this book devoted to Søren Kierkegaard, in which the author links the notions of alienation and despair. In the paper I will first of all try to shed light on despair as a fundamental form of the self-alienated self. But before analyzing despair as a fundamental form of self-alienation in Kierkegaard, I will define two notions of alienation that can be found in his authorship.¹

¹ For concept of alienation in Kierkegaard's authorship, see, for instance, Stewart (2021, 179 – 204); Stewart (2019, 193 – 216); Stewart (1997, 117 – 143); Dalferth (2023, 49 – 67); Dalferth (2018, 127 – 144); and White (2019, 305 – 316).

I. On the Two Concepts of Alienation

Within the entirety of Kierkegaard's corpus, we can encounter two notions of alienation that could be named and distinguished as religious and existential alienation. While the former I have termed *religious* because, according to Kierkegaard, it originates in authentic religiosity, the latter I have termed *existential* because its basis is the alienation of the individual from himself.

Given that Stewart does not devote any attention in his book to explaining the first of these, despite the fact that it is found in explicit form in Kierkegaard's work,² we will first stop for a moment with this specific type of religious alienation and briefly elucidate it. This type of religious alienation should not be confused with what is commonly understood by this term in philosophical discourse, especially thanks to G. W. F. Hegel ("unhappy consciousness") and Ludwig Feuerbach (the projection of the human essence into the idea of God). Both authors essentially describe a form of human consciousness which, due to its religiosity, has become alienated from itself. I have to highlight here two aspects in particular that fundamentally distinguish Kierkegaard's concept of religious alienation from these concepts. First of all, in contrast to their conception, Kierkegaard's notion of religious alienation is not connected to self-alienation; on the contrary, it is a manifestation of its overcoming. The second fundamental difference is the predominantly positive connotation of Kierkegaard's type of religious alienation as opposed to the negative connotation of that of Hegel or Feuerbach. Kierkegaard's concept of religious alienation does not refer to some imperfect stage of human existence to be overcome, but, on the contrary, it refers to that stage to which each individual is to progress eventually. For him, religious alienation is a sign of faith as the ultimate goal of human existence because it is a consequence of religious detachment from the world, that is, of what he often calls "dying [to the world]."³ This is an alienation both from the external world and the world ("the natural man") within us. Therefore, if we wanted to characterize this type of alienation according to its object, that is, according to what the individual is alienating here, we would call it a universal alienation. This type of alienation is emphasized by Kierkegaard as an essential feature of Christian existence, especially in his second authorship (after 1846). For example, in his 1855 anti-church pamphlet *The Moment*, No. 7, we can read:

² This is fully understandable, however, because this type of religious alienation is in no way influenced by Hegel's concept of alienation, which is Stewart's main focus throughout the book.

³ See, for instance, Kierkegaard 1980b, 6; Kierkegaard 1997, 17, 146 – 147, 172; Kierkegaard 1990, 76 – 84, 98, 116, 131 – 133, 140.

The Christian in the New Testament sense is completely alienated from this life... A Christian in the New Testament sense is literally a stranger and alien: he feels himself a stranger, and everyone feels instinctively that he is a stranger to him (Kierkegaard 1998, 257).⁴

Despite the fundamental difference between religious and existential alienation, a certain connection can be found between them: there is, in fact, an inverse relationship. It is something of a paradox of Kierkegaard's philosophical anthropology that at the moment when the individual reaches the highest stage of existence, namely, the stage of faith, and thus at the moment when he finally overcomes his alienation from himself, he is at the same time alienating himself from the whole world. Alienation from the world is thus a possible sign of overcoming existential alienation.

In contrast to the first type of alienation, the second type of alienation (self-alienation) is never explicitly mentioned by Kierkegaard. Yet, we can recognize it above all in the phenomenon he describes and analyzes in detail in his principal work *The Sickness unto Death*, namely, the phenomenon of despair. This interpretation of mine coincides with Stewart's in its basic outlines: "The forms of despair can be understood as forms of alienation" (Stewart 2021, 194). For self-alienation essentially expresses a state in which the self is not oneself, in which it is as it were separated from its true self.⁵ And it is exactly this state of existence that Kierkegaard calls despair.

II. Despair as a Sickness of the Spirit

According to Kierkegaard's philosophical anthropology, despair belongs to the basic structure of our existence. Kierkegaard reflects on the theme of despair in several of his books; particularly extensive reflections on despair can be found in the second part of *Either/Or* (1843) and in *Works of Love* (1847); but the most comprehensive and systematic treatment of the concept is found in *The Sickness unto Death*, published in 1849 under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus. Among his pseudonyms, this one represents "a Christian on an extraordinarily high level" (Kierkegaard 1978, 174). Through Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard thus illuminates human existence from the ultimate Christian point of view.⁶

As a book, *The Sickness unto Death* is a brilliant analysis of human existence and of the wide range of its possible modes in relation to despair. No one before Kierkegaard had explored the phenomenon of despair in such breadth and depth, down to the most subtle nuances, as he did. In doing so, his understanding of existence and despair as its

⁴ See also Kierkegaard (1990, 170) and Kierkegaard (1975, 394).

⁵ As Stewart defines it: "self-alienation is a separation from oneself" (Stewart 2021, 183).

⁶ For more on Anti-Climacus, see Marek (2015, 39 – 48).

structural element consistently follows the basic Christian premise where the self stands in its freedom and immense responsibility directly before God. In this respect, one can only agree with Wolfgang Janke's view that this writing is "the fundamental book of Christian existential analytics" (Janke 1994, 28). This Christian background, however, does not diminish the philosophical value of the book; as Stewart also remarks: "there can be little doubt that within this broader Christian context there are some philosophically valuable analyses" (Stewart 2021, 193). Its form and purpose are aptly described by Peter Šajda, the author of the Slovak translation of the book: "It does not suffer from any philosophical correctness. On the contrary, it wants to touch the reader in a sensitive place, it wants to disturb him, to shake him, to provoke him ... It is both a deadly serious and a wryly satirical book" (Šajda 2018, 157).

In the introduction of the main text of the book, Kierkegaard comes up with his principal theses on the basic ontological constitution of human being, which build on his original triadic anthropological concept (body – soul – spirit) from *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844):⁷ "A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity" (Kierkegaard 1980b, 13). The place where the synthesis of the given moments takes place, according to Kierkegaard, is the spirit: "A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self" (Kierkegaard 1980b, 13). The question at issue is then, what is the self, for all that we have said so far about the human being is insufficient to identify him as the self, that is, the real subject, the subject of existence. Here Kierkegaard comes up with one of his most crucial theses ever: "The self is a relation that relates itself to itself" (Kierkegaard 1980b, 13). This implies that the self is not determined by the synthesis alone, that is, by the relation between the two poles of its existence (in that case, according to Kierkegaard, man would have no self), but is a synthesis (i.e., a unifying relation) relating to itself. It is this relationship to oneself that makes man what he really is – the self, for it endows man with freedom and responsibility.⁸

However, despite the fact that "[a] person cannot rid himself of the relation to himself any more than he can rid himself of his self, which, after all, is one and the same thing, since the self is the relation to oneself" (Kierkegaard 1980b, 17), not every person is in truth himself. The state in which the individual is not himself, that is, the state of the self-alienated self, is characterized by Kierkegaard as despair. Kierkegaard understands despair as a sickness in the human self, "a sickness of the spirit" (Kierkegaard 1980b, 13, 22, 24). At the same time, he stresses that, unlike in the case of physical illness, one is responsible for the state of despair at every moment of its

⁷ See Kierkegaard (1980a, 43).

⁸ For more on Kierkegaard's definition of the self as a relation to oneself, see Petkanič (2010, 52 – 57) and Glenn (1987, 5 – 23).

duration – this is because despair comes from freedom, namely, from the relation of the self to itself. Kierkegaard defines this ill state of existence as follows: “Despair is the misrelation in the relation of a synthesis that relates itself to itself” (Kierkegaard 1980b, 15). Despair is thus a kind of disharmony, an unbalanced relation within the constitutive components of the self-synthesis. The source of this imbalance within the self-synthesis is the inadequate relation of the self to itself. The distorted relation to self, in turn, arises from the distorted relation of the self to the power that has established the self as a relation to itself because the self has not established itself but has been established by something that it is not: by God. Any disturbance of one of these relations is then accompanied by a disturbance of the other two relations. This clearly shows that three essential relations play a key role in Kierkegaard’s definition of the self – the relation of contrasting elements within the self-synthesis, the relation to the self, and the relation to God. The relation to God, therefore, belongs to the fundamental determination of the self; it lies at the deepest foundations of our existence, whether or not we are clearly aware of it in the course of our lives. We can now add to Kierkegaard’s definition of the self as outlined above: the self is a relation of synthesis that has a relation to itself and thus relates to the power that has established it.

Despair, according to Kierkegaard, convicts a person of not being himself, that is, that there has been a discrepancy between the “actual self” and the “authentic self,”⁹ which implies that the individual in his actuality has become alienated from his authentic self. However, as Kierkegaard emphasizes throughout his work, the fundamental task of every self is to become this true, authentic self, that is, to become itself. It is only when one becomes oneself that one overcomes the ill state of despair within oneself and thus reaches a state of spiritual health. That state, which is entirely freed from despair, is in Kierkegaard’s view faith for it is only in faith that one becomes entirely oneself. One does so by coming into a transparent relationship with the power that has constituted one’s self. Despair, therefore, signifies not only alienation from oneself but also God. As Stewart argues, “since we are created beings and thus always have a relation to God, when we are alienated from ourselves, we are ipso facto alienated from God” (Stewart 2021, 197).

Before proceeding to Kierkegaard’s further analyses of despair, it should be underlined that Kierkegaard’s conception of despair is highly original and does not entirely coincide with the common and psychological understanding of the term. In common and psychological usage, by despair we mean, first of all, the feeling of

⁹ Gordon Marino, in Kierkegaard’s writing *The Sickness unto Death*, finds as many as three sorts of selves: “the concrete self,” “the ideal self,” and “the true self.” Cf. Marino (2018, 71 – 72).

hopelessness and despondency.¹⁰ From Kierkegaard's perspective, however, despair is primarily a sickness of the spirit, not of the soul. Kierkegaard's concept of despair is thus not strictly psychological but spiritual (i.e., it concerns things ultimate and empirically ungraspable) and existential (i.e., it is fundamentally related to the individual's choices enabled by his freedom). That is, we do not have to feel despair at all, or even be aware of it, to be classified as despairing in Kierkegaard's eyes. We can even be happy and at the same time be despairing in the light of truth since happiness itself does not belong to a qualification of spirit (Kierkegaard 1980b, 25), and what is more, "for despair the most cherished and desirable place to live is in the heart of happiness" (Kierkegaard 1980b, 25). Nevertheless, as Kierkegaard points out in his analysis of the different forms of despair, the spiritual and mental levels of despair are not strictly separated from each other, for despair as a spiritual sickness can produce symptoms of various mental disorders. Furthermore, as with the common and psychological concept, Kierkegaard's concept of despair also corresponds in principle to hopelessness,¹¹ but it does not refer primarily to the feeling and consciousness of hopelessness but to hopelessness in the sense of a spiritual state and an existential situation. It should also be added that this kind of hopelessness is never absolute during our lifetime. That is to say, every person, no matter how desperate he may be in a spiritual sense and no matter how unfortunate his life circumstances may be, always has at hand in his life a certain hope, which is an antidote to the spiritual toxicity of despair, that is, faith.

Contrary to the common view, which sees despair only as a rare and extreme phenomenon, Kierkegaard comes up with a surprising claim about the universal presence of despair in each of us. Similarly, just as there is not a single person who is completely healthy from the point of view of physical health, so from the spiritual point of view, "there is not one single living human being who does not despair a little" (Kierkegaard 1980b, 22). The universality of this sickness of the spirit may not seem obvious at first sight, for one of the worst features of despair is precisely its hiddenness. The problem lies mainly in the fact that most people fall under the category of despair when they are unaware of it. Yet the despair slumbering quietly in the soul of such a person does, now and then, announce itself in a flash of inexplicable anxiety and thus draws attention to itself as dwelling within (Kierkegaard 1980b, 22). Kierkegaard is

¹⁰ By this, of course, I do not intend to equate the common and psychological usage of this term, but only to point out that in their basic conception, when they understand despair as a feeling, both are fundamentally different from Kierkegaard's notion which grows out of an ontological and theological foundation.

¹¹ Etymologically speaking, the Danish word for despair (*fortvivelse*) also contains the roots of the words for doubt (Danish *tvivl*) and split (Germanic *twi-fla*). For the link between these meanings and Kierkegaard's concept, see McDonald (2014, 159).

convinced that with every appearance of despair, however, our whole previous life will also appear desperate at the same time. The argument he uses to support this claim is that despair, as a spiritual phenomenon, is related to eternity “and thus has something of the eternal in its dialectic” (Kierkegaard 1980b, 24).

Kierkegaard defines despair as a “sickness unto death,” which is also reflected in the title of the book in question. This term is borrowed by Kierkegaard from the story of Lazarus found in the Gospel of John (Jn 11:1-44), and Kierkegaard’s concept of the sickness unto death can be understood as his attempt at a peculiar exegesis of this particular biblical story. The expression “being sick unto death” signifies that the sickness ends in the death of the individual concerned. In interpreting Lazarus’ resurrection, Kierkegaard advocates the view that, in the highest terms, there is no such thing as an earthly, bodily sickness that leads to death. Only despair as a spiritual sickness brings (often unnoticed) the individual to death, not the physical one, but death in the spiritual sense. Spiritual death from despair, however, is an eternal dying that never reaches its end, because even despair cannot swallow up in man that which is eternal in him, his eternal self. The hopelessness of eternal despair is so abysmal that he lacks even the last hope: death. This feature of despair is also echoed in its psychological aspect: despair is manifested on the mental level in an escalated form as self-consumption, as a helpless, consuming desire to get rid of oneself. It is precisely the will to be rid of oneself that is the common expression for all types of despair. All forms of despair can thus ultimately be converted into a formula: not willing to be oneself. For even in the case of the despair of defiance, which corresponds to the desperate desire to be oneself, the despairing person is, in fact, only trying to become what he is not: “he wants to tear his self away from the power that established it” (Kierkegaard 1980b, 20).

The largest part of *The Sickness unto Death* is the description and analysis of various forms of despair, which applies to both parts of the book. While in the first part, Kierkegaard examines despair outside of a theological framework, in the second part, he examines it through that lens, reclassifying despair here as sin.¹² The book is essentially a nosology and etiology of despair, its content being a classification and description of the symptoms and causes of this spiritual sickness. Figuratively speaking, Kierkegaard, for diagnostic reasons, conducts in the first part of the book a kind of double surgical incision across the whole self to reveal the various forms and causes of this spiritual sickness lurking beneath its surface, beneath the outer façade of its appearance. The first incision could be characterized as ontological, the second as phenomenological. While the first reveals and describes forms of despair from an abstract perspective by exploring possible variations of the imbalance between the two

¹² However, the theological level of the concept of despair developed in the second part of the book is not pursued in this article.

sides of the self-synthesis, the second examines forms of despair in terms of their intensity and depth and thereby defines its individual stages.

From the point of view of the synthesis of which the self consists, despair occurs in a person when this synthesis is unbalanced, that is, when one of the contradictory ontological components of the self-synthesis prevails over the other, which, in its extreme form, can lead to a state where one of them dominates so much in a person that it completely absorbs and nullifies the other one in him. Kierkegaard distinguishes and describes four basic forms of despair regarding self-synthesis, these are: infinitude's despair, finitude's despair, possibility's despair, and necessity's despair. For example, the infinitude's despair means that we lack the dimension of finitude and, conversely, the finitude's despair means that we suffer from a lack of the dimension of infinity.

Kierkegaard then analyses the forms (degrees) of despair in relation to its intensity. This part of the book is most reminiscent of Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, as it examines the stages of the development of self-consciousness (the self) on the background of the analysis of the degrees of despair (see also Stewart 2021, 202; Stewart 1997, 117 – 143). This is because, as Kierkegaard argues, the gradation of despair depends on the gradation of consciousness – the more consciousness we have (i.e., consciousness of the self), the more we have clarity about our own despair, and also the more our despair gains in intensity. As the consciousness and intensity of despair increase, the self as spirit also rises. Therefore, the various degrees of despair are at the same time stages of the human spirit. In inverse proportion to the ascent of the spirit is its appearance in the world. The more intense one's despair and self-consciousness, that is, the more one is spirit, the less this type of existence occurs in the world. Kierkegaard identifies three basic stages of despair: despair when we are not conscious of our own self (not despair in the strict sense), despair when we do not will to be ourselves (despair of weakness), and despair when we will to be ourselves (despair of defiance). Within these three basic stages of despair, Kierkegaard distinguishes yet different intermediate stages or variants.¹³

III. Dialectics of Despair and Alienation

Despair seen through Kierkegaard's optics is a category of the spirit, and this is also, according to him, the main reason why the nature of despair is dialectical: “[i]n the life of the spirit, everything is dialectical” (Kierkegaard 1980b, 116n). The dialectical nature of despair can be detected first in the unusual relation between the possibility and the actuality of despair: “The possibility of this sickness is man's superiority over the

¹³ For a detailed analysis of the various forms and degrees of despair in Kierkegaard, see the relevant chapters of my book (Petkanič 2021, 66 – 86). More on this specific theme, see, for instance, Stewart (1997, 117 – 143); Stewart (2021, 179 – 204); and Marsh (1987, 67 – 83).

animal, and this superiority distinguishes him in quite another way than does his erect walk, for it indicates infinite erectness or sublimity, that he is spirit” (Kierkegaard 1980b, 15). But the actuality of despair, dwelling in this state, is the greatest misery and damnation for man. Kierkegaard notes that such a ratio between possibility and actuality is unusual, for ordinarily, if it is an advantage to be able to become something, it is all the more advantageous actually to become it. But with despair, it is the other way round: as infinite an advantage lies in the possibility of despair, so infinitely deep is the fall in the actuality of despair (Kierkegaard 1980b, 15).

The dialectical nature of despair is also revealed in the fact that although despair is, on the one hand, a sickness of the spirit, a manifestation of the inauthentic self, the opposite of faith, equal to sin, and eventually leads one to eternal damnation, it is, on the other hand, a necessary movement on the path to oneself, faith, and spiritual healing. Lest there be any misunderstanding, Kierkegaard himself, in the very preface to his treatise on despair, emphatically warns the reader that despair is first and foremost a spiritual sickness, not a cure for it (Kierkegaard 1980b, 6). Yet, on the other hand, it is clear not only from this book that he also regards despair as the first step on the path to the true self. The positive significance of the experience of despair for the individual’s journey towards oneself and the absolute is already elaborated by Kierkegaard in his book *Either/Or*, where he holds that “any human being who has not tasted the bitterness of despair has fallen short of the meaning of life, even if his life has been ever so beautiful, ever so abundantly happy” (Kierkegaard 1987, 208). A few pages later, we may even read that “the true point of departure for finding the absolute is not doubt but despair” (Kierkegaard 1987, 213). He then repeats and develops this motif towards faith in *The Sickness unto Death* where he claims that despair is also “the first element in faith” (Kierkegaard 1980b, 116n). Kierkegaard, who himself often experienced the bitterness of melancholy in his personal life, observed with his spiritually refined sight of life that despair can awaken us from our spiritual sleep and open our eyes to the highest things. According to his spiritual insight, the experience and subsequent awareness of one’s despair leads one to realize oneself “in an eternal and decisive way” as spirit, as self, and at the same time to perceive “in the deepest sense” that there is a God and that one exists in full responsibility before that God (Kierkegaard 1980b, 26 – 27).

Finally, the dialectical essence of despair is underscored by Kierkegaard’s doctrine of its stages: On the one hand, each new stage of despair is an ascent on the spirit’s journey towards itself. On the other hand, it corresponds to the stages of its fall, namely, the descent into the depths of sin since, from Kierkegaard’s point of view, the consciousness of self (and therefore of self as spirit) corresponds to the consciousness of despair, then the most intense, “the devil’s despair,” whose essence

is absolute defiance, is at the same time the highest stage of the spirit within despair: “for the devil is sheer spirit and hence absolute consciousness and transparency” (Kierkegaard 1980b, 42).¹⁴ And the man who is ignorant of his despair is the farthest from the consciousness of being a spirit. This ignorance of oneself being determined as a spirit is also the lowest form of despair, that is, spiritlessness. Ethically speaking, it is the least intense and thus also the most innocent type of despair, but from a “therapeutic” point of view, that is, from the point of view of treating the sickness, it is the most dangerous form of despair because the most difficult of all is to awaken the spiritless individual from his contented ignorance.¹⁵

Kierkegaard clarifies his dialectics of despair by introducing two dialectical steps that the spirit must go through to arrive at itself in faith when he claims: “Despair itself is a negativity; ignorance of it, a new negativity” (Kierkegaard 1980b, 44) That implies that the desperate person in spiritlessness is one negativity further from healing than the desperate person who is aware of his despair. “However, to reach the truth, one must go through every negativity” (Kierkegaard 1980b, 44). In other words, on the way to the true self, it is necessary to go through two steps within the stage of despair: first, the experience of despair and then the realization of it. Yet, another hidden implication can be discovered here: it is not enough to go through any experience of despair, for the experience of the lowest stage of despair (unconscious despair) cannot stand here since it lacks the reflection of despair, and as soon as awareness of it occurs, it would raise us to one of the higher stages of despair. In order to reach the authentic self, therefore, we must pass through at least one of the forms of conscious despair.

From the foregoing, it is clear that Kierkegaard’s dialectics of despair is part of a larger dialectics, the dialectics of the self (self-consciousness or human existence). Since, like Stewart, I view despair as a stage of the alienated self, towards the end of this article, there is an opportunity to try to outline an application of the Hegelian model of dialectics to Kierkegaard’s concept of the self (self-consciousness). So despair represents the alienated self, that is, the self in a state of being external-to-itself. It stands for negativity and constitutes an antithesis; but every antithesis presupposes a thesis, that is, in our case, some original state in which the self was not alienated from itself. Despair is not something natural, original to human being, since the self-synthesis is not created as a misrelation, as Kierkegaard argues in *The Sickness unto Death* (Kierkegaard 1980b, 15 – 16). In this book, however, Kierkegaard does not further

¹⁴ A slightly modified translation.

¹⁵ To awaken an individual from spiritlessness is especially difficult since “he is completely dominated by the sensate and the sensate-psychical, because he lives in sensate categories, the pleasant and the unpleasant, waves goodbye to spirit, truth, etc., because he is too sensate to have the courage to venture out and to endure being spirit” (Kierkegaard 1980b, 43).

elaborate on the nature of that original self. But in *The Concept of Anxiety*, he does characterize this original self, uncorrupted by sin and despair, as innocence; here he claims: “innocence is lost only by guilt” (Kierkegaard 1980a, 36). So to use the terminology of *The Sickness unto Death*, innocence is lost only by despair or sin. The original self, that is, the self created by God’s will, is thus the innocent self in which the spirit is just dreaming (Kierkegaard 1980a, 41). As the essential characteristic of innocence is ignorance (of good and evil) (Kierkegaard 1980a, 37f.), the innocent self rests contentedly in itself – in Hegelian words, we might call it to be in a state of being in-itself. The highest, synthetic stage of the self, by which we rise above the opposition of thesis and antithesis: Innocence and despair/sin, is then represented by faith. Faith involves the overcoming of self-alienation, the return of the self to itself but not to that original, immature, immediate innocence, but to a reflective, mature stage purified of despair/sin. The man of faith is free from despair, but at the same time he is aware of its danger. This awareness fundamentally distinguishes the mature stage of faith from the initial immature innocence. In Hegelian terminology, this ultimate stage of human existence might correspond to being in-and-for-itself.¹⁶ Thus, in Kierkegaard’s dialectics of the self, one is to make a movement from the innocent self in ignorance through the self-alienated self in despair to the true self in faith.

Dialectically speaking, then, Kierkegaard understands despair as an important, even inevitable step towards the true self, and thus also towards faith. Ethically speaking, however, despair is by no means a cure in his eyes but the opposite: it is a spiritual sickness, as he emphatically points out in the preface to *The Sickness unto Death*. But what is the cure for this sickness with the help of which we can come to faith? To this question Kierkegaard answers in the very same place: “the cure is simply to die, to die to the world” (Kierkegaard 1980b, 6). The expression “being dead to the world” is indeed analogous to the expression “being a stranger in the world” – and both are manifestations of authentic Christian faith from Kierkegaard’s perspective at least in his second authorship. This brings us back to the beginning of our article, to the idea that, having overcome self-alienation in faith, the individual enters into a state of alienation from the whole world, which means that he becomes a stranger walking alone through the world in immense responsibility before God, but, let us note, not in

¹⁶ A different perspective and a stimulating contribution to the discussion of Kierkegaard’s dialectics of despair is offered by the study of James L. Marsh: “Kierkegaard moves through the stages of despair or sin in itself in the form of ignorance, for itself in the form of weakness, and in and for itself in the form of defiance” (Marsh 1987, 74 – 75). But this interpretation seems questionable, at least in that nowhere does Kierkegaard suggest, as implied by the quotation in question, that one must move through all three stages of despair gradually; on the contrary, once despair becomes conscious, one must overcome it as soon as possible.

some social isolation, in seclusion from others, since his loneliness, his strangeness, is only of a spiritual nature (see, for instance, Kierkegaard 1975, 394).

Kierkegaard's dialectics of despair in *The Sickness unto Death* reveals the profound impact that Hegel's philosophy had on this work, even though Hegel's name is not mentioned directly in the book. In this respect, it is Stewart's book that is very useful, as in the chapter referred to above he maps out the extent of the influence that Hegel's work has had on this seminal work of Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard frequently employed Hegelian terms in his writings; however, *The Sickness unto Death* makes it clear that Kierkegaard's thought was permeated by Hegel's philosophy more than just terminologically. As Stewart argues, Kierkegaard also adopts specific Hegelian motifs into his thought and develops them further in the book, such as the notion of spirit, self-consciousness, and unhappy consciousness (Stewart 2021, 193f.).¹⁷ But the greatest imprint on Kierkegaard's work is left by Hegel's dialectics as a method of interpreting reality, which Kierkegaard here appropriates in his own peculiar form and without which we could hardly imagine (not only) this work of Kierkegaard.¹⁸

IV. Conclusion

In my study I have tried to demonstrate, as did Jon Stewart, that Kierkegaard's dialectics of despair also introduces us to his dialectics of alienation, despite the fact that nowhere in his work does he explicitly use the term in the context of despair. Despair as a spiritual phenomenon is by its nature highly dialectical: on the one hand, by analogy with Hegel's concept of self-alienation, it represents negativity and a stage of self-alienated existence; on the other hand, it represents a second and inevitable stage on the way to the self, which in Kierkegaard's terms means: on the way to the religious stage of existence in faith.

¹⁷ Although the last of these concepts is nowhere mentioned in the final form of the book, Kierkegaard refers to it explicitly in the draft of the work in connection with despair (Cf. Kierkegaard 1980b, 150). It provides clear textual evidence that Kierkegaard, in conceiving his dialectics of despair, was strongly inspired by Hegel's dialectics of alienation, which lies behind this concept, as Stewart points out: "By referring to Hegel's notion of the unhappy consciousness, he implies that his analysis also involves some form of separation that is characteristic of alienation" (Stewart 2021, 194 – 195).

¹⁸ However, it should not be overlooked that one of the main targets of Kierkegaard's philosophical criticism was Hegel, and this is no different in the book under discussion. Several passages of the text refer to him indirectly, but mostly critically or even sarcastically. References to Hegel's philosophy are often hidden behind the terms "system," "speculation," or "fantastic knowing" (see Kierkegaard 1980b, 31; 43 – 44; 83; 99; 117; 119 – 120).

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