



In Defense of the Devil's Despair

An Argument based on Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death*
and Milton's *Paradise Lost*

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Welcome to Class!

Introductions



- Tell me your name and why you are interested in this class in particular?
- Any experience reading Kierkegaard or familiarity with his philosophy?
 - Interest in or familiarity with the branch of philosophy known as existentialism?
 - Interest in the work of John Milton, English literature?
- Have you read or are you familiar with the narrative of *Paradise Lost*?
 - Favorite pastimes, hobbies, interests in life?
- Finally, how did you hear about the OLLI program, and are you taking other courses here as well this semester? Which Ones?

Overview for Today

- ❖ **INTRODUCTORY QUOTATION**
- ❖ **HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *PARADISE LOST* BY JOHN MILTON (1608-1674)**
- ❖ **OVERVIEW OF *PARADISE LOST***
- ❖ **WHO WAS SØREN KIERKEGAARD?**
- ❖ **OVERVIEW OF *THE SICKNESS UNTO DEATH***
- ❖ **SMALL DISCUSSION GROUP QUESTIONS**
- ❖ **LOOKING FORWARD (WEDNESDAY): HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF EXISTENTIALISM; OVERVIEW OF EXISTENTIALISM; KIERKEGAARD'S ORIGINAL SYNTHESIS AND SELFHOOD; FORMS OF DESPAIR; CONSCIOUSNESS; SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**



Introduction

- “For the Miltonist, Kierkegaard’s description of the demonic could hardly fit *Paradise Lost* more neatly [...] despite all that has been written about Milton’s Satan, significant new insight into his malaise are available from Kierkegaard, whose analysis of ‘demonic despair’ in *The Sickness unto Death* [...] often seems as if it were penned specifically with the existential position of Milton’s Satan in mind (Tanner 1992, 130, 146, as cited in Fremstedal, 2019, 5).

Paradise Lost

John Milton (1608-1674)

First Edition: 1667 (10 books)

Second Edition: 1674 (12 books)

Fourth Edition: 1688 (Illustrated)



Milton Dictating to His Daughter, 1794 (oil on canvas),
Fuseli, Henry (Fuseli, Johann Heinrich) (1741-1825)

Overview of *Paradise Lost*


- Epic poem, written in blank verse, retelling the biblical story of the Fall of Man.
- **Two main narrative arcs:**
 - **Man's Fall from Grace (The Book of Genesis)**
 - **Satan's fall from Grace (Books I-IV)**
- Milton's attempt to justify the ways of God to men
- *In medias res* (in the middle of the action)
- The Revenge of Satan: Corrupt humanity!
- Key characters: God, Satan, Eve, Adam
- Key themes: Free will, responsibility, the consequences of disobedience, the nature of good and evil, the omnipotence of God...
- For the purposes of our class: **DEMONIC DEFIANCE**

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)

- Danish philosopher, theologian, poet, social critic
- 19th century proto-existentialism
- "Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom"
- Man's simultaneous life as an individual in spirit (eternity) and as a citizen in society (time)
- Optimism as illusion, despair
- Philosophical analysis of Christian faith
- Theistic, faith as hope, edifying



Faith as True Ethic

- **Kierkegaard values faith above all else**
- **The pilgrimage of faith**
- *'the belief that in God the impossible is possible, that in Him time and eternity are one, that both life and death are meaningful. **Faith is the knowledge that man is creature [...] and yet responsible and free.** It is the acceptance of man's essential loneliness, to be overcome by the certainty that God is always with man; even 'unto the hour of our death'.*
- Faith through despair  Genuine freedom

Faith as True Ethic

Tro: faith/belief

- ❖ In the development of the self through the stages of life (**the pilgrimage of faith**), the experience of faith changes. As the individual reaches the ethical stage of personal commitment to others and the moral law, faith is committed to reason and the moral order of society, becoming a “reason to produce the social good”.
- ❖ Furthermore, **in faith the individual becomes the universal, ceases to be isolated, becomes meaningful and absolute; hence, in faith there is a true ethic.** And in faith, existence in society becomes meaningful, “too as existence in true charity”.

The Sickness Unto Death (1849)



The Resurrection of Lazarus, Engraving (1870)
Doré, Gustave (Paul Gustave Louis Christophe Doré)
(1832-1883)

- Søren Kierkegaard, writing pseudonymously as Anti-Climacus
- An illness that takes one to the grave.
- The “sickness” which Kierkegaard refers to in the title is resistance to the belief that Christ is the resurrection and the life.
- Spiritual sickness: A torment of being unable to live while simultaneously unable to escape existence truly.
- **Despair IS THE SICKNESS UNTO DEATH.**

The Sickness Unto Death (1849)

The Self is a **Relation, a Synthesis.**

Despair arises when there is a **"misrelation" within this synthesis.**

Three main forms of despair, increasing in intensity and consciousness.

Faith is the Antidote. Taking "the leap of faith" into Christ consciousness and standing before God from within.

Small Group Discussion Questions to Consider

- ❖ Have you ever experienced any of the following forms of despair in your life? Give an example.
 - ❖ 1. **Despair of not being conscious of having a self:** This is the most common form, where individuals are **unaware** they are in despair. They live superficially, absorbed in worldly matters, and avoid confronting their true selves or their relation to the eternal.
 - ❖ 2. **Despair of not willing to be oneself (weakness):** Here, the individual is **aware** of having a self but is unwilling to embrace it fully. They might wish to be someone else or try to escape their responsibilities, feeling trapped or inadequate.
 - ❖ 3. **Despair of willing to be oneself (defiance):** This is the most intense form, where the individual **defiantly wills** to be their own self, apart from God. They reject any dependence on a higher power, choosing self-creation and rebellion. Kierkegaard equates this most radical form of despair with sin.

Looking Forward to Wednesday, March 18th

- Historical Context of Existentialism
- Overview of Existentialism
- Kierkegaard's Original Synthesis and Selfhood
- Forms of Despair in *The Sickness unto Death*
- Consciousness
- Small Group Discussion Questions
- Looking Forward to Next Monday, March 25th