

“Biblical Positions on Medicine” in Theological Perspective

Frédéric Rognon

In his article titled “Biblical Positions on Medicine,” Jacques Ellul nowhere cites Søren Kierkegaard (or any other author, except of course the biblical authors). And yet Kierkegaard is present “incognito” (a term dear to Kierkegaard) from the beginning to the end of Ellul’s text, and particularly at the point where Ellul brings his argument to a decisive close. The primary implicit references to the Danish philosopher and theologian concern the distinction between “the sickness that is not unto death” and “the sickness unto death.” These make tacit reference to Kierkegaard’s book *The Sickness unto Death*. A summary of this book will therefore be helpful for clarifying Ellul’s approach.

JACQUES ELLUL AND SØREN KIERKEGAARD

It is beneficial to keep in mind the very definite relationship between Kierkegaard and Ellul. As we know, this relationship passes by way of Karl Barth, but when Barth moves apart from Kierkegaard, Jacques Ellul moves apart from Barth and stays close to Kierkegaard. In other words, Ellul is Barthian only when Karl Barth is Kierkegaardian. If Ellul allows himself some criticism toward Barth on the theological level (as he does with Marx on the sociological level), it is also true that Ellul is never critical toward Kierkegaard. He describes it in this way:

Normally, in my reading, the critical mechanism of thought arises right away, and I am prompted to respond, “Yes, but . . .” The authors who have had the greatest influence on me have made me think reactively. I have never followed a system. With regard to Barth himself, I always held a critical distance. There is nothing like this in my relation to Kierkegaard. With him, I just listen. I do not try to imitate, or to the apply methods or concepts. I am brought back to myself in a mirror that illuminates thoughts, contradictions, exigencies, presence toward life, and presence toward death. Brought back to myself, but not at all the same as I was before reading such or such a text. Questioned. With my back to the wall, by a singular relationship that denies me any escape. I listen. I do not contest

Kierkegaard’s thought, but I feel obligated to respond, to respond to another than to Kierkegaard himself.¹ This long citation demonstrates Ellul’s intellectual and spiritual debt to Kierkegaard, which exceeded any other. This point only confirms the interest that a detour through the work of Kierkegaard can offer us.

THE SICKNESS UNTO DEATH: AVOIDING MISUNDERSTANDINGS

To read *The Sickness unto Death* requires some care, however, due to a certain number of persistent misunderstandings that have affected the book’s reception in France from the time of its first appearance.² The first misunderstanding, and the most damaging, is that the book was first translated under the title *Traité du désespoir* [Treatise on Despair]. This faulty title (faulty because the original Danish title, *Sygdommen til Døden*, literally means “the sickness unto death”) contributed in no small way to the diffusion of a particularly gloomy image of the thinker of Copenhagen. When Jacques Ellul wrote “Biblical Positions on Medicine” in 1947, only this first French translation was available to him; it was not until 1971, when volume XVI of Kierkegaard’s *Complete Works* was published in French translation in a scholarly edition,³ that the correct title began to take precedence (even if the *Traité du désespoir* continues to be cited today).

These publication details must be mentioned in order to underline Ellul’s rigor, for he reads *The Sickness unto Death* carefully and describes it judiciously without being concerned with Kierkegaard’s negative reputation. For if the book indeed has to do with despair, it is described only in order to better proclaim, by contrast, the Christian hope. The title says it well, for it refers to Jesus’ words in the Gospel of John: “This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby.”⁴ Those who know the bible as well as Ellul did will immediately make the connection. In everyday French, one would instead use the phrase “maladie mortelle” [terminal illness]. The unusual expression “sickness unto death” is surprising to those for whom the bible is unfamiliar, that is, the great majority of French persons in 1947 and today. Thus it opens the door to all the misunderstanding. In reality, *The Sickness unto Death*

(with its subtitle *A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*) is a treatise and a meditation upon Christian hope.

THE SICKNESS UNTO DEATH: FROM DESPAIR TO HOPE

The Sickness unto Death appears under a pseudonym, Anti-Climacus. *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (1846)⁵ is signed by Johannes Climacus; he expresses the rationalist conceit, with Hegelian undertones, of rising from earth to heaven by a ladder (“climax” in Greek means “ladder”) and of accounting for the entirety of the real as a totalizing system. Anti-Climacus, who signs *The Sickness unto Death* (1849),⁶ but also *Training in Christianity* (1850),⁷ is Climacus’ opposite; he is the witness to Christian truth, which is revealed to men by a downward movement, contrary to the upward movement of human presumption. Anti-Climacus is the one who welcomes the God of Jesus Christ, who is himself made known through his Word.

From the outset, he states, “The sickness unto death is despair.”⁸ And he pursues the chain of identification in these terms: “Despair is sin.”⁹ But there are two kinds of despair and thus two kinds of sin: despair-weakness and despair-defiance. Despair-weakness consists in not wanting to be oneself, in fleeing from oneself into all the diversions that the world offers. Despair-defiance consists in wanting to be oneself, but all alone, without otherness, and especially without the divine otherness. Thus, paradoxically, “When we are before God or have the idea of God, and we are found to be in the state of despair, sin consists in not wanting to be oneself, or in wanting to be.”¹⁰ We understand from this that sin must not be understood on a moral level: “The opposite of sin is not virtue [. . .], it is faith.”¹¹

But if the opposite of sin is faith, and if despair consists in not wanting to be oneself, or in wanting to be, how can we conceive of despair’s opposite, that is, hope? According to Kierkegaard, hope consists “in the self, being itself and wanting to be, becoming transparent and grounding itself in God.”¹² In other words, here is the “state in which all despair is banished: the self that relates itself to itself and wants to be itself becomes transparent and grounds itself in the power that placed him there.”¹³ Thus Christian hope, the antidote for every kind of despair, amounts to making a leap of faith, falling into God who welcomes us with open arms, renouncing oneself, in order to find oneself again in the end, but by way of a detour through the divine otherness.

The primary quality that differentiates hope from despair is otherness: whether one flees from oneself or wants to be oneself, one denies the otherness of God. By contrast, if I enter into a living and trusting relationship with the God who lives and gives life, then I become truly myself and am healed of despair. For then my sickness is not “unto death”; it has as its end the glorification of God.

BIBLICAL POSITIONS ON MEDICINE: TOWARD A SPIRITUAL APPROACH TO ILLNESS

Such then is the philosophical and theological direction that Søren Kierkegaard advocates in 1849 and that is found in the background, implicitly, a century later in the text of his spiritual heir, Jacques Ellul, titled “Biblical Positions on Medicine.” How might we discern the effect that this work by the Copenhagen thinker had on this work by the Bordeaux professor, on the subject of illness?

Just as, with Kierkegaard, sin must not be understood in a moral but rather a spiritual sense, so also despair must not be reduced to a psychological mode but grasped in its spiritual dimension. Thus, from the Kierkegaardian perspective, a desperate man (spiritually speaking) may very well not know it (psychologically speaking): the flight from himself, or the frenzied affirmation of himself, hides from his own eyes his real condition as a desperate man, that is, as one who is independent of God. The sickness unto death is that which separates from God.

Jacques Ellul applies the same reasoning to illness itself. In the usual sense of the word, sickness may be “unto death” or not “unto death,” depending on whether the sick person does or does not turn toward God. This signifies that a terminal illness, that is, an illness that leads to physiological death, may very well not be “unto death” if the patient gives himself over to God during his illness. Conversely, an illness that can be cured, and from which in the end the patient is healed on the physiological level, can very well be a sickness “unto death” if this patient turns away from God during the healing process.

In his work *The Sickness unto Death*, Søren Kierkegaard rarely speaks of sickness in the physiological sense and concentrates on the question of the spiritual sickness that is despair. Yet he concentrates the two pages of the “Preamble,”¹⁴ right after the “Foreword,” on the distinction between physiological sickness and spiritual sickness. It is in this way that he recalls the words of Jesus, in which Lazarus’ sickness “is not unto death,” even though Lazarus does die a short while afterward and Jesus then openly informs his disciples, “Lazarus has died.”¹⁵ This death may very well be the result of a sickness that is “not unto death.” The sickness and death of Lazarus, as we know, will be the occasion for the glorification of God, by means of the sign of his resurrection that Jesus performs. This is why his sickness was not “unto death,” although it was fatal.

It is this decisive point that enables Jacques Ellul to pose the question of meaning: whether a sickness is or is not fatal, the essential point is that it may not be “unto death.” That is, it may be lived with God, and this may be the living and trusting bond with the God who lives and gives life, who gives it a meaning.

This fundamental distinction, inspired by Kierkegaard, between the sickness “unto death” and fatal illness, sheds light on Jacques Ellul’s reflections on the problem of treatment: the therapies of the materialistic type, which treat

man as material and reduce him to his physiological dimension, to a collection of atoms, may heal a curable illness, or may push back the final defeat of an incurable illness, but in both cases they may not keep it from being “unto death.” Such an orientation may lead to a therapeutic determination to succeed, or to medical exploits, but in all cases to stay alive without the spiritual orientation strips this life of all true meaning, reducing it to a physico-chemical process.

This is why Jacques Ellul ends his text by questioning the validity of this or that treatment “before God.” The only real healing, he affirms, is the resurrection, and he is careful to clarify, in order to remove every ambiguity or to avoid all misinterpretation, that this resurrection does not concern only the end of time, the judgment and salvation, but it takes place “starting now,” *hic et nunc*. We may be raised from the dead during our life if we place this life firmly within God’s care. Then hope overcomes despair, and no sickness that we undergo, not even terminal illness, is “unto death.”

CONCLUSION

In a bible study on 1 Corinthians 15, dated 1988 and recently published,¹⁶ Jacques Ellul offers a highly suggestive idea. Just as in Jewish tradition the day begins at sunset and ends with sunrise, so also death precedes life: “We begin by a life that is an actual death, and we end our life with the resurrection.”¹⁷ Thus we pass from death to life when, through a new birth, we enter straightaway, during our earthly pilgrimage, into eternal life. As a result, all of the illnesses that can assail us, affect us, diminish us, and make us suffer terribly, may be seen to bestow a meaning. They may no longer be, in the strict sense, sicknesses “unto death”; they may even become, like all things in our life, signs of God’s glory.¹⁸ Such is the rich Kierkegaardian heritage passed down to Jacques Ellul; such is the existential and spiritual spring that irrigates his thought.

About the Author

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Notes

1. Jacques Ellul, “Préface.” In Nelly Viallaneix, *Écoute, Kierkegaard. Essai sur la communication de la parole*. 2 vols. Paris: Éditions du Cerf (col. Cogitatio Fidei), 1979, v. 1, ii–iii.
2. See Hélène Politis, *Kierkegaard en France au XXe siècle : Archéologie d’une réception*. Paris: Éditions Kimé, 2005; Florian Forestier, Jacques Message and Anna Svenbrok, *Kierkegaard en France. Incidences et résonances*. Paris: Éditions Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2016.

3. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Œuvres Complètes*. Paris: Éditions de l’Orante, 1966–1986, vv. I–XX.
4. John 11:4.
5. See Kierkegaard, “Post Scriptum définitif et non scientifique aux Miettes philosophiques,” *Œuvres Complètes*, 1977, vv. X–XI.
6. See Kierkegaard, “La maladie à la mort,” *Œuvres Complètes*, 1971, v. XVI.
7. See Kierkegaard “L’école du christianisme,” *Œuvres Complètes*, 1982, v. XVII.
8. Kierkegaard, “La maladie à la mort,” *op. cit.*, 169.
9. *Ibid.*, 231.
10. *Ibid.*, 233.
11. *Ibid.*, 238.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, 285.
14. *Ibid.*, 167–168.
15. John 11:14.
16. See Jacques Ellul, *Mort et espérance de la résurrection. Conférences inédites de Jacques Ellul*. Lyon: Éditions Olivétan, 2016.
17. *Ibid.*, 124.
18. See 1 Cor. 10:31: “Whether therefore you eat, or drink, or whatever you do, do all for the glory of God.”