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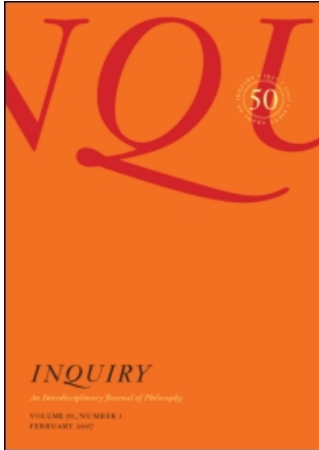
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The Comically Infinite Man¹

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ABSTRACT *A long time ago, I procured a little book edited by Soren Kierkegaard entitled *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849). What is more, I read it. (I must confess to having been first attracted to it solely by its title). For and as a tribute to Alastair Hannay I was inspired to set down in print this brief (altogether too brief, philosophically speaking) and unsystematic reflection. What struck me most palpably was the suggestion that, although our worldly endeavors and thus our publications are, so to speak, temporally limited, our despair is not. I write on the obligations and privileges of that mood.*

I don't know that I understand Kierkegaard.² More to the point, I know that I do not understand him exactly. The discussion in *The Sickness Unto Death* seems to go like this: Sin is a problem that needs comprehension. Hitherto all attempts to comprehend it have failed; they have failed in their innocent paganism, their inability to get into the paradox and sit there like a bug stuck in glue (apparently the proper place, as far as Kierkegaard is concerned).

They are all too cheery, what with their belief that a man knowing what is right could never do wrong, that he could never fail to do right.³ It's all too innocent. Too optimistic. Too easy! I agree with him here, I confess.

The only proper, adequate, the only deep statement about sin comes from Christianity, and the dogmatic and unproved, positively inexplicable, decree than man is a sinner before God. (I shall disagree here.) This, that he is in a *state of sin* (not simply that, for example, he'd philandered when he'd promised not to, coveted this, or lied about that...not sinful *acts*, but the deep fact that he is in a state of sin...he is a sinner *before God*) grounds Kierkegaard's analyses about the comical man. *Infinitely* comical, infinitely

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because never able to escape his inherently sinful presence before God for all eternity. Why? And why comical?

One might say that sinning is an act of will, one that wantonly disobeys the intellect that knows (it “knows” the good...an interesting idea). One might say this. Kierkegaard suggests something like it. He tells us that the problem with the Socratic/Greek (that is, the non-Christian) account of sin is that it fails to take into consideration “the will”, and our “defiance”.⁴ In naively suggesting that wrongfulness stems merely from ignorance, why, it positively takes away all the blame! While ignorance is sometimes perhaps a bit funny, it isn’t infinitely comical! But there is also another, deeper problem with the Socratic definition of sin...and it lies in the assumption that one actually acts on *reasons*. Perhaps indeed action is never truly “from reason”, reasons are smuggled in always after the fact, to justify (comically) the deed mysteriously done or left undone. On this Kierkegaard is assuredly correct. But this is not *exactly* his problem. His is not any straightforward attack, as in Schopenhauer or Nietzsche, on the integrity of “pure practical reason”. It is much worse than that! Nor is what we have here merely a state of ignorance about what is right, not a failure of reason. Not at all. What we have here, rather, is something altogether more Dostoyevskian, something with more perspiration and cowardice:

It is infinitely comical that a person, stirred so to tears that the sweat pours from him as well as the tears, can sit and read or hear a discourse on self-denial, on the nobility of sacrificing one’s life for the truth—and then, in the next second, ein, zwei, drei, vupti, eyes scarcely dry, he is in full swing—in the sweat of his brow and as best he can—helping untruth to triumph. It is infinitely comical that a person, with truth in his voice and mien, deeply affecting, can grippingly portray the truth, grandly look all evil, all the powers of hell, in the eye, with a confidence in his bearing, with boldness in his glance, his paces admirably measured—it is infinitely comical that almost the same instant, practically in ‘full fig’, he can leap aside at the least inconvenience like a faint-hearted coward.⁵

We travel along the highway, and see an accident along the road. If we stop, we help—*Maybe*. If we do not stop, we tell ourselves after the fact that our efforts would have been frustraneous, nay, to no good. But the problem here is not that the rationalizations pour out after the fact to justify our stopping or not stopping. No. It is not simply that we act on grounds other than the reason that knows (innocent Socrates!) the good. The problem, in short, is not with hypocrisy in this easily explicable sense. That is too simple. Amusing, perhaps, but altogether too light and cheerful to be *infinitely comical*. The hilarity here is not that the reasons effuse disingenuously *post-facto*, parading around puffed up as prime movers of the deed. In

Kierkegaard's scenario, the sweat and tears, the intellect, *precede* the fulsome comedy. The comedy comes from moving from those sweaty moments to the cowardly deeds that betray them. Reason is not here to blame, regardless of whether it leads or follows. Again, is it weakness of the will?

We travel along the highway, and see an accident. We think we perhaps ought to stop. No, better: We *know* we ought to stop; we see the folded body lying on the asphalt. Not stopping immediately, the "good" not "done immediately it is known", and *ein, zwei, drei, splat!* – the moment of goodness passes.⁶ There was only one such moment, the one wherein the knowing and the deed coincided. Too quickly passed. The problem lies in the hesitations, hesitations that in their expansion erect a convenient smoke screen over our certainty about what is to the good. And so the sinning is lodged in the mysterious transition from the understanding to the "understanding/willing/acting". The allegedly "lower parts" contrive to politicize the event by stalling for time. And ultimately, really, that is it, isn't it? The problem revealed? The problem lies in those excruciating moments of suspension, and *that we will at all!*

You are a sinner before God because (and do not try to get out of it) you are in time. Were you not, you would be a creative intellect, one whereby the thought coincides in utter immediacy with the deed. These lower parts, these temporal parts, the parts in time – to traverse them is to solve the pre-Socratic paradox, infinite depths of fleeting moments, lodged in time. An excruciating impossibility. Do not think, optimist, that were you to stop "immediately (or so it seemed to you) knowing to stop" that the sin would be mercifully avoided. To do good immediately upon knowing is near impossible for a being in time, isn't it? Even if it were not, the problem multiplies, for there are the moments still, those to ford in your feckless proreption (Shall I roll him over? Must I breathe into his bloody mouth or touch his soiled pants? Dare I take a step?), moments inevitably stalling the deeds of goodness, with reason trotting along afterwards like a dumb dog (To think – this, after its begging at the door was what prompted us in the first place!). When the hand falters, reason is a dutiful companion. But this isn't the paradox. Or the comedy. The burlesque lies in the fact that as the hand falters during the frozen interminable moments of hesitancy (you didn't even notice them, did you? Take care! God did, from the standpoint of eternity), the sweat and tears of antecedent true conviction have not even yet dried on the skin.

Let us stop and reflect. How can a man, soggy in his tears and his sweat, wet with his conviction of the truth, in "almost the same instant" (is it *almost the same*, or *the same* instant? Which is it? I have gotten confused in the dialectically dizzying motion between my eternal and my temporal lower self...*aaaah*: it is "*the next second!*") express in deed this double-minded promotion of untruth? What truth is this, what untruth? The answer is clear.

The truth betrayed is the truth of “self denial”, and the need for “self sacrifice”, (presumably the self, not the Infinite SELF) grounded in the understanding that this world is wretched and petty.⁷ And the untruth? We shall come to that. In time.

You are in sin, in a state of sin (known with clarity and depth only by the true Christian, the man, as opposed to the child, i.e. everybody else), which means that you suffer the true despair. What do you do about it? Here is the paradox and what makes it “infinitely comical” (Am I right? Do I follow him?): First, recognize that this being in a state of sin (as opposed to action sinful) is completely inexplicable. Sinful acts, of omission and commission, are distractions, really, from the true state of sin that defines your existence. It is a condition revealed but inexpressible.

Suppose you deny it. You are not, you say, in sin? Not in despair? Alas, optimist, you are deluded here. First of all, you are the last one we ought to ask about this, since you lack privileged access to your own despairingly sinful condition, a fact proven indisputably by your denial of it. Are you perplexed? (Here it was helpful for me to keep in mind that sin, like penis envy, is something the owner is oftentimes the least privy to; it takes an expert to diagnose the condition.) Your failure to be conscious of your sin implies your attenuated lessened self, the failure to achieve in your project the awareness of the expanded, Infinite Self (as the one Mr. Anti-Climacus presupposed, and Kierkegaard longed for) requisite for such consciousness and, by extension, true (conscious/authentic) despair. You are in despair nevertheless, yours being compounded by your utterly shallow lack of it. Does Kierkegaard mean to say that you are less for not feeling despair? Yes. He does. The self progressively expanding (hopefully) to the recognition of its eternal spiritual nature is *almost* necessarily in despair.

Second, recognize that there is nothing *you* can do in the world, in time, to avoid sin. There might seem to be two options: a) *Not wanting in despair to be oneself*, and b) *Wanting in despair to be oneself*. Either path, as we shall see, is an effort to be rid of the sinful self that is the locus of despair. Either path, interestingly, leads to conscious despair, and by extension, sin, for sin is “before God in despair not wanting to be oneself or wanting in despair to be oneself”.⁸ To understand sin, then (though it is utterly inexplicable), we must turn to the consideration of these two conscious forms of despair before God. Sin, it turns out, is both our presupposition and our discovery.

Alastair Hannay has noted that there are varieties of despair.⁹ In Kierkegaard, indeed, this notion sprouts into a well-tended horticultural extravaganza! We have already looked at unconscious despair. Let us begin again with the despair at *not wanting to be oneself*. I am perhaps in a better position to understand this one, rather than the next one, since I am a woman, and this *not willing to be oneself* is a *weakness* and (*ex hypothesi*) a womanly form of (conscious) despair.¹⁰ I have some hope, then, that (unlike unconscious penis envy) I might be able to grapple with this paradox. What

we have here is a weakness characterized by what appears to be an absorption in the world, in the domain of the temporal and worldly, an altogether passive dispersion of the self into outward circumstances, a failure to own up to the task of living in light of the accused and singular “I” for which I am allegedly responsible. The self dispersed, it finds itself in what it takes to be despair, but mistakenly (because it is shallow) attaches its despairing condition to the earthly or to “something earthly” (Kierkegaard does not really specify, so it appears that anything earthly is a candidate).¹¹ It matters not: Things go wrong, fortunes go awry, lovers do not comply, praise is not forthcoming, and our despairing dandipratt laments and lashes out with a “Why me?” and a “Why me?” and a yearning “What if I became someone else!”¹²

Meanwhile, Kierkegaard reminds us, “time passes”.¹³

But this “Why me?” and “Why me?” is too – simply too – hilarious; it is infinitely comical! For we know, don’t we, that in fact the true locus of despair is not the constellation of external circumstances, those that have contrived to undo the self’s fragile movements in its world...we know that what is really eating at the despairing self here is its “loss” of the implied eternal Self.¹⁴ (*We* know this; the deluded and suffering self does not – It helped me here to keep in mind that “God is love”).

To sum up: At this point, we know that we cannot fall into the world, lose or rid ourselves of our eternal Self and avoid thereby our sin. The strategy doesn’t work; it is rather like watching a bag lady trying to satisfy her hunger by searching in the dumpster, rather like witnessing her increasingly immersed flesh get sloppy in the refuse, her hands digging into the empty greasy brown bags for lunch. Lo! By and by this grotesque creature, shabby and concentrating, pulls out the moldy remnants of a Mexican food plate and gobbles them up, and she looks for *all the world* as though her worries are over. She acts for *all the world* as though the burden of her project had been mercifully lifted (as though she would not again feel hunger tomorrow!). Funny, eh? Ha ha.

Meanwhile, Kierkegaard reminds us, time passes.

Perhaps a better approach for our little sinner might be rather to invert his strategy, to *want to be one’s self*. Perhaps this will do? Indeed, it turns out that our two-faced despairer is (as am I) a Gemini, for this weakness has another face, a defiant masculine face. At bottom (or have we elevated? I keep getting confused in the ascending dialectic of the downward plunge) what looks to be a frivolous and unreflective (feminine) dispersal of the self is a passive-aggressive and defiant (masculine) refusal to admit that its now-recognized Infinite Self is *before God*. Taking the Infinite Self in hand like a

javelin, our manly defiant warrior-despairer now *wants to be himself* (the cad!). Casting off from his dependence and his derivation, he thinks he might like to create himself on his own terms, to bestow upon himself and his worldly undertakings infinite interest and importance. Are you laughing harder? This man, sweating and striving – what unadulterated hubris! Let us attend to the Promethean comedy that Kierkegaard has constructed.

What we have here is the hilarious illusion of self-subsistence. Here again, Hannay is instructive, noting that willing to be oneself takes on both an active and a passive form, and in that order. To will to be oneself in an *active* manner is, it seems, to fail (comically) to recognize the ultimate source of one's Selfhood, to detach oneself from the "Power which has established it", it is to act as though one were a pure possibility to be, a possibility wholly legislated by oneself.¹⁵ Infinite Self in hand, our little warrior fancies himself an "experimental god" and a poet, and yet....yet...his efforts to write his little poem, to concretize himself into a Self by his deeds, lack grounding. This self, this question mark in the night, this hypothesis, what does it amount to? Nothing; from the standpoint of eternity, absolutely nothing at all. The "I" is here not but an abstract promise, and all the deeds of the world can never deliver it over to itself. The despairing self knows this, in a sense, knows that he shall not achieve fulfillment from this strategy, and yet he defiantly (I almost said heroically, but heroes are not funny, for they stand above us) betrays his own understanding of the truth; with the tears and sweat of antecedent true conviction still wet on his skin, he devotes himself to the untruth.

Meanwhile, time passes.

It would appear to most that we have arrived at an impasse. Has our comedian exhausted his repertoire? Is the stage-play over? Not quite. There is left still the strategy of passively defiant suffering. One could always shake ones fists at the sky, one could sputter and spew and pitch a fit. One could dig into one's despair, defiantly refusing all help, willfully proclaiming the task towards Selfhood a sham, because it takes *time*.

"If it should happen", Kierkegaard whispers to us (behind the tantrum thrower's back), "that God in heaven and all the angels were to offer to help him to be rid of this torment – no, he does not want that..." (Do you blame him, pessimist?). Now, Kierkegaard scoffs, "now it is too late. Once he would gladly have given everything to be rid of this agony but he was kept waiting, now all that's past..."¹⁶ This man, railing against existence, raging against the human condition, it is indeed funny, isn't it? Funny like an infant who has gotten so exhausted and so exhausted and so overly exhausted that she screams hysterically upon being put down, rioting and refusing her own soft bed.

Meanwhile, time passes.

You are stuck like a bug in glue, before God, resting and despairing in the terrible revealed fact of being in a state of sin, of willing not to do what is right, not to express in deed your understanding of what is true. You are fallen. What a dank hell – It is called an individual. Your task is to carry on with it! To make it blossom! You are individuated. Fallen. Infinitely comical, because you cannot but be in relation to God (though you won't admit it, though you cannot see it), trembling and sweating over what is right (and meaning it, sincerely), comical because you can never cross over and stay on the other side of time, the other side of sin. Tragic because you cannot succeed without a miracle. Disgusting because you are too shallow to notice the problem (though you are yourself to blame, because you are in a state of sin before God). There is *nothing to do*. We watch the minutes pass, the time it takes to move between the poles of sincere righteousness and utter cowardice, in ripe despair preening before the mirror of our own sickness. It is an art! Your task is to carry on with it! To make it blossom, to cultivate in the deepest singularity of your inwardly turned self the soil for the seed of grace. Morality cannot help you here. There are no golden rules here. Deeds that do not issue from this sacred cultivated ground are irrelevant.

What does it mean to be a man, lost in himself, trying to tease out of his own isolated singularity an infinite expansion – all this yearning turned outside in, playing to an imaginary woman, all this desire to make himself *more real* from the inside out! All the impossibility of ever “knowing” that he has the truth understood! All this time, waiting for grace, waiting for the rains to come.

What was Kierkegaard thinking? What is the point of all this scab-picking?

At this point, I should like to state my intentions. As I said, I do not really understand Kierkegaard. My aim is not to *mock* him. After all, Kierkegaard is a liar. He does not think any of this funny. He is being “ironic”. What he wants, after all, is to retain his individuated self, but to make it concretely infinite, to become infinite in a concrete way by “an” act of faith (*shhhhhhhhh!* It can never stop in time!), one in accordance with which he does the good immediately upon knowing it, an utterly non-discursive performance of an infinite particular which finds its freedom in devoted surrender. It *is* a paradox, and an absurdity. He wants to be one whose external deeds (had he undertaken any) are unmediated expressions of a deeply inward condition, one whose every small step, every movement, every gesture, manifests the miracle of on-going faith. In this, the self – this particular “I” for whom I am allegedly responsible – is much more than a

construction, more than a hypothesis, more than a regulative idea (I could perhaps go for that!), more than the sum of its deeds. It is much more than that! It is a “stupendously real” thing, an exhaustively on-going project, it is *infinite*, in a state of eternally sustained dependence on God.

We travel along the highway, and see an accident. We stop and help, maybe. Does Kierkegaard?

*Let us go into the garden and do our work.*¹⁷

Notes

1. This little paper was first presented in Copenhagen, summer, 2004, at a conference in honor of Alastair Hannay. I thank Alastair Hannay for his generosity in reading and commenting on this paper, and I thank the editors at *Inquiry* for their interest in bringing the piece to light. I am deeply indebted to Arthur B. Cody.
2. All references to Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death* are taken from *The Sickness unto Death*, translated by Alastair Hannay (Penguin Books, 2002). The author is aware that Kierkegaard did not write *Sickness unto Death*, or rather that the author of the *Sickness* is actually another man, one “Anti-Climacus”. Since, however, the author is not herself, she is willing to address the piece to an author who is not himself.
3. See *Sickness* pp. 121–122.
4. *Sickness* p. 122.
5. *Sickness* p. 123.
6. *Sickness* p. 126. “During all this the knowing becomes more and more obscured, and the lower nature more and more victorious. For alas! The good must be done immediately, directly it is known (and that is why in pure ideality the transition from thinking to being occurs so easily, for there everything happens immediately), but the lower nature has its strength in dragging things out”.
7. Kierkegaard *Sickness Unto Death* p. 123.
8. *Sickness* p. 109.
9. Alastair Hannay (1998 “Kierkegaard and the Variety of Despair” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Ed.) Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
10. Cf. *Sickness* p.80. In an attached footnote, Anti-Climacus proffers a lengthy and deeply insightful and fascinatingly informed disquisition on the general differences between masculine and feminine despair.
11. *Sickness* p. 87
12. *Sickness* p. 84
13. *Sickness* p. 83
14. *Sickness* p. 91. “Despair over the earthly or over something earthly is really despair of the eternal...”
15. *Sickness* p. 99
16. *Sickness* p. 103.
17. The author here cites an abbreviated version of Kant's abbreviated version of a passage from Voltaire's *Candide* (1759). In Kant, the passage reads: “Let us attend to our happiness, and go into the garden and work” (“Dreams of a Spirit-Seer” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant, Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 359). Happiness is clearly beside the point.