

Morals of Despair

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, drawing from the ideas of the 19th-century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, a self-proclaimed “physician of the soul”, we are going to explore whether conformity and the pursuit of social status and acceptance be a strategy used to hide this despair, not just from others, but from ourselves and what is the most functional and potent antidote to the despair that torments so many in the modern world.

Keywords: Despair, Morals, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Jung.

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I. INTRODUCTION

“That one is in despair is not a rarity; no, it is rare, very rare, that one is...not in despair.” ~ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* [1]

Is it within our reach to believe that we are leading towards a good life, but in existence to be in a censorious and critical state of despair and anxiety? In this paper, drawing from the ideas of the 19th-century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, a self-proclaimed “physician of the soul”, we are going to explore these questions.

II. MORALS OF DESPAIR

“The common view, which assumes that everyone who does not think or feel he is in despair is not or that only he who says he is in despair is, is totally false.” wrote Søren Kierkegaard in his book "The Sickness Unto Death" [1].

Customarily, despair has been defined as the absence of all hopes that we can expect and possible action that we can take with regard to our desires, whether it is a matter of satisfying them or destroying them for the sake of ourselves or others, yet according to Kierkegaard, a more encompassing definition of despair is that it is a developmental failure of the self. Most individuals face this failure not because they have done too little of what they want to do or what they are supposed to do, but because they have done too little of what sparks the light within them. An individual is in despair when he or she is not moving in the direction of the person they potentially could be, or in Kierkegaard’s words, despair is the consequence of: “...not willing to be the self which one truly is.” The philosopher Stephen Evans in his book on Kierkegaard [2] expands on this conception of despair: “Kierkegaard, like Nietzsche a half-century later, sees the human self not simply as a finished product, a kind of entity, but as a developing process.

A self is not simply something I am but something I must become...To be a self is to embark on a process in which one becomes something...Essentially, a person is in despair if they fail to be fully a self. An awareness of the emptiness of self-results in that feeling we normally call despair....”

To become the self, what one needs to do is to truly necessitate the actualization and fulfilment of all our hidden potentials and the full realization of all the elements of our personality and self-consciousness that exist in embryonic form within ourselves. In the brevity and briefness of human life we can scarcely ever approach this ideal of full selfhood, distinctiveness, individualism and a unique identity, but according to Kierkegaard to move towards such a state is the greatest and most rewarding of tasks, or as Rollo May put it into words is his book "The Meaning of Anxiety" [3]: “To will to be himself is man’s true vocation...blockages in self-awareness [occur] because the individual [is] unable to move through accumulations of anxiety at various points in his growth. Kierkegaard makes it clear that selfhood depends upon the individual’s capacity to confront anxiety and move ahead despite it.”

Some people make great strides in the direction of full selfhood and unique identity. These are individuals of great character and radiant personality. “To be independent of public opinion if the first formal condition for achieving anything great,” wrote Hegel [4]. Most people, however, become stunted in their development, and instead of progressing toward the ideal of the “self which one truly is” they regress away from it.

Bad influences of people around us, bad luck, or just plain laziness of our work and fear of taking actions and their consequences are the most common culprits of this failure. In my personal opinion, which I have experienced not just in others, but in myself too, a bad company of friends and people around us plays a major role in how you think and act. Don’t just think that a close friendship with people you admire and respect is what necessary for social status

and acceptance. 19th-century Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote

“A large part of friendship is based on humiliation and people really like to see their best-friends being humiliated, this is an old truth known to all intelligent people”.

Many other things can reverse your progress other than just bad friendship and a bad company of people around us, it depends on your priority of things that you pay attention to.

Of those who are stunted in their development, some are conscious of their predicament and so aware of their despair which according to Kierkegaard is a prognostically positive sign. For the more we feel our despair, the more we will be motivated to search for ways to overcome it, or as the philosopher, Michael Watts writes in his book on Kierkegaard [5]: “...it would be accurate to say that despair is the most precious sickness known to man, and so there is no reason to despair...if you are suffering from ‘existential despair’, since this is potentially your ‘ticket’ to freedom.”

But not all whose way of life is inhibiting the cultivation of a true self are conscious of the pit and hollow chasm of despair into which they are descending. Some individuals, for whom full consciousness and awareness of their situation would flood them with anxiety and despair, actually believe the life path they are on is right and proper and will lead to fulfilment and liberation. But according to Kierkegaard, these unfortunate souls are like the consumptive or the man or woman who is afflicted with an as-yet undetected degenerative disease, or as he wrote in his book "The Sickness Unto Death"[1]: “...the [unconscious] despairer is in the same situation as the consumptive; he feels best, considers himself to be healthiest, can appear to others to be in the pink of condition, just when the illness is at its most critical.” Two forces are impelling many of us in our day to this critical state. First: the corrupted state of a modern conformist lifestyle in which an individual follows traditional standards of conduct, convention, and

established customs, which in most cases are false and are based on selfish desires of people ruling the society. These traditional standards and establish customs remain unchanged for many generations and when followed by modern individuals creates despair and makes them question their own actions. And the second is a human proclivity toward self-deception in which an individual develops the tendency or practice of allowing oneself to believe that false or unvalidated feelings, ideas, or situations are true. Both of these impelling forces penetrate into every average and uneducated individual of the society and thus creates conflicts with people. A large amount of functioning of these two forces into society leaves no space for truth and reality. To be self is the biggest challenge in our modern society. Conformity is neither good nor bad, rather its value is dependent on the way of life it promotes.

If conformity promotes the healthy functioning of the body and mind, conformity is good, but if it stunts an individual's development then conformity is bad. In the modern world, conformity is more likely to cause us to regress from the ideal of full selfhood than to promote its flowering and this is due to the excessive focus that our society places on external values. Wealth, social status, social acceptance, popularity, good looks, and power over others are the dominant values for the modern conformist and this is creating psychologically crippled individuals. These psychologically crippled individuals not just are bad elements for themselves and the people around them, but rather such individuals are like a deadly disease, a deadly mind disease which creates retarded conformists in our society who further becomes the reason for major flaws in our society. For the world within must be mastered just as surely as the world outside of us and this means that to experience the cultivation of full selfhood and awareness, we must also focus on inner values such as emotional intelligence, psychological resilience, courage, integrity, tolerance, and the ability to think for ourselves and ability to think good for others. The

modern conformist with his outward focus neglects these inner values and so struggles to move in the direction of full selfhood and thus finds himself in despair, or as Kierkegaard wrote in his book "The Sickness Unto Death"[1]: "By seeing the multitude of people around, by being busy with all sorts of worldly affairs, by being wise to the ways of the world, such a person forgets himself...dares not believe in himself, finds being himself too risky, finds it much easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass-man. Now, this form of despair goes practically unnoticed in the world. Precisely by losing himself in this way, such a person gains all that is required for a flawless performance in everyday life, yes, for making a great success out of life...Far from anyone thinking him to be in despair, he is just what a human being ought to be. Naturally the world has generally no understanding of what is truly horrifying. The despair that not only does not cause any inconvenience in life, but makes life convenient and comfortable, is naturally enough in no way regarded as despair."

Conformity, however, both promotes despair and offers a way for a man or woman to deny his or her despair through self-deception. "Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself," wrote Wittgenstein and one of the forms of deception used by the conformist is to claim that there is nothing wrong with his way of life, rather there is merely something wrong with the external conditions of it. "I have not climbed enough rungs on the ladder of social-success and attained enough wealth and status," the conformist claims. Such crippled conformists become slave to other people's thinking, they do not act in the way that would be most advantageous to them, but rather they act in the way that would satisfy others hopes who pay attention of what they think and act because now that is what their life is. The conformist blame friends and family members for his unhappiness and despairs, as a result of these rationalizations and the false belief that the good life is a product of attaining certain external values he doubles down on his commitment

to conformity and in the process moves ever further away from recognizing that his despair is rooted in his one-sided preoccupation with externals. It is indeed very difficult to express in words to what level of self-destruction these psychologically crippled conformists can sink downwards in their identity to satisfy themselves. If these self-deceptions fail to push his feelings of despair and anxiety outside the periphery of awareness and self-control then the conformist turns to alcohol, drugs, sexual satisfaction, or the distracting pull of screens to help him remain oblivious as to the true nature and depths of his despair.

“At one moment it has almost become clear to him that he is in despair; but then at another moment it appears to him after all as though his indisposition might have another ground...something outside of himself, and if this were to be changed, he would not be in despair. Or perhaps, by diversions, or in other ways, e.g., by work and busy occupations as means of distraction, he seeks by his own effort to preserve an obscurity about his condition.”

~ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* [1]

To avoid the dangerous and self-threatening state of the conformist, Kierkegaard urged we develop the courage to accept that there may be errors and flaws in our ways and to realize that feelings of despair should be embraced and examined rather than denied: “The despairing man who is unconscious of being in despair is, in comparison with him who is conscious of it, merely a negative step further from the truth and from salvation.”

~ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* [1]

But becoming conscious of despair is only the first step as action must also be taken if the change is to be realized. This may include taking actions against self or others. One may embrace their first step towards becoming self-conscious by withdrawing themselves away from those people and habits that led them to develop such conformist behaviour in themselves. But before embracing this step they will at some point need to accept and become aware of the

fact that that they are conformist in their behaviour and are a slave to what other people think about them. Kierkegaard, therefore, recommends choosing a personalized ideal to shape the course of our life, one that promotes inner development and mastery of the outer world, as both are necessary to move towards full selfhood. We need, in other words, something to aim at that forces us to realize our potentials and this is best provided by discovering a purpose or what Kierkegaard calls a passion. “...existing cannot be done without passion.”

A passion is an idea, goal, or a way of life that is meaningful, enduring, and which by using it to structure our life produces an authentic expression of who we really are. People with passion have significant aspects of life and work. With a passion our life has direction; without a passion, we are but a passive drifter and thus susceptible to mindless conformity and the stunted development that lies at the root of despair that causes anxiety. Concerning the crucialness of discovering a passion, Kierkegaard wrote in his *Journal*: “To be clear in my mind what I am to do, not what I am to know, except in so far as a certain understanding must precede every action. The thing is to understand me...the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die.”

It is indeed not that difficult to become aware of our passion, but this isn't the case in every individual. In our society, there are two groups of people that we can classify into educated individuals and uneducated individuals. This classification needs further divisions because the line that separates educated individuals from those of uneducated individuals is very blurring. This is a very old and traditional way of judging people, but it is true that educated individuals have more access to understand the modern world and choose their passion, but it is very risky because acquiring the status of “being educated” involves the conventional way of schooling which limits our imagination, thus making difficult for individuals to progress in their passion even if they have found it.

Whereas, uneducated people haven't gone through the madness of their education system and are free to think and develop themselves in the way they want without any interference of other individuals, but now since they are uneducated, they might not have crippled their imagination, but they surely have limited their access to knowledge and understanding modern world. You see, being educated or uneducated doesn't make any difference because both have numerous advantages and disadvantages in themselves.

The passion, or idea, which holds and clench the flux of our self together and helps us grow towards full selfhood can be a value or set of values; we may live and die for adventure, love, creativity, beauty, freedom, or truth. Those values or set of values depends on the things that we prioritize. It can be something we cherish such as family, friends, personal and spiritual growth, or a vocation. Or it can be lofty and meaningful goals that form our life's purpose and which we are determined to achieve at all costs, for as Kierkegaard's philosophical brother in arms Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in an 1873 unpublished note: "For what purpose humanity is there should not even concern us: why you are there, that you should ask yourself: and if you have no ready answer, then set for yourself goals, high and noble goals, and perish in pursuit of them! I know of no better life purpose than to perish in attempting the great and the impossible."

Individuals of each generation, whether they be of the past generation or future generation, to make sure that they have a built a socially desirable status in wealth and name, any individuals today are more concerned and perturbed with keeping up with the latest fashion and technology, looking good on social media, attaining wealth and social status and in general conforming to whatever is adjudged socially acceptable, than they are with the state of their own self and the values of their life. Such psychologically ill acts are what creates conformist attitude in individuals and lead us to develop an attention-

grabbing identity within one-self. And so, Kierkegaard's insights serve as a much-needed antidote to the hollowness of our age. His philosophy is a reminder of the need to reflect on who we are and why we are doing what we are doing. His sharp awareness helps puncture the false claims and lies that we tell ourselves and lay hold of the motivations that can misleading lie behind our actions and behaviour. "For what will it profit a man if he gains the world, but loses his soul?" ~ Book of Matthew

Or as John Mullen wrote in his book "Kierkegaard's Philosophy: Self Deception and Cowardice in the Present Age": "Søren Kierkegaard was a philosopher of the human spirit. To come to understand what he is saying is to be challenged as a person, the challenge is in the form of an interrogation, the topic of which is very simple: you are an existing person, a human being; do you treat this fact with the seriousness and respect it demands? Or would you rather avoid the question?" "How can a man come to know himself? Never by thinking, but by doing. Try to do your duty and you will know at once what you are worth." ~ Goethe

Reflection and introspection can teach us who we are, other people can teach us what is possible, but only through action can we create a life worth living. "Do the work, then step back. The only path to serenity." ~ Lao-Tzu

But here is where most of us struggle by falling into the abyss of laziness. We introspect and discover a way towards a better future and self, but at the decisive moment when bold action or hard work is called for, we shirk from our duty and hide behind a wall of excuses. This is the main reason why most individuals lost many opportunities and remain under lifelong tutelage even though they were prepared to face their challenges. Laziness may seem like an attractive option that would provide ease, but it will never provide you the satisfaction that you will earn by doing bold work. Tomorrow we tell ourselves, but

tomorrow remains as today. Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th-century Danish philosopher, saw only one way out of this predicament. If we wish to escape from a life of laziness, passivity, stagnation, or mediocrity we must be willing to attend what he called 'the school of anxiety. For anxiety, according to Kierkegaard, is a Janus-faced phenomenon. It has a demonic and monstrous side which can ruin our life, but it also has a constructive side that can guide us toward the development of a greater self. Which of these two faces it will show depends, to a broad degree, on how we approach the anxiety eliciting situations of our life and tame it through heroic efforts.

To understand the role that anxiety plays in awareness and development of self, we must recognize that as humans we are placed in a unique predicament that separates us from all other species. Unlike all other creatures who are ruled by their instincts and necessities instead of desires and mindless conformity as we humans do, we must contend with our freedom. We can use our knowledge and imagination to create new possibilities and we can project our self into these alternative futures to see where they lead their way. Choosing among the paths of the possible and then taking the steps toward actualizing these possibilities is what leads to self-creation, and according to Kierkegaard, it is self-creation that is the ultimate task of man.

"The distinctive characteristic of the human being," wrote Rollo May "in contrast to the merely vegetative or the merely animal, lies in the range of human possibility and in our capacity for self-awareness of possibility. Kierkegaard sees man as a creature who is continually beckoned by possibility, who conceives of possibility, visualizes it, and by creative activity carries it into actuality." wrote Rollo May in his book "The Meaning of Anxiety"[3].

The problem that we all face is which of the paths through the possible should we choose? We squander most of our time in taking decisions and introspecting all possibilities, and in the brevity of lifetime passes by and we never get time to get hold of

our actions. If our goal is to live a fulfilling life, then one of the surest ways to accomplish this is to orient our self-creation around the ideal of self-realization. We need to choose the possibilities and prospects that permit the progressive unfolding of our latent potentials and that allows us to use our developed capacities in a self-expressive and creative manner. This requires a sacrifice, sacrifice of our flaws and ignorance, sacrifice of our previous identity, and conformist attitude. How each person self-realizes will differ in its particulars and priorities, but there is a general formula that can lead us in this direction – some have said follow your bliss, others have said find a passion, Kierkegaard would say follow your anxiety or as Soren Kierkegaard put it into words in his book "The Concept of Dread": "Possibility means I can, In a logical system it is convenient enough to say that possibility passes over into actuality. In reality, it is not so easy, and an intermediate determinant is necessary. This intermediate determinant is anxiety..."

Even though different individuals have a different identity and conformist attitude which corresponds to different despairs and psychological disorders (in very rare cases), each step on the path to self-realization and self-awareness is patterned the same – envision a possibility that could further our self-creation, experience the anxiety and despair that accompanies the possibilities of moving forward into an unforeseeable and open-ended future, but move forward in any case. If the prospects that we are embracing in our life are free of the intervening causality of anxiety, this is not a sign of productive mental health, but instead suggests that we are living in a manner that betrays our latent potential.

"The capacity to bear anxiety is important for the individual's self-realization and for his conquest of his environment. Every person experiences continual shocks and threats to his existence; indeed, self-actualization occurs only at the price of moving ahead despite such shocks. This indicates the constructive use of anxiety"

~ Rollo May, *The Meaning of Anxiety* [3].

Not every individual is psychologically prepared to take the despair of anxiety and therefore, unfortunately, most people do not use anxiety in this constructive and rewarding manner. Instead, many of us do all we can to nimble away from our anxiety. Some of us will go as far as to mislead ourselves with the false claim that we don't even desire a greater life and that comfort and security are best in these uncertain times. This is the lowest form of existence and these are exactly those psychologically crippled mindless coward individuals who prefer stagnation in their life. But what is overlooked at the moment of such a decision is the whole of something of what has been chosen – for in repudiating to move into the prospects that make us anxious, we have made a Faustian bargain (Faustian bargain, a pact whereby a person trades something of supreme moral or spiritual importance, such as personal values or the soul, for some worldly or material benefit, such as knowledge, power, or riches.). We gain some temporary comfort by avoiding the challenge that we are supposed to face and we remove the chance for our failure that comes with each step on the path towards self-realization, but we do so at a great cost. For these inconsequential procure is insipid in comparison to the suffering we set on ourselves when we refuse whole-hearted participation in the process of our self-creation:

“When a person sacrifices his right to self-expression [i.e., self-realization] for the sake of survival, his very survival is endangered, not from without but from within. With the surrender of the right to self-expression, the meaning of life is lost. This is not a psychological phenomenon only. Self-expression is the direct and immediate manifestation of the life force in an individual. Self-expression is equivalent to life expression and a life that isn't expressed isn't being lived. That leads to a slow death.”

~ Alexander Lowen. *The Voice of the Body* [6].

Carl Jung reflects Lowen's sentiments suggesting that those who deny to “launch out into life” must commit

a “partial suicide”. We must kill off the perimeter of ourselves that aspirates self-realization and we must kill off the side of ourselves that envisions the prospects of a greater life. In making this choice we beat a hasty retreat further and further into a shell of an ever-narrower comfort zone and as Lowen writes: “[This] shell . . . eventually becomes a tomb. The situation is truly tragic. To break out of the shell is to risk death but to stay in the shell, which is a living death, threatens one also with actual death, more inevitable but slower.”

~ Rollo May, *The Meaning of Anxiety* [3].

What segregates who escape from this calamitous state, from those who remain imprisoned in it to their dying breath? few factors seem exceptionally predominant. Firstly, we have to accept that action can be taken in the face of anxiety that we are facing due to a lack of psychological control on our side and there are innumerable examples of people who do this on a consistent basis. Believing that we must rid ourselves of anxiety before acting only breeds weakness, despair, constant procrastination, and potential dependence on drugs or alcohol. Such psychologically lazy individuals at last the last moment succumb to their lowest form of existence.

The second factor that is integral to breaking out of our shell of our anxiety is the awareness of the fact that it is up to us to do this, no one can move through our anxiety for us, no one can actualize our latent potential, no one can save us. Nathaniel Branden, a 20th-century psychotherapist suggested that one of the most positive prognostic signs among his patients was the full acceptance of this fact:

“One of the most important [revelatory] moments is when the client grasps that no one is coming. No one is coming to save me; no one is coming to make life right for me; no one is coming to solve my problems. If I don't do something, nothing is going to get better. The dream of a rescuer who will deliver us may offer a kind of comfort, but it leaves us passive and powerless. We may feel if only I suffer long enough, if only I yearn desperately enough, somehow

a miracle will happen, but this is the kind of self-deception one pays for with one's life as it drains away into the abyss of unredeemable possibilities and irretrievable days, months, decades."

~ Nathaniel Branden, *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem* [7].

Or as Friedrich Nietzsche put it into words "No one can construct for you the bridge upon which precisely you must cross the stream of life, no one but you yourself alone".

But there is a concluding factor that we must discuss, that is, the end may prove most Pivotal in our attempts to escape from a passive and mediocre existence – can we tap into that side of our being that craves disorder, chaos, and destruction, which makes us think that existence is indeed passive and mediocre, can we access what Carl Jung called our shadow?

"A dim premonition tells us that we cannot be whole without this negative side, that we have a body which, like all bodies, casts a shadow, and that if we deny this body, we cease to be three-dimensional and become flat and without substance. Yet this body is a beast with a beast's soul, an organism that gives unquestioning obedience to instinct. To unite oneself with this shadow is to say yes to instinct, to that formidable dynamism lurking in the background."

~ Carl Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*.

In the moments when our life perfectly hangs in the balance and we have the choice that we least anticipated – the choice of avoiding yet again or moving forward that envision a possibility that could further our self-creation. it is often not our wisdom that will push us to take the risk of going against all the calamities, nor the weighing of pros and cons, instead, it is something instinctual- a typically fixed pattern of our behaviour based on instincts, it is this formidable dynamism lurking within us.

III. CONCLUSION

The shadow side of our being can force us to take action even when our reasoning tries to pull us back

and our instincts are at times wiser than our cognitions. For life needs disorder in order to bring into existence a greater form of self-organization and destruction is often necessary to make way for the new. Every act of creation is first an act of destruction. Destruction, hence, like creation, is one of Nature's mandates. Saying yes to our shadow side, to the side of us that craves chaos and destruction, maybe what is needed for those individuals who have lived for too many years around the ideals of safety, security and comfort and who have for too long been trapped in a small life because of the refusal to take the bold risks that life requires.

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