

"It is really true what philosophy tells us, that life must be understood backwards. But with this, one forgets the second proposition, that it must be lived forwards. A proposition which, the more it is subjected to careful thought, the more it ends up concluding precisely that life at any given moment cannot really ever be fully understood; exactly because there is no single moment where time stops completely in order for me to take position [to do this]: going backwards."
Kierkegaard, *Journalen* JJ:167 (1843)

Kierkegaard is widely understood to be one of the founders of *existentialism* (though defining existentialism is a bit tricky; click [here](#) for some attempts). For our purposes, we will be focused on how one can become (as Kierkegaard put it) the *true self*. As our reading highlighted, Kierkegaard was not impressed with either the culture of Denmark, nor of the state's religion. Given these perceived failings, Kierkegaard is left unable to answer the question of who he is to be.

It's important to note that the kind of motivation that Kierkegaard has is not some abstract, philosophical interest in the topic of life and its meaning. Rather, Kierkegaard is motivated by an impending sense of *despair*. One of the refreshing things about reflecting on his work is that Kierkegaard's discussions are intimate and personal. He feels like life is wrong (in some fundamental way) and his writings invite us to see the world his way. For Kierkegaard, the despair that he discusses is the result of two psychological attitudes which are in tension: we wish to be more than we are, but we can never rid ourselves of what we are. Such tension results in a perpetual dissatisfaction with one's life. This inability to escape such tension is what causes despair.

While Kierkegaard's notion of despair is tied with God, we can probably remember a time or two where something like Kierkegaard's despair took hold of our minds (even if you are not religious). Despite this, Kierkegaard's approach as to how each of us is to resolve the tension which gives rise to despair is to be found in faith in God. Before such faith can occur, however, we begin by trying to find lasting meaning in the world. As was stated above, Kierkegaard found his country's culture and religion to be lacking. Hence, he assumes we will find similar failings in our country.¹

Though the following quote is from a character in Kierkegaard's *Either / Or*, it certainly feels at home given the above discussion of despair.

"I saw that the meaning of life was to secure a livelihood, and that its goal was to attain a high position; that love's rich dream was marriage with an heiress; that friendship's blessing was help in financial difficulties; that wisdom was what the majority assumed it to be; that enthusiasm consisted in making a speech; that it

¹ Even family and friends were not a source of meaning for Kierkegaard. By the age of 22, five out of his six siblings had died, and at the age of 42 he died of tuberculosis. Suffering and despair was part of the fabric of his life, and so it should be no surprise that the topic consumed much of his focus.

was courage to risk the loss of ten dollars; that kindness consisted in saying, "You are welcome," at the dinner table; that piety consisted in going to communion once a year. This I saw, and I laughed."

Once we commit to resigning infinitely to the world's inability to provide meaning to our lives, we can be free to trust God to do that for us. Not mentioned in our reading are what is typically called Kierkegaard's 'three stages of life'. The first is what Kierkegaard calls *the aesthetic*. This is not a stage of life where one is looking at art and whatnot, but instead a stage where the individual's life is focused on pursuing happiness and pleasure. While this can provide short term satisfaction, Kierkegaard concludes that this stage cannot prevent despair.

Stage two is *the ethical*. The individual will become aware of good and evil, and their place in the world. Instead of focusing solely on happiness and pleasure, the individual recognizes that they must do certain things, and must not do other things. They can no longer act as if society does not exist - at least not for long. The individual is, in a sense, growing up. A focus on ethics, however, cannot stave off despair. Realizing this, we arrive at the third stage: *the religion*.

For Kierkegaard, we cannot prove that God exists. Such rationalizing cannot generate faith. Faith is, in some sense for Kierkegaard, at odds with reason. Instead, given that nothing else can provide meaning for our lives, our only option is to trust in God. This divorcing of faith and reason is deemed by Kierkegaard to be *absurd*. Faith cannot be supported - at all - by empirical fact. Such faith, however, is able to combat despair. Have faith in the absurd (take that Nagel!).

It is also worth noting that Kierkegaard's God is extremely personal. God is not just what the religious leader says, God is who gives *your* life meaning. Hence, Kierkegaard's religious views focus heavily on the subjective side of our existence rather than on trying to establish some objective and systematic denomination.