

KIERKEGAARD AND THE DIALECTIC OF DEMONIC DESPAIR

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Alas, that lonely demoniac . . . any suffering that does not begin with rendering the sufferer speechless does not amount to much

Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*

1 The ladder of despair

In *Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Anti-Climacus sets out what could be termed a scalar gradation of forms of despair. From the lowest to the highest rung, this climbing ladder of despair takes man as its criterion. Since one of the most human characteristics is awareness, the ladder is organized according to the "degree of consciousness . . . [wherein] the greater the degree of consciousness, the more intensive the despair."¹ One of the highest forms of despair, which Anti-Climacus calls 'demonic despair', is particularly intriguing. This is not to say that the demonic is truly the final kind of despair, but simply that anything higher than demonic despair takes God as its criterion, rather than man. Demonic despair, then, is only the highest form of despair when the criterion for the gradation is man, and all

¹Kierkegaard 1983, p. 42.

higher gradations are too intensive for man alone to experience.

This paper, however, does not venture into those more intense grades of despair, but focuses mostly on demonic despair. In order to position this kind of despair, it is necessary to start at the bottom rung, and gradually climb up to the demonic.² We then examine one possible meaning of demonic despair. At this point, we raise a question: why does Anti-Climacus consider demonic despair the highest form of despair? That is, why does Anti-Climacus locate demonic despair above the other types of despair when man is the criterion? This question is difficult to answer, and it requires some assistance from literature. In order to make some sense of his use of the demonic, I visit Dante's depiction of the fallen angel Lucifer in his *Inferno*.³ Working up from the bottom rung, upon reaching the top of this ladder of despair, we will find ourselves, perhaps paradoxically, in the lowest ring of hell, the ninth ring. At this lowest point we see how the engine of the Christian dialectic is the possibility of offense, which maintains an infinite qualitative distance between man and God that is embodied by the figure of Christ. For Christ, as we will see, was a man in every way except the most essential: sinfulness. For now, I should clarify what Kierkegaard means by despair.

In short, "despair is the misrelation in the relation of a synthesis that relates itself to itself."⁴ Let us break this down. Man, according to Anti-Climacus, is a kinetic and relating self. This means that man

²We should note that these are not fixed types of despair associated with particular individuals, but are merely potential states of existential despair that can arise if the misrelation that is the self as synthesis achieves a certain degree of intensity or consciousness.

³Some may argue that Anti-Climacus's (or Kierkegaard's) use of the demonic should be taken in the Greek sense of *daimonion*, such as the "divine something" that Socrates, in the *Apology*, claims to accompany him and warn him when he was about to make mistakes. This reading, however, seems wrong, especially given the differences Kierkegaard, often by way of his pseudonyms, locates between pre-Christians and Christians. This reading is also explicitly denied in Kierkegaard's personal journals and papers. He says, "[a]s a category the demonic is found only within Christianity, because only Christianity can inform man in a concrete way what the good is." According to Kierkegaard's understanding, modern man, by departing from Christianity, is moving more definitely in the direction of the demonic, because in spite of his repudiation of Christianity he cannot escape knowledge of it (Kierkegaard 2007, p. 469).

⁴Kierkegaard 1983, p. 15.

is not a completed unity but a manyness that, in order to become a whole, must be brought together, that is, must be synthesized. This synthesis is a relation among the components of the self, such as the finite and infinite or the possible and necessary. Despair arises when this synthesis becomes a misrelation. Still, “the synthesis itself is not the misrelation . . . [rather] in the synthesis lies the possibility of the misrelation.”⁵ Since man is a synthesis of different parts, man can, but does not have to, despair. Unlike a Hegelian synthesis, the self as synthesis does not produce a higher unity but is caught in an uneven and paradoxical tension, in short, an intensive relation. The focus on the sustenance of this tension is why kinds of despair are measured by degree of intensity. With this definition of despair in mind, let us turn to the bottom of the ladder, the lowest form of despair: unconscious despair.

2 The lower rungs of the ladder

Unconscious despair is located at the lowest rung: the least intensive or lowest degree of consciousness. A person suffering unconscious despair is utterly unaware that he is in despair. He lives completely engaged with the sensuous world, unable to turn inward to the eternal within, the self. He estimates the physical world far too highly, and this leads to a blindness to the eternal. This person is at the lowest degree of intensity because of the great distance between the eternal self and the finite self.⁶ This blind and unaware world, however, is quite comforting, and the person who lives in such a world feels secure due to his reliance on the illusions of the physical world.

One rung higher on this ladder is conscious despair. The person experiencing such despair has, to some degree, disengaged from the external world, turned inward and become aware of the presence of the self that is contained therein. The parts of the self are now closer

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁶It is important to note that intensity, and thus despair, increases as distance between the parts of the self decreases. Think of, for example, what happens when two opposite electrical charges or opposing chemicals are brought together. This is the sense in which turning inward and becoming conscious of the misrelation of the synthesis of the self is more intense.

together, which is why it is at a higher intensity. This form of despair, however, spans a large portion of the ladder, leading almost to the very top, to the last rung. Within this large scalar expanse are more nuanced forms of despair. The lower section of the form of conscious despair is characterized by a “despair not to will to be oneself.”⁷ This is a kind of earthly despair, a despair in immediacy. Although he is not completely enrapt with exteriority, since there is at least a minimal degree of reflection, worth is measured mostly by the external world.

A little higher on the ladder of conscious despair are two kinds of ‘defiant despair’⁸ Such forms of despair include a new qualification: it is not only more reflective, and thus more conscious of the infinite self, but also more active. Again, we see a higher degree of intensity. As “the despair is conscious of itself as an act; it . . . comes directly from the self.”⁹ Defiant despair comes in two forms, one lower and one higher. Anti-Climacus calls the lower form ‘poetic despair,’ and the higher form ‘demonic despair.’¹⁰ These two forms are the main focus of this analysis.

3 The poet and the demon

Both poetic and demonic forms of despair assume this formula: “despair to will to be oneself.”¹¹ On the one hand, unlike the lower form of earthly despair, defiant despair does not “will to be someone else;” on the other hand, unlike the higher form of earthly despair, defiant despair does not “will to be oneself.”¹² The difference between poetic and demonic despair is thus seen in terms of activity: the difference between the “acting self” and the “self acted upon,” respectively.¹³

In poetic despair, the self is an acting self in that it attempts to construct itself, to make itself into a concrete image or character. Like the

⁷Kierkegaard 1983, p. 49.

⁸Ibid., p. 67.

⁹Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 72, 73.

¹¹Ibid., p. 68.

¹²Ibid., p. 53, 52.

¹³Ibid., p. 68.

Greek *poiēsis*,¹⁴ there is a focus on making or building. The poet fully utilizes his fashioning power, an almost divine power, and this god-like feeling leads the poet to ignore any power over himself, including God. Since he is able to give life, the poet becomes the author of the world. “For even if this self does not go so far into despair that it becomes an imaginatively constructed god . . . it remains itself from first to last.”¹⁵ The criterion for such a character is the power of man: the constructive self, the poet, not God. If the poet is not happy with his construction, he can simply wipe it away and begin again; he has the power to give life and take life away. The problem is that these masterly constructions are merely thought constructions: fictions, stories, not actual people and actions. The poet is his own master, and he is very proud of his powers, but this great power is simultaneously his despair. He has created a fabulous world, established himself as the sole sovereign in a magical kingdom but, “[o]n closer examination . . . this absolute ruler is a king without a country, actually ruling over nothing.”¹⁶ The poet cannot become a god, and so defiantly stands against God, stubbornly remaining merely an empty self. The poet becomes *nemo*.

In order to make sense of the despair of the poet, which will also allow for a smooth transition into demonic despair, it is helpful to turn to the use of Lucifer in Dante’s *Inferno*. Like the poet, Lucifer is overwhelmed with the feeling of the power of creation. Lucifer used to be the most beautiful angel, the being closest to God. Perhaps due to this proximity to the sole author of the world, however, Lucifer fell victim to the illusion that he was as strong as God; he despaired at being merely a servant to God because he felt himself equal to, if not more powerful than, God. Overcome with false feelings of divine might, Lucifer made his intentions known. He said, “I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit on the mount of congregation on the heights . . . I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High.”¹⁷ Lucifer, however, was not as

¹⁴See the depiction of *poiēsis* in Books II and X of Plato’s *Republic*.

¹⁵Kierkegaard 1983, p. 69.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁷Isaiah 14:3–4 (*The Holy Bible, King James Version* 1999). These are actually the words attributed to

strong and powerful as he had supposed. When he and his rebellious angelic cabal challenged God, they lost and were shown to be nothing compared to the infinite might of the true divinity. God then cast Lucifer and his followers down to the deepest pit of hell. In this way, Lucifer actually did assume a throne of sorts; he became the king of the underworld. Compared to the infinite power and goodness of God, however, such a place is nothing, full only of emptiness and despair. Lucifer fell from grace and descended into meaninglessness and nothingness, but, simultaneously, was raised to the highest rung of the ladder of despair: the demonic.

In *Sickness Unto Death*, the poet becomes demonic; in Dante's *Inferno*, Lucifer becomes Satan. While the poet and Lucifer both felt the increasingly intense power to create, they failed to recognize their weakness in the face of the all-powerful God. They thought they were acting selves, able to create and destroy the world at will, but they soon realized that this was simply an illusion, for they are not able to freely construct however they wished. Realizing their weakness, they become infuriated, filled with seething rage. They are not the powerful actors they thought themselves to be. Instead, they are selves in despair that are "acted upon."¹⁸ In their attempts to create themselves, they do "not succeed; [their] proficiency in imaginary constructing does not stretch that far."¹⁹ And yet, they still will to be themselves, which is an affirmation of one's power of willing and creation over any other power, especially God. This is why it is "a severing [of] the self from any relation to a power that has established it," and so is a turning away from God.²⁰ As we will see, the possibility of turning away from God by willing to be oneself is the possibility of offense. So, they defiantly will to be themselves, for they do have great powers of creation,

the King of Babylon, an over-zealous man who thought himself to be more powerful than he was. The King was indirectly depicted, however, with reference to Venus, the Morning Star. In the Latin Vulgate, the Morning Star is called *Lucifer*, the "bringer of light" of the dawn. Etymologically, Lucifer is derived from 'light' (*lux*) and 'to carry' (*ferre*). Construed in this manner, they are the words of Lucifer. This is why many argue that Lucifer, in this passage in Isaiah, is Satan.

¹⁸Kierkegaard 1983, p. 70.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 70.

²⁰Ibid., p. 67.

but are, simultaneously, acting and acted upon.²¹ “Rather than seek help, [they] prefer . . . to be [themselves] with all the agonies of hell.”²² This situation of acting-yet-acted-upon is vividly illustrated by Dante’s descriptions of what he saw in the ninth ring of hell, the lowest pit.

Upon reaching the pit, after entering the circle of the Biblical Giants surrounding the ninth ring, after passing the rounds of Caina, Antenora, Ptolemaea, and Judecca, Dante finally witnesses Satan, the fallen Lucifer. Dante describes Satan as an enormous, terrifying beast, larger than all the Giants of Hell. He says,

I marveled when I saw that, on his head,
he had three faces: one in front bloodred;

and another two that, just above
the midpoint of each shoulder, joined the first;
and at the crown, all three were reattached;

the right looked somewhat yellow, somewhat white;
the left in its appearance was like those
who come from where the Nile, descending, flows.

(Alighieri 2003, Canto VII, 38-45)

Satan, once the most beautiful angel in heaven, is now equally as ugly. “He wept out of six eyes; and down three chins, tears gushed together with a bloody froth.”²³ He had two enormously broad wings, which “had no feathers, but were fashioned like a bat’s.”²⁴ It is because of these scaly wings that Satan is both acting and acted upon, for Satan, through his own actions, actually keeps himself chained to the bottom of the lake in the centre pit of hell. According to Dante’s description, Satan is held fast, unable to move; half his body is frozen in Cocytus, the gelid lake of the ninth circle. What is most intriguing,

²¹Ibid., p. 71.

²²Ibid., p. 71.

²³Alighieri 2003, Canto VII, 53-54.

²⁴Ibid., Canto VII, 49-50.

then, is that, by his own actions, Satan remains stuck in such an agonizing position. By flapping his two great wings, “three winds made their way out from him and all Cocytus froze before those winds,” and these freezing winds keep the imprisoning ice in place.²⁵ Such a highly paradoxical position is the demonic: there is the will to act but the inability truly to act. We thus see a difference between the poetic and the demonic: while the poet wills to act through his fantastical creations, the demonic wills to act in actuality. Since willing in actuality is more intense than willing in fantasy, the demonic is more intense and thus higher. If Satan would simply stop flapping his wings, he might be able to free himself from his frigid bondage, but he defiantly does not, he defiantly offends. As Anti-Climacus says,

he would rather rage against everything and be the wronged victim of the whole world and of all life, and it is of particular significance to him to make sure that he has his torment on hand and that no one takes it away from him—for then he would not be able to demonstrate and prove to himself that he is right.²⁶

Satan, a vivid embodiment of demonic despair, defiantly wills to be his wretched self out of “spite . . . out of malice . . . [r]ebelling against all existence.”²⁷ Although God is an all-powerful, infinitely good author of existence, due to the despair of Lucifer, an error in God’s perfect creation defiantly despairs in actuality. This is the possibility of offense. The king of the demons thus rages against his creator, boldly planning the great battle to be held at the end of time, consciously willing to be “himself in his torment,” simultaneously offending and defining the dialectical structure of Christianity.²⁸ If one replaces ‘author’ with ‘God’ and ‘error’ with ‘Satan’ in the following passage, Anti-Climacus articulates this sentiment perfectly:

it is as if an error slipped into an author’s [God’s] writing

²⁵Alighieri 2003, Canto VII, 51-52.

²⁶Kierkegaard 1983, p. 72.

²⁷Ibid., p. 73.

²⁸Ibid., p. 73.

and the error [Satan] become conscious of itself as an error [Satan]—perhaps it actually was not a mistake but in a much higher sense an essential part of the whole production—and now this error [Satan] wants to mutiny against the author [God], out of hatred toward him, forbidding him to correct it and in maniacal defiance saying to him: No, I refuse to be erased; I will stand as a witness against you, a witness that you are a second-rate author [God].

Satan is the error of God's good plan, and his only goal is to offend God in the hopes of driving an unbridgeable wedge between God and man. In the next section, we see how this broken bridge becomes the defining characteristic of Christianity, which is one reason why the demonic is ranked so highly. When despair reaches such a high degree of intensity, a defining threshold is reached. Demonic despair, in maintaining this misrelation between God and man, is defiant in that "as a demoniac he loves his sickness."²⁹ Thus, through the figure of an actual demon, the higher demon, it is possible to make sense of the higher type of defiant despair: demonic despair.

4 The dialectic of the state of sin

With the story of Dante's descent into the inferno in hand, it is possible to turn back to the original question: why does Anti-Climacus characterize the demonic as the highest form of despair? Such a claim might seem counterintuitive. For given a basic understanding of the Christian dialectic of good and evil, of God and Satan, it would seem that the demonic should be the lowest form of being, the form furthest from a true God-relationship. The teachings of Christ are commonly understood to demand that his followers overcome sin and the temptation of the devil and strive towards God, not the demonic, which would make the direction of the gradations of the ladder of despair seem inverted. Contrary to traditional readings of Christianity, the demonic, according to Anti-Climacus, is the highest form of despair. The ladder of despair is, in a sense, inverted Christianity. To confuse matters

²⁹Kierkegaard 2007, p. 1.341 (XI.1 A 270).

even further, Anti-Climacus goes so far as to say that “there is nothing meritorious about being in despair to a higher degree . . . ethically, the more intensive form of despair is further from salvation than the lesser form.”³⁰ So, the confusion remains: how can the highest form of despair be, simultaneously, so far from the salvation? One way to address this paradoxical situation is to turn to the similarities in the nature of the demoniac and that of the good man.

Anti-Climacus says, there is “the same attitude in a demoniac as in the good man.”³¹ This attitude is “internal consistency.”³² The nature of the good man remains internally consistent with the good, dwelling in the constant state of repenting his sins. The nature of the demoniac, however, “is consistent in the consistency of evil.”³³ The point is to recognize the consistency in the state in which each type of man exists: the state of repentance of sin or the state of sin. If either man had “one single moment of inconsistency . . . he would perhaps never be himself again.”³⁴ Both men must thus remain true to their nature, never falling into the temptation to turn to evil or good, respectively. Formally, they are structurally identical, or at least isomorphic; they only differ in terms of content or direction: for the good man, repentance, for the demoniac, sin.

Perhaps even more confusing is that Anti-Climacus claims that, while demonic sin is the highest form, the more intensive the despair, the further one is from God. Traditionally, the good man would appear to be closest to God, while the demoniac would be further from God. Yet the matter is not that simple, for there are “dreadfully deranged” “ratios of distance.”³⁵ Whether it is the despair of the good man or demonic despair, Anti-Climacus says, “because it lies very close to the truth, it is infinitely far away;” the same ratio holds in the opposite direction.³⁶ This is where the complicated nature of the Christian dialectic

³⁰Kierkegaard 1983, p. 101.

³¹Ibid., p. 108.

³²Ibid., p. 108.

³³Ibid., p. 108.

³⁴Ibid., p. 108.

³⁵Ibid., p. 108, 114.

³⁶Ibid., p. 67.

tic comes to the fore. If one is a good man, then he is both infinitely far away and infinitely close; if one is a demoniac, he is infinitely close and infinitely far away. Put differently, as one becomes increasingly conscious of the state of sin in which one exists, as one's despair continues to intensify, one both approaches and sinks away from the God-relationship.

Consider the position Lucifer held prior to his defiant challenge and subsequent fall from being the most beautiful angel, the most blessed creature, the being closest to God to the lowest circle of hell, the farthest point from God. Again, Christian dialectics is clearly at work. That is, the one who was closest to God, Lucifer, is now the farthest from God, but the notions of farthest and closest are quickly, and continuously, inverted. Ontologically considered, God needs Satan as the opposing force, that against which goodness must fight. The whole Christian drama would not make sense if there were no evil in the world, no sin, no temptation. In this sense, the most highly ranked despair—spiritual despair or sin of the good man—is only possible due to the demonic, in the mythic form, the existence of Satan. So, as one climbs the ladder of despair and approaches God one is simultaneously approaching Satan. Satan and God, although as far apart as possible, are also closest together. So, it would make sense to rank demonic despair as highly as possible, for the demonic is the negative pole of the spiritual and is therefore next to godliness.

To review, although they differ in terms of content or direction, both the good man and the demoniac are structurally identical in that they remain internally consistent. What, then, is the point of this dialectic if, no matter what one does, it is impossible to actually achieve salvation and become one with God? This very impossibility is actually the engine of the Christian dialectic. Christianity, *Anti-Climacus* argues, necessitates an infinite qualitative distance, from God. The true God-relationship, then, is one that recognizes this unbridgeable distance, one that does not pretend to be able to overcome this “infinite, chasmic, qualitative abyss” but situates itself at the edge of this abyss.³⁷ Striving for forgiveness or for sin always misses the divine,

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 129.

for a God-relationship cannot be established directly. And what is it that continues to invert the dialectic, what is the engine of this Christian dialectic? The possibility of offense. As Anti-Climacus says, the “possibility of offense is . . . the guarantee whereby God protects himself against man’s coming too close. . . . [It] is the dialectical element in everything essentially Christian.”³⁸ The possibility of offense is what maintains the distance separating God and man by constantly inverting the approach and the fall. This distance is embodied by the defiant demon Lucifer. In this way, the dialectic is never completed, but remains turning in a state of sin. How does Anti-Climacus characterize the state of sin? As he says, “to remain in sin is of the devil.”³⁹ This is why “Christianity begins . . . with making every man . . . an individual sinner.”⁴⁰ The state of man is a state of sin; it is impossible to escape despair. Although God did become man in the form of Christ, he was unlike man in one important sense: sin. Christ was free from sin, and since man can never truly overcome sin (for to overcome sin would be to overcome man), God and man remain infinitely separated. Thus, due to the necessity of the demonic in the Christian dialectic, Anti-Climacus claims that demonic despair is the highest form of despair.

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³⁸Kierkegaard 1983, p. 125.

³⁹Ibid., p. 106.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 122.

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