Kierkegaard: the pathologist

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A pathologist in the normal sense deals with the «alien» or «invading» causes of bodily disease, viruses, bacteria, failure of the immunity defence system and so on. Even where the notion of morbidity is expanded metaphorically to include the human psyche or states of society as in Freud and Marx, it is assumed these states have external causes. Although, unlike both Freud and Marx, pathologists do not pretend to be similarly expert in the science of healing, it is the causes codified in pathology that you need to neutralize if you want to prevent or cure disease.

Both Marx and Freud are pathologists in this extension of the normal sense. Kierkegaard, though explicitly addressing what he calls a sickness, is not. He thinks the sickness is self-induced —not induced by *it*self, as could be said of any disease— but induced by the people whose sickness it is. In one sense it is of course true that the bodily and mental states which receive the attention of a pathologist may also be induced by the person whose states they are. People contract influenza by visiting badly ventilated public places in a time of epidemic, they can bring on headaches by reading in a bad light, or induce mental illness by taking drugs or living in certain kinds of straitened circumstance. But Kierkegaard claims something else: the morbid condition he discerns is one we «cause» just by wanting to be or to remain in it. Not only that, the very thought that the states he calls sickness are caused in the ordinary sense is itself, in his view, a morbid one, part of a state of sickness we choose to be in. It, too, finds its place in the nosology provided in *The Sickness unto Death*.

The sickness is called «despair», and Kierkegaard calls it a sickness of the spirit. Spirit is not some ethereal addition to the human psychosoma, some even more refined ghost in the machine, but the fact that human beings are self-conscious. In the first instance this means only that linguistically mature human beings can use the first-person pronoun. Since despair itself, however, is defined as the *wish to be rid of oneself*[1], the term «self» as it occurs in

1. Søren KIERKEGAARD, *Samlede Værker* , ed. by A. B. Drachmann, J. L. Heiberg and

«oneself» here must refer to something other than this mere grammatical ability. But whatever it is, this self we morbidly want to be rid of must be something (though not of course a «thing») the wanting or not wanting to be of which is somehow under our control. Since it would be incautious in a post-Freudian age to deny that there were unconscious wishes of wanting to be rid of things (or people), it will be a decided advantage if whatever sense we can make of Kierkegaard's notion of a sickness of the spirit made allowance for phenomena of the kind Freud attempted to explain by referring to wishes that are unconscious. To say what Kierkegaard's pathology of selfhood is one must first point out what it is not. A contemporary pathology of selfhood would codify insights into the difficulties of forming and sustaining personal identity: not knowing what to make of oneself or what to count important in life. Such a pathology arises in response to such psychosociological facts as that in today's societies it is harder than it once was to be engaged in activities that give us a sense of personal worth. There is an interest in studying the ways in which people fail to find identities or, having become selves of a sort, the factors that prevent them maintaining them. We find insights very similar to these in Kierkegaard, so much so that many people see in him a prophet of this modern *malaise*. But his pathology contains one feature that makes it altogether different. He provides a reason for enduring the sufferings of emergent selfhood.

So far the only reason in the pathology sketched here could be some claim about selfhood containing the promise of a happier or more stable life. The reason would be utilitarian, which is to say that if the pain outweighed the gains it would be better to give up the struggle. The reason would be no less utilitarian if selfhood was said to be a condition of the social stability needed for longer-term happinesses. Kierkegaard takes whatever he means by selfhood to be a mode of personal fulfilment. Any attempt to turn one's back on the task of becoming a self becomes a denial of one's destiny or one's being. The advantage of Kierkegaard's view is that it expresses the sense people have, before they lose it as they often do, of being inherently worthwhile. Those who preserve this sense see in a utilitarian justification a mere makeshift, a vain attempt to find some general positive norm in some part of the repertoire of human behaviour that is shared by everyone. The attempt is vain because it fails conspicuously to address the question of why it is so important to be human. If it is objected that Kierkegaard merely begs that question, one may reply that it is better to beg a question than not to face it.

Because they see him as a prophet of our contemporary *malaise*, interpreters of Kierkegaard often represent his view as a rather banal one. What despairers fail to do is reveal themselves to the world or even to themselves. They

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H.O. Lange, Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1962, *SV3* 15, 79; *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. by Alastair Hannay, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1989, p. 50. References to the latter are given following those to the Danish edition.

fail to pull themselves together into integrated sources of initiative. Taking their cue from Assessor Wilhelm's advice to «choose oneself», these interpreters assume that to despair in Kierkegaard's sense is to let one's life fritter away in short-term enterprises, responding to the moment instead of organizing one's life around a firm intention or life-plan.

There is much in Kierkegaard that supports this view, the theme of irresoluteness and criticism of activity that is really only a case-by-case response to outside circumstances are to be found in his earliest public talk and crop up constantly in the early works, notably *Either/Or*. At first it looks as though Kierkegaard were concerned mainly with the way in which people fail to become thoroughly socialized. But in *The Sickness unto Death* the manner of integration is been changed and its centre shifted. Kierkegaard talks now of loss of self as something that can pass unnoticed, «unlike every other loss: an arm, leg, fifty dollars, a wife, etc.» (*SV3* 15, 90/62-63) The reason is that presenting a consistent face to the world in the way thoroughly socialized people can, is a most effective means of refusing either to be or to take up the question of becoming what Kierkegaard means by «oneself». A budding violinist loses an arm, a promising athlete a leg; a thrifty man loses fifty dollars, a proud husband his wife. Naturally they despair. But according to Kierkegaard their real despair is something else. It is the thought that you are nothing if not a violinist, an athlete, solvent, or wed.

The self one loses behind these facades is a self that has no defining characteristics. If one regains this self, just as there is nothing to be pointed to as its loss, there is nothing that can be pointed to as its repossession. But what can such an invisible selfhood amount to? Although Kierkegaard talks of a «naked» self with no distinction other than its sense of particularity, in other words a self reduced to mere grammatical reflexivity, this is still only the «abstract form of the self», its «most abstract possibility.» (*SV3* 15, 122/99) Selfhood proper must take some shape in the world, in the form of distinguishable concerns and deeds. The point is not that no descriptions should apply but that when descriptions do apply, the value of the concerns and activities in question now resides not in the mutual evaluations we make of people on the basis of such descriptions, but in the activity having its source in the self's sense of doing God's will.

Kierkegaard talks of two main kinds of despair. One of them is an unwillingness to be a self of this kind. Willingness to be such a self would mean accepting that finite successes (or failures) don't count. But it would also mean admitting that thinking they do count is simply a convenient way of protecting oneself from the thought that they do not. This is a typical piece of Kierkegaardian pathology: in suiting their goals to their abilities as they see them, people are shrinking from the tests that really face them. A preoccupation with achievement or with cutting an admirable figure, chasing success, all this is a defensive strategem. The other main kind of despair is that of those who see that this is the case but refuse to bow to the thought that their selves have their origin in God. They take it upon themselves to define

their own standards of success, possibly ambitious standards in their way, and in conforming with these they become their «own» selves rather than selves centred on God. Kierkegaard calls this kind of despair defiance.

In an extreme version, a contemporary pathology might see nothing wrong with the individual and take the «illness» to reside in society. The individual need make no adjustments that will not occur automatically once the environment has been made healthy. Kierkegaard makes repeated claims that his own age is an age of despair, and points out that there are plenty of social roles behind which one can hide one's lack of selfhood. But for Kierkegaard it is not society that should change but the individual. If society is sick, that is an expression of a sickness in its members individually.

Kierkegaard calls it a sickness «unto death». His reason is that it is a project that cannot be completed; you cannot die from your self, not even by physically dying, since the self you are transcends your physical and social persona. That also means that human fulfilment calls for support from a transcendent source. To be cured of despair you must have faith but also have it in more than some abstract intellectual sense. It is a matter of the self as a whole. The recipe for being rid of despair and gaining oneself is: «in relating to itself and wanting to be itself, the self is grounded tranparently in the power that established it.» (*SV3* 15, 71/44)

Objections spring to one's lips. But take care! If they spring too quickly you may be playing into your respondent's hands. He might take the very speed with which your objections come to mind as evidence of a refusal that is more than just intellectual. The thought behind Kierkegaard's pathology is that where one denies things because one wants to, one may find that wanting to do so one is a way of defending oneself against the hidden fear that what one wants to deny may after all be true. The question is how «hidden» a fear can be when the hiding belongs to «spirit» and is therefore something for which we are accountable. At least it would be a mistake to think that for Kierkegaard a person «suffering» from despair is at every moment in a situation of choice where the options of health and disease clearly present themselves. That at any rate would make it impossible for the fears to be hidden. But for Kierkegaard the most common forms of despair are those in which the choice is not clearly in view. The despairer may talk and behave as though some such choice had been made, and indeed it is typical of some despairing to assume that the decision in favour of health has already been made, or even that it has been defiantly rejected in favour of something the despairer may even call despair. But the real despair that Kierkegaard talks about in *The Sickness unto Death* lies in the fact, as that work claims, that these people are guarding themselves against having to take the *real* choice —a choice they would have to make against the backdrop of the realization that in merely finite terms they are *nothing*. They are holding this crucial insight at arm's length, pretending that it isn't something they really have to face. The subterfuges can be subtle, for instancey substituting an easier version of the choice that converts the issue of despair/not-despair into one grasped in terms one

can accept, that is to say, in terms of what on a reasonable assessment life seems to offer. «Despair» then ensues when the assessment proves too optimistic and relief or rejoicing when it doesn't. Normally, when you turn your back on something you know what is behind you.

The protective attitude Kierkegaard talks about is something at once less conscious and more diffuse. It may take the form of a rigidly preserved self-satisfaction, but equally it can be found in certain kinds of escapism where limitations of ability are ignored and life tends to be lived in the realm of fantasy. Mostly, according to Kierkegaard, the protective attitude which he calls despair is to be found in the emphatic way people count on certain things happening or not happening. His diagnostic observation is that the investment in no way matches the result if the latter is grasped as the purely finite circumstance it is. The same diagnosis may apply to the emphatic and self-righteous ways in which we reject such notions as «spirit» or «God».

Faced with a «case» that refused to accept his diagnosis, what would Kierkegaard do? The stock response, «Your refusal only shows I'm right», is of course unsatisfactory for reasons well formulated by Popper. If the pattern of conversation continues in that way the chances are that the «view» behind the diagnosis has no meaning. One may on Popperian grounds resist the conclusion that because it lacks *empirical* meaning such a claim lacks meaning altogether so that the view may have some heuristic value in the developing of theories that do have empirical content. One may even preempt the need to resort to that defence by allowing to first-personal insight an evidential status equal to that accorded to statements of observation, claiming that exposure to the collective insights of a writer like Kierkegaard can enhance a sense of their rightness. But of course it could be claimed equally that the exposure can have a damagingly ideological effect. Given Kierkegaard's reputation for eccentricity, this possibility may prompt the question, Do you trust a pathologist himself considered by many to be «pathological»? Some, like Adorno, would expose him to a competing pathology in which his very concept of selfhood assumes morbid aspects.

Rather than look for an independent platform from which to judge the merits of one «anthropathology» against those of another, it may be more fruitful just to let the competing views, as visions, fight for allegiance in the minds and hearts of those whose grasp of life is broad and deep enough to allow them to test them in the light of their own experience. It is still possible to do that in a context familiar to Kierkegaard himself. Whether or not God is dead, contrary to many's belief Hegel is certainly still very much alive. Current Hegelians are people who would look upon quite a lot of what Kierkegaard describes as despair as healthy participation in society. Against the meliorism inherent in Hegel and the idea that fulfilment occurs at the end of history, Kierkegaardians can see human fulfilment as a possibility even in socially oppressive circumstances and thus history itself the proper domain of the human.

The visions are very different but Hegel and Kierkegaard are both optimists about the value of the commonplace and everyday. The difference is

that where Hegel thinks that we will find the values are validated by reason, Kierkegaard believes that, if they are there at all, it must be by our assisting them and allowing them to flourish. For that we must loosen the grip we allow the world to have on us and cease to tailor our hopes to our normal expectancies. Instead of clinging on to our deficiencies because it is they that give us our distinction, or pointing to our inabilities or weaknesses as excuses, and then generalizing them on behalf of humankind as a kind of proof of man's imperfectibility —proof even of the falsity of the picture of man that speaks of this as *im*perfection— we should accept our weaknesses for what they are and look at them as indications that the task is that more difficult. (*SV3* 15, 126/103) Pathology is properly considered a science of the inflictions impeding human fulfilment. Kierkegaard's science is of the subtle strategems mankind deploys to deny itself fulfilment. The aim of pathology is to minimize suffering («pathos» in the original sense). Kierkegaard is concerned with a sickness of the spirit which morbidly extends this aim into an area where certain kinds of suffering are actually called for. Consistently for someone who claims that in matters of spirit words must acquire a transferred (*overført*) sense, for Kierkegaard a «pathology» —though he never uses the word— of the self as spirit would be a science not of human suffering but of human faint-heartedness in the face of the pains of separation attending the individual's development as a spiritual being.