
This is a very welcome translation of a work of a much-needed sort: a detailed critical analysis of Kierkegaard's substantial philosophical contributions—in this case, his bold and original account of what it is to be in despair. First published in 1993, Theunissen's book contains two, relatively free-standing studies of Kierkegaard's major work on this theme, *The Sickness unto Death*. The first aims to develop an 'immanent critique' of this text by locating its most basic theoretical commitments, considering how far it remains true to these principles, and correcting it where it does not. By contrast, the lengthier second study offers a 'transcending critique'—where this involves a detailed examination of various points in the text deemed to reveal certain basic flaws in Kierkegaard's overall scheme. Theunissen remarks at some length on his own methodological procedures, and although these remarks are often programmatic and sometimes obscure (darkly alluding, for example, to something called 'classical phenomenology'), the division of labour between the two studies is clear enough and affords an admirably sustained critical focus.

The primary aim of the first study is to show that the central tenets of Kierkegaard's theory can be derived as consequences of a single, fundamental principle. What Theunissen dignifies with this foundational role is this: 'We do not will to be directly who we are' (p. 5). This claim, he explains, says that 'we moderns' do not will to be the beings we are, *qua* humans, *qua* 'selves' and *qua* instances of 'pre-given Dasein'. Very roughly, this latter terminology picks up Kierkegaard's various distinctions between an individual considered as a member of humankind, as an agent of free, self-relating activity and as a concrete entity in the world. So the idea is that the basic motivation and structure of Kierkegaard's analysis of despair crucially depends on this claim, the claim that we moderns somehow fail to identify with ourselves as human beings, as self-relating agents and as beings in the world.

Some things are immediately puzzling about Theunissen's fundamental principle, however. For one thing, it is not made clear in what sense it is supposed to be a *principle*—on the face of it, at least, it is a historical hypothesis. For another thing, Theunissen expressly characterizes the distinction between not willing to be oneself *qua* 'self' and not willing to be oneself *qua* 'pre-given Dasein' in terms of Heidegger's distinction between the 'existential' and the 'existentiell'—only to go on to charge Kierkegaard with confusing this distinction. But in the absence of any reason to think Kierkegaard would endorse the framework set by these Heideggerian terms, this seems a dangerously anachronistic line of reconstruction and criticism. Again, although Theunissen is surely right that Kierkegaard's analysis of despair crucially depends on this claim, the claim that we moderns somehow fail to identify with ourselves as human beings, as self-relating agents and as beings in the world.

Nonetheless, the central claim Theunissen wants to defend here is striking and important. The claim is that Kierkegaard's official line is seriously misleading, the official line, that is, which endorses a no-priority thesis about the relation between forms of despair in which one does not will to be oneself and forms in which one does will to be oneself. Theunissen's criticism is threefold. First, when Kierkegaard refers to a form of despair in which one does will to be oneself what, for the most part, he really has in mind is a form of despair in which one wills to be something which one is *not*, i.e. some kind of construction or fantasy. But, second,
it appears in the light of this that, contrary to the no-priority thesis, the form of despair in which one does not will to be oneself is antecedent to the form in which one does will to be what one is not. For the asymmetry is this: that N wills to be what he is not presupposes that N does not will to be what he is; whereas that N does not will to be what he is does not presuppose that N wills to be what he is not. And, third, Theunissen claims that, despite his official line, Kierkegaard actually presents the form of despair in which one does will to be oneself as basic and prior—something he puts down to Kierkegaard’s ulterior aim to present despair ultimately as some sort of revolt against God.

Crucial here is Theunissen’s reasoning that, since Kierkegaard characterizes what it is not to be in despair precisely in terms of one’s willing to be oneself he cannot be taken at his word when he identifies a form of despair in just these terms. It is not clear, however, that this reasoning is sound. By analogy, the view that the one who is free from irrationality is peculiarly sensitive to reasons, for instance, is not obviously incompatible with the view that important forms of being irrational involve perverse kinds of sensitivity to reasons—plainly, much will depend here on whether a distinctively irrational kind of sensitivity to reasons can be convincingly made out. Likewise, Theunissen’s criticisms turn on the issue whether Kierkegaard convincingly distinguishes a despairing kind of will to be oneself from the kind of will to be oneself he finds characteristic of the one who is not in despair. Theunissen makes a case to be answered, at any rate, that he does not.

Having offered a rather sweeping survey of the significance of The Sickness unto Death vis-à-vis Heidegger and Sartre, Theunissen moves on to his second study, ‘On the Transcending Critique of Kierkegaard’s Analysis of Despair’. Amongst the many acute observations and thought-provoking criticisms which make up this study, the following emerges as central. Kierkegaard’s approach, Theunissen argues, systematically underplays the significance of objective—that is, the object-centred—forms of despair. For Kierkegaard apparently wants to bring all forms of despair within the orbit of possible ways in which we relate to ourselves. To be sure, he does describe a form of despair, the so-called ‘despair of weakness’, in which one despairs over some external event, such as the loss of a loved one through unfaithfulness or death. In Kierkegaard’s view, however, the despair here lies not in the immediate experience of the actual event of a loved one’s death, say, nor in reflection on this event as such, but rather in reflection on the significance of the event for oneself, on one’s own state of loss. Thus, for Kierkegaard, despair is a distinctively reflective, subject-centred state. Theunissen, on the other hand, wants to show that there is a perfectly robust, and explanatorily basic, sense of despair as immediate despair over some external event. He highlights, for example, the possibility that the one who despairs over the death of another may despair not merely over his own loss, but also over the loved one’s loss, their loss of life. And he further argues that Kierkegaard’s refusal to acknowledge object-centred forms of despair is at odds with several features of his own analysis.

Theunissen’s discussion here is rich and subtle, calling out for extended discussion. In Kierkegaard’s defence, we may simply note here that it is certainly natural to suppose that it is distinctive of the concept of despair that it has an ineluctably reflective element—plausibly, this is one of the things that distinguishes despair from such concepts as pain and distress, for example. But, again, Theunissen develops a powerful case that certain crucial aspects of Kierkegaard’s account of despair are at best underdeveloped, and that this seriously undermines the conclusions he draws, for example, about the relationship between the concepts of despair and defiance.