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# Kierkegaard and Entrepreneurship

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Earlier this year I spent a lot of time thinking about what "impact" means to me. In the tech world, we use it to say that our work matters and that we're "making a dent in the universe". But it feels empty most of the time. I came to the conclusion that "impact" has no meaning to me when I'm easily replaceable. No matter how many people's lives I'm touching with software that I've written, if I'm not bringing something unique -- a part of myself -- into my work then I'm not doing something worth doing.

Last month, on the [Philosophize This podcast](#), I heard about Kierkegaard's work on despair and found it to be a weirdly good articulation of my thoughts on work fulfillment and progress. He was a 19th century Danish philosopher and wrote primarily on psychology and the human condition. Although he viewed most things through the lens of theology, it's common -- and works pretty well -- to have a secular reading of his work.

He viewed the self as having two opposing aspects. One that he called the infinite and the other is the finite. He described the relationship between them as dialectical -- which means that one cannot exist without the other and that there is constant tension between them. Furthermore, there exists a "synthesis", a point which we can balance these contradicting forces.

## The infinite and finite

The finite aspect of the self deals with worldly facts about the person. It is the condition in which one exists. Your name, sex, race, and even things that are more general like the social, political, and cultural environment that you find yourself in. The finite is concerned with necessity as opposed to possibilities -- things that are largely predetermined.

The infinite is the aspect of the self that deals with abstractions, different meanings, and possibilities. And imagination is its primary device. The infinite is concerned with what the self can become as opposed to its current state. It opens up opportunities to free oneself from the rigidity of finite existence.

If someone lacked either aspects of themselves, Kierkegaard thought they'd be in a state of despair -- they can lose themselves in the infinite or in the finite.

## The finite is the default

There is generally a set path in life for people to follow. Most choices are made for us, and someone can exist purely within the tracks that were manufactured for them by their parents, culture, and society. After we graduate and become adults we go to work and get plugged into the place that is deemed most fit for us and contribute our small part as cogs in the machine.

*Just by losing himself this way, such a man has gained an increasing capacity for going along superbly in business and social life, indeed, for making a great success in the world. Here there is no delay, no difficulty with his self and its infinitizing; he is as smooth as a rolling stone, as courant [passable] as a circulating coin. He is so far from being regarded as a person in despair that he is just what a human being is supposed to be.*

Bob is an engineer because his father was an engineer. He uses vim because everyone at work uses vim. He takes the designs passed to him by his product manager and implements them a 100% according to spec. He never questions anything. He is moved by his managers from team to team without any objections. When asked why he's doing what he's doing, he parrots what his manager told him about the importance of the mission and how he fits in. He is as passable as a coin.

*by getting engaged in all sorts of worldly affairs, by becoming wise about how things go in this world, such a man forgets himself, forgets what his name is (in the divine understanding of it), does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too venturesome a thing to be himself, far easier and safer to be like the others, to become an imitation, a number, a cipher in the crowd.*

Bob is so easy to replace. He provides nothing to his team, work, society, or family that is unique to himself. He'd rather lose himself in the crowd, become indistinguishable, than be himself.

*it is dangerous to venture. And why? Because one may lose. But not to venture is shrewd. And yet, by not venturing, it is so dreadfully easy to lose that which it would be difficult to lose in even the most venturesome venture, and in any case never so easily, so completely as if it were nothing ...one's self.*

Bob should know that he stands to lose more by accepting the default. He risks losing himself by taking the seemingly safe and secure choice. Let alone dream, imagine, or take the time to figure out what he really cares about in this world.

## Lost in the infinite

Engaging in the infinite aspect of the self is important to balance out the finite. To come up with new ideas, new understanding of the world, and new meaning. In other words, to become

something more. But unless this process is grounded in reality (the finite), the self may risk becoming too abstract, fantastic, unreal.

For example, if Bob loves humanity so much it makes him weep, it's just his loss he cannot stand. He has been carried away into the abstract, the infinite, and has lost his relation to the finite, the concrete. He holds an abstract and **free-floating belief** that's not influencing his behavior.

Similarly a person may get caught up in abstract knowledge that never makes its way back to the finite world. For example, Bob likes to learn about Machine Learning, he accumulates a whole lot of knowledge on the subject but never gets a chance to apply it at his job. Bob has lost himself in pursuing this knowledge because he is not able to benefit himself or the world from it.

Finally, and more relevant to our discussion, is being lost in "willing" (or wishing). For example, Bob wishes the world to move to renewable energy. But he never takes an action towards that end. This goal is so out of his control that there seems to be nothing he can do about it. He never grounds his imagination in the finite. He doesn't take the time to come up with the smallest possible task that can be a step towards achieving his desired state.

*the will does not constantly become concrete in the same degree that it is abstract, in such a way that the more it is infinitized in purpose and resolution, the more present and contemporaneous with itself does it become in the small part of the task which can be realized at once, so that in being infinitized it returns in the strictest sense to its self, so that what is farthest from itself (when it is most infinitized in purpose and resolution) is in the same instant nearest to itself in accomplishing the infinitely small part of the task which can be done even today, even at this hour, even at this instant.*

## Entrepreneurship

I view entrepreneurship as means of reconciling the infinite and finite. You venture into your imagination, gather knowledge, and dream about a better world. But you have to bring some of that back to earth. You take a step -- no matter how small -- towards your imagined world in the real world.

This is not a one time thing, it's a recursive process. If your imagined possibilities became real then that's your new "finite". The process restarts and that's how we make progress.

This notion of progress comes from **Hegelian dialectic**. When traversing dialectical opposites like the infinite and finite, and are finally able to reconcile the conflict and arrive at common truths. This becomes our new reality and the process restarts.

I see this as the perfect framework for the work we do in technology. There is always a tension between what is and what could be. There are people and organizations who are stuck in the

status quo (the finite). On the other hand, there are folks who are stuck in the what could be without any actionability (the infinite).

Taking a step into the infinite could be hard, but the hardest thing of all is bringing something back to the finite. The real art is coming up with the smallest possible task that can be done here and now.

Take Elon Musk for example, like Bob, he wants the world to move to renewable energy but that's such a big and daunting task that seems unapproachable. Elon could've been lost in the infinite. Instead he took a step towards doing something within his reach. He started an electric super-car company. It's counter-intuitive how this is relevant as outlined in his [master plan](#) in 2006:

*The strategy of Tesla is to enter at the high end of the market, where customers are prepared to pay a premium, and then drive down market as fast as possible to higher unit volume and lower prices with each successive model.*

Ten years later, Tesla is shipping the first mass-market electric car and innovating in battery technology. Making real progress towards a renewable energy world.

Not everyone can be Elon Musk, but we all can be entrepreneurial in our own sense. I think the most important thing is to always make progress. Don't get stuck in the weeds for too long. Imagine a better world, and take a small step towards it.