

The Sickness Unto Death – Study Guide

Søren Kierkegaard

Overview

The Sickness Unto Death is a philosophical and psychological exploration of the human self, despair, and the relationship between the individual and God. Kierkegaard argues that the greatest form of despair is not physical death but spiritual death – being alienated from one’s true self and from God.

The book is written under the pseudonym **Anti-Climacus**, representing an idealized Christian perspective beyond ordinary faith.

The Central Idea

Kierkegaard defines the human being as:

A synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity.

The self is not just something we are born with – it is something we must **become**.

Despair arises when this synthesis is misaligned.

What Is the Self?

Kierkegaard defines the self as:

“A relation that relates itself to itself.”

This means:

- The self is not merely the body
- Not merely the mind
- Not merely personality

The self is:

- Awareness of oneself
- The ability to reflect
- The capacity to choose what one becomes

True selfhood requires grounding in something higher — for Kierkegaard, this is God.

What Is Despair?

Despair is the central concept of the book.

Kierkegaard defines despair as:

A misrelation in the self.

It is not always emotional sadness. Many people are in despair without knowing it.

He calls despair:

“The sickness unto death”

Meaning:

- A spiritual sickness
 - A condition of the soul
 - A life lived disconnected from one’s true nature
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The Three Forms of Despair

1. Despair of Not Being Aware of Having a Self

This is the most common form.

Characteristics:

- Living automatically
- Being absorbed in society
- Chasing pleasure, status, or distraction
- Never asking deeper questions

This person:

- Lives comfortably
- Appears normal
- But never becomes an individual

Kierkegaard considers this a hidden despair.

2. Despair of Not Wanting to Be Oneself

This is despair of weakness.

Characteristics:

- Self-rejection
- Shame
- Escapism
- Wanting to disappear into distractions or roles

This person:

- Knows they are a self
- But refuses to accept themselves

Examples:

- Losing oneself in entertainment
- Living only to meet expectations
- Avoiding responsibility for one's life

3. Despair of Wanting to Be Oneself (Defiant Despair)

This is despair of pride.

Characteristics:

- Trying to define oneself completely independently
- Rejecting dependence on God or anything higher
- Radical self-assertion

This person says: "I will be myself on my own terms."

But Kierkegaard argues: The self cannot ground itself alone.

The Role of God

For Kierkegaard:

The self becomes whole only when:

The self rests transparently in the power that established it.

Meaning:

- Accepting dependence on God
- Recognizing one's limitations
- Living in humility and faith

Faith is not blind belief.

Faith is:

- Trust
 - Surrender
 - Alignment with truth
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Why Despair Is Worse Than Physical Suffering

Physical suffering ends with death.

Despair:

- Can last a lifetime
- Can go unnoticed
- Can hollow a person from within

Kierkegaard argues that many people live and die without ever becoming a true self.

Consciousness and Responsibility

The more aware a person becomes:

- The more responsibility they have
- The more possibility for despair
- But also the more possibility for freedom

Awareness increases both:

- Risk
 - Greatness
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The Importance of Becoming an Individual

Kierkegaard strongly opposes:

- The crowd
- Mass thinking
- Blind conformity

He believes: Truth is found in inwardness, not popularity.

The individual must:

- Stand alone
- Think deeply

- Confront themselves honestly
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Key Themes

1. The Self Is a Task

You are not finished. You are something to be shaped.

2. Despair Is Universal

Everyone experiences it in some form.

The difference is: Some recognize it. Some do not.

3. Faith Is the Cure

Not comfort. Not success. Not distraction.

Faith restores the self.

Practical Takeaways

From a practical standpoint, the book teaches:

- Become aware of your inner life
- Do not live automatically
- Accept responsibility for who you become

- Do not lose yourself in the crowd
 - Seek truth inwardly
 - Recognize dependence rather than pretending independence
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A Simple Summary

Human beings are:

- Finite and infinite
- Temporary and eternal
- Free yet constrained

Despair happens when we:

- Refuse who we are
- Ignore who we are
- Try to be ourselves without grounding

The cure is: Faith and alignment with the source of our being.

Reflection Questions

1. Am I living consciously or automatically?
 2. Do I accept myself or resist myself?
 3. What am I grounding my life in?
 4. Am I becoming an individual or disappearing into the crowd?
 5. What would it mean to live transparently and truthfully?
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Final Insight

Kierkegaard's deepest message:

The greatest tragedy is not death.

The greatest tragedy is never becoming yourself.