GENERAL

kierkegaard the sickness unto death

Published: September 3, 2026 | Index ID: #-

Kierkegaard's Concept of the Sickness Unto Death

When Søren Kierkegaard first introduced the idea of the **sickness unto death** in his seminal work *The Concept of Anxiety*, he was not merely describing a physical ailment but a profound existential condition that lies at the heart of human despair. In this article we will unpack Kierkegaard's original concept, explore its philosophical roots, and examine how it continues to resonate in contemporary discussions of anxiety, faith, and the human condition. Whether you are a philosophy student, a mental health professional, or simply curious about the intersection of existential thought and everyday life, this comprehensive guide will illuminate the layers of meaning behind Kierkegaard's chilling metaphor.

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What Is the Sickness Unto Death?

Kierkegaard's **sickness unto death** is a paradoxical term that captures the existential crisis of a person who is caught in a state of profound despair that ultimately leads to a kind of spiritual or moral death. It is not a medical diagnosis; rather, it is a metaphorical illness that manifests when an individual loses the capacity to recognize and affirm their own existence and moral agency. In Kierkegaard's view, this sickness is the culmination of two intertwined conditions: *anxiety*—the raw, unsettling feeling of potential freedom—and *despair*—the failure to live in accordance with one's authentic self.

Unlike ordinary sadness, the sickness unto death is a chronic, pervasive condition that erodes the very foundations of a person's identity. It is an existential ailment that can be diagnosed only by a philosophical or spiritual lens, not by a clinical one. Kierkegaard believed that this sickness could only be remedied through a radical act of faith, a leap that reestablishes a relationship with God and thereby restores the self's integrity.

Historical Context and Kierkegaard's Influences

Kierkegaard wrote in a period of intense intellectual upheaval. The early nineteenth century was marked by the rise of rationalism, the aftermath of the French Revolution, and the burgeoning influence of German idealism, especially the works of Hegel. Kierkegaard was deeply influenced by the existential angst that permeated Europe's intellectual circles, but he also drew heavily from Christian theology.

His father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, was a devout Lutheran, and this religious background shaped the way Kierkegaard approached questions of faith and doubt. Moreover, Kierkegaard's reading of the Bible—particularly the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac—provided a concrete example of the "leap of faith" that he

would later elaborate upon in his critique of despair.

In addition to theological influences, Kierkegaard was also responding to the philosophical currents of his time. He was critical of the systematic philosophy of Hegel, which he felt reduced individual subjectivity to an abstract, universal process. Kierkegaard's insistence on the primacy of individual experience and the existential necessity of choice set the stage for his later development of the concept of the sickness unto death.

Philosophical Foundations: Anxiety, Despair, and the Self

Before delving into the sickness itself, it is essential to understand the two philosophical pillars that underpin Kierkegaard's argument: anxiety and despair.

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard describes anxiety (or *Angst*) as the "dizziness of freedom." It is the unsettling awareness that one has the capacity to choose, and thus the potential to commit a sin. Anxiety is not a symptom of mental illness; it is a necessary condition for authentic self determination. It is the space in which the individual confronts the possibility of becoming who they are not.

Despair, according to Kierkegaard, is the self's failure to align with its true nature. He identifies three types of despair: (1) *despair of ignorance*—unawareness of the self's nature; (2) *despair of resistance*—the willful rejection of one's authentic identity; and (3) *despair of acceptance*—the surrender to a false self. The sickness unto death is the ultimate manifestation of despair, in which the self is not only unaware of its own nature but is also completely detached from any possibility of redemption or renewal.

These concepts are interrelated. Anxiety creates the possibility of freedom, while despair represents the failure to exercise that freedom. The sickness unto death is the point where despair has consumed the self entirely, leaving no room for hope or transformation.

Kierkegaard's Analysis of the Sickness Unto Death

Kierkegaard's exploration of the sickness unto death is a multi layered argument that integrates philosophical, theological, and psychological insights. He begins by asserting that the sickness is a **condition of the self**that arises when one loses the ability to recognize oneself as a living, moral being.

For Kierkegaard, the self is defined by its relationship with God. The sickness unto death occurs when the self becomes indifferent to this relationship, treating it as a mere intellectual abstraction rather than a lived reality. In this state, the individual's sense of purpose, morality, and identity evaporates.

Choice is central to Kierkegaard's philosophy. The sickness unto death is the result of an individual's persistent avoidance of making meaningful choices. When people repeatedly defer decisions, they create a void that despair fills. The self becomes a passive observer, unable to act with purpose or conviction.

The remedy for the sickness is a radical, paradoxical act: the leap of faith. This leap does not imply blind belief but a conscious decision to trust in God despite uncertainty. By making this leap, the individual reestablishes a connection with the divine, thereby restoring the integrity of the self and breaking the cycle of despair.

Modern Interpretations and Relevance

While Kierkegaard wrote over a century ago, his concept of the sickness unto death remains highly relevant in today's world of constant connectivity, information overload, and existential anxiety. Modern philosophers, psychologists, and theologians have built upon Kierkegaard's ideas, applying them to contemporary issues such as depression, burnout, and the search for meaning in a post materialistic society.

Existential therapy, pioneered by thinkers like Viktor Frankl and Rollo May, echoes Kierkegaard's emphasis on

choice and responsibility. Therapists today often address patients' "sickness unto death" by helping them confront their deepest fears and reconnect with authentic values.

The internet has created new spaces where individuals can experiment with multiple personas. While this can be liberating, it can also lead to a fragmentation of self that resembles Kierkegaard's despair. The sickness unto death may manifest as a feeling that one's online identity is a mere façade, devoid of real meaning.

As cultures intermingle, individuals often find themselves torn between multiple value systems. The tension between personal authenticity and social conformity can trigger a modern version of the sickness, wherein the self feels lost amid conflicting expectations.

Clinical Perspectives: Psychology and Psychiatry

Although the sickness unto death is a philosophical construct, it parallels several psychological conditions. Clinicians often see symptoms that echo Kierkegaard's description: chronic hopelessness, a sense of purposelessness, and an inability to commit to future goals.

Depression is frequently characterized by feelings of emptiness and a loss of meaning. In clinical terms, this can be seen as a manifestation of despair, where the patient's self is unable to function in a coherent way.

In high stress professions, burnout can erode an individual's sense of self. Moral injury—when one's core values are compromised—can also lead to a state similar to the sickness unto death, where the individual feels disconnected from their authentic identity.

- Existential Phenomenological Therapy focuses on meaning-making and encourages patients to confront existential anxieties.
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) can help patients restructure negative thought patterns that reinforce despair.
- Mindfulness and Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) teaches patients to accept uncertainty while committing to values-based action.

The Role of Faith and Religious Response

For Kierkegaard, faith is not a passive state but an active, transformative commitment. The sickness unto death is, in part, a failure of faith—an inability to trust in a higher purpose. Religious traditions offer various pathways to confront this sickness.

Christian theology speaks of repentance, redemption, and the promise of salvation. Kierkegaard's notion of the leap of faith aligns with the biblical call to trust God even when the path is uncertain. The concept of *redemptive suffering* suggests that enduring suffering can lead to spiritual growth.

In Buddhism, the concept of *dukkha*(suffering) parallels Kierkegaard's despair. The practice of mindfulness and the pursuit of enlightenment are modern antidotes to the sickness, providing a framework for recognizing and transcending existential suffering.

Modern interfaith initiatives often emphasize shared human experiences such as doubt, fear, and the search for meaning. These dialogues can provide individuals with a broader context for understanding the sickness unto death and finding communal support.

Conclusion: Why the Sickness Unto Death Still Matters

The concept of the **sickness unto death**remains a powerful lens through which we can examine our deepest anxieties and the fragility of the human self. Kierkegaard's insight—that despair is not merely a psychological state

but a fundamental rupture in the relationship between the individual, their values, and the divine—continues to inform philosophical discourse, therapeutic practices, and religious teachings.

Tags: #kierkegaard #sickness #unto #death