

Summary:

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), a Danish philosopher and theologian, is considered one of the founders of existentialism and focused on how one can become their true self. He was critical of both the culture and religion of Denmark and left unable to answer the question of who he is supposed to be. Kierkegaard's work is motivated by an impending sense of despair, which he defines as the result of two psychological attitudes that are in tension: the desire to be more than we are and the inability to rid ourselves of what we are. This tension results in perpetual dissatisfaction with one's life and causes despair. Kierkegaard's approach to resolving this tension is through faith in God. He suggests that we must first try to find lasting meaning in the world but ultimately resign ourselves to the world's inability to provide meaning and instead trust in God.

Kierkegaard's three stages of life are the aesthetic, ethical, and religious. The aesthetic stage is focused on pursuing happiness and pleasure but cannot prevent despair. The ethical stage involves awareness of good and evil and the individual's place in the world. However, a focus on ethics cannot stave off despair either. The religious stage is where an individual finds meaning in God, despite the lack of empirical evidence. This faith in the absurd is what Kierkegaard believes can combat despair.

Kierkegaard's notion of the authentic individual is someone who is "willing to be one's own self." This individual recognizes that there is more to life than following the crowd or chasing surface pleasures. Authenticity requires a passionate decision or commitment that unifies the fragmented moments of our lives into a focused whole. This "unifying power" of commitment is embodied in an attitude of "earnestness," a sober recognition that existence is a serious affair. However, authenticity cannot be achieved simply by renouncing temporal pleasures and doing one's duty according to some universal moral principle. For Kierkegaard, the subjective truth of the individual is higher than the universal truths of morality. There may be times when we must suspend our obligation to the ethical sphere and accept that it may be more important to be authentic than to be moral.

Problem & Solution:

Problem: The problem, as Kierkegaard sees it, is that we are in a state of despair due to the tension between our desire to be more than we are and our inability to change what we are. This despair is further exacerbated by the inability to find lasting meaning in the world, whether through culture, religion, or worldly pursuits.

Solution: The solution, according to Kierkegaard, is to embrace faith in God. This faith is not based on reason or empirical evidence but rather on a leap of faith into the absurd. It is through this faith that we can overcome despair and find true meaning in our lives.

Stages of Life:

- **Aesthetic:** Focus on happiness and pleasure.
- **Ethical:** Awareness of good and evil and one's place in the world.
- **Religious:** Faith in God and acceptance of the absurd.

Important Quotes:

- "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." (pg. 1)
- "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 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." (pg. 1-2)
- "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." (pg. 2)
- "An authentic or religious life, then, is always accompanied by anxiety and loneliness because the leap individualizes us; it cuts us off from the comforting truths of the public and its blanket conceptions of right and wrong." (pg. 2)

Important Notes:

- Kierkegaard's work is motivated by a personal sense of despair, not just an abstract philosophical interest.
- Kierkegaard's God is extremely personal and subjective, providing individual meaning to life.
- Faith, for Kierkegaard, is at odds with reason and is grounded in the absurd.