

Søren Aabye Kierkegaard

(5 May 1813 – 11 November 1855) was a Danish philosopher, theologian, poet, social critic and religious author who is widely considered to be the first existentialist philosopher. He wrote critical texts on organized religion, Christendom, morality, ethics, psychology, and the philosophy of religion, displaying a fondness for metaphor, irony and parables. Much of his philosophical work deals with the issues of how one lives as a "single individual",



giving priority to concrete human reality over abstract thinking and highlighting the importance of personal choice and commitment. He was against literary critics who defined idealist intellectuals and philosophers of his time including Hegel [the dialectic] and Goethe.

Kierkegaard's theological work focuses on Christian ethics, the institution of the Church, the differences between purely objective proofs of Christianity, the infinite qualitative distinction between man and God, and the individual's subjective relationship to the God-Man Jesus the Christ, which came through faith. Much of his work deals with Christian love. He was extremely critical of the practice of Christianity as a state religion, primarily that of the Church of Denmark. He contrasted that, which he called "Christendom" with the individual subjective experience of faith which he called "Christianity." He regarded himself as a religious author whose chief task was to clarify the conceptual and existential requirements of Christian faith.

Questions to ponder as a way into the thoughts of Kierkegaard.

- **How do you know that there is a God?**
- **How have you arrived at faith in that God?**
- **How can you explain the existence of God to someone else?**
- **Is it possible to convince someone else of the existence of God?**
- **How is the story of Genesis 22 (Abraham sacrificing Isaac) an example of faith?**
- **How is the story of the King and the maiden absurd? How is it true? How does it relate to Christianity?**
- **How do we face the existential challenge of Christendom in our time and culture?**

In response to the work of the philosopher Hegel, Kierkegaard developed the idea of the **existential dialectic**, according to which the positive ideals of Christianity, such as faith, hope, joy and consolation, are always qualified by the negative determinants of Christian existence. The essentially Christian form of life is marked by the consciousness of sin, sacrifice, self-denial, poverty, suffering, and adversity. According to Kierkegaard, the believer must neither seek to avoid these nor to give in to them entirely, but rather to understand that it is only through these negative conditions that one can experience the true nature of divine grace and give proper expression to the positive ideals of Christianity. It's only through an awareness of one's sin [antithesis] that one can fathom God's grace [thesis] that one can come to faith [synthesis].

DIALECTIC: in Kierkegaard's (and other existentialists') writings, back and forth movements between opposite beliefs, emotions or attitudes. Hegel articulated it as the process of debating a thesis, its antithesis and arriving at a synthesis. Karl Marx wrote of dialectical materialism political and historical events result from the conflict of social forces and are interpretable as a series of contradictions and their solutions. The conflict is believed to be caused by material needs.

According to Kierkegaard, the great "calamity of Christendom" is that it abolishes this dialectic, and with it the emphasis on the negative aspects of Christian existence. Being European in the 19th century was equated with being Christian. In this way, Christendom not only removes the rigorousness and difficulty of being a Christian, but at the same time removes the very possibility of living Christianly. In response to this situation of acculturation, Kierkegaard undertakes to "reintroduce Christianity into Christendom"

For Kierkegaard, Christian faith is not a matter of regurgitating church dogma. It is a matter of individual subjective passion, which cannot be mediated by the clergy or by human artefacts. Faith is the most important task to be achieved by a human being, because only on the basis of faith does an individual have a chance to become a true self. This self is the life-work which God judges for eternity.

The individual is thereby subject to an enormous burden of responsibility, for upon h/er existential choices hangs h/er eternal salvation or damnation. Anxiety or dread (Angest) is the presentiment of this terrible responsibility when the individual stands at the threshold of momentous existential choice. Anxiety is a two-sided emotion: on one side is the dread burden of choosing for eternity; on the other side is the exhilaration of freedom in choosing oneself. Choice occurs in the instant which is the point at which time and eternity intersect—for the individual creates through temporal choice a self which will be judged for eternity.

REDUPLICATION: involves expressing one's relation to the eternal by "working against oneself" -- not in the sense in which one works against one's "true condition or goal" but in the sense that the inverted dialectical movement of faith "runs counter to ordinary human desires, values, and goals in life." Finding freedom in recognizing one's slavery.

But the choice of faith is not made once and for all. It is essential that faith be constantly renewed by means of repeated avowals of faith. One's very selfhood depends upon this repetition, for according to Anti-Climacus, the self "is a relation which relates itself to itself" (*The Sickness Unto Death*). But unless this self acknowledges a "power which constituted it," it falls into a despair which undoes its selfhood. Therefore, in order to maintain itself as a relation which relates itself to itself, the self must constantly renew its faith in "the power which posited it." There is no mediation between the individual self and God by priest or by logical system (contra Catholicism and Hegelianism respectively). There is only the individual's own repetition of faith. This repetition of faith is the way the self relates itself to itself and to the power which constituted it, i.e., the repetition of faith is the self.

Christian dogma, according to Kierkegaard, embodies paradoxes which are offensive to reason. The central paradox is the assertion that the eternal, infinite, transcendent God simultaneously became incarnated as a temporal, finite, human being (Jesus). There are two possible attitudes we can adopt to this assertion, viz. we can have faith, or we can take offense. What we cannot do, according to Kierkegaard, is believe by virtue of reason. If we choose faith we must suspend our reason in order to believe in something higher than reason. In fact, we must believe by virtue of the *absurd*.

Much of Kierkegaard's authorship explores the notion of the absurd: Job gets everything back again by virtue of the absurd (Repetition); Abraham gets a reprieve from having to sacrifice Isaac, by virtue of the absurd (Fear and Trembling); the Christian God is represented as absolutely transcendent of human categories yet is absurdly presented as a personal God with the human capacities to love, judge, forgive, teach, etc. Kierkegaard's notion of the absurd subsequently became an important category for twentieth century existentialists, though usually devoid of its religious associations.

According to Johannes Climacus, faith is a miracle, a gift from God whereby eternal truth enters time in the instant. Crucial to the miracle of Christian faith is the realization that over against God we are always in the wrong. That is, we must realize that we are always in sin. This is the condition for faith, and must be given by God. The idea of sin cannot evolve from purely human origins. Rather, it must have been introduced into the world from a transcendent source. Once we understand that we are in sin, we can understand that there is some being over against which we are always in the wrong. On this basis, we can have faith that, by virtue of the absurd, we can ultimately be atoned with this being. The absurdity of atonement requires faith that we believe that for God even the impossible is possible, including the forgiveness of the unforgivable. If we can accept God's forgiveness, sincerely, inwardly, contritely, with gratitude and hope, then we open ourselves to the joyous prospect of beginning anew. The only obstacle to this joy is our refusal or resistance to accepting God's forgiveness properly. Although God can forgive the unforgivable, He cannot force anyone to accept it. Therefore, for Kierkegaard, "there is only one guilt that God cannot forgive, that of not willing to believe in his greatness!".

The highest order of consciousness for Kierkegaard is God-consciousness, which enables the individual to see himself or herself as both a sinner and as open to divine grace. The path to this ultimate freedom requires will, imagination, faith, love, penitence, patience and a humble kenosis, whereby the self is emptied of will to become receptive to God's will.

FIDEISM: the view that religious belief is based on faith and not on reason. 2) the view that religious belief should be based on faith and not reason. The denial of **RATIONALISM**, which is the view that some knowledge is not derived from sense experience; and that reason plays a positive role in religious life, such as by proving the existence of God.

Existentialism: a 19th & 20th century philosophy that makes the individual central rather than the universal, accents individual freedom and responsibility, and highlights the absurd character of reality.

Notes and Thoughts about Kierkegaard

How do you define faith?

How does the idea of faith as a leap, articulated by Kierkegaard impact your life?

How do you agree with it? How do you have trouble with it?

How is faith hard for you?....rational, emotional, existential, understanding, living-it-out (doing or practice)?

How have you known God?

How are you knowing God today?

Is there a difference?, in other words is knowing God a process or an event?

What connection is there for you between faith and practice (deeds or living)?

What other thoughts does Kierkegaard arise in you?

The King and the Maiden

Søren Kierkegaard

Suppose there was a king who loved a humble maiden. The king was like no other king. Every statesman trembled before his power. No one dared breathe a word against him, for he had the strength to crush all opponents.

And yet this mighty king was melted by love for a humble maiden who lived in a poor village in his kingdom. How could he declare his love for her? In an odd sort of way, his kingliness tied his hands. If he brought her to the palace and crowned her head with jewels and clothed her body in royal robes, she would surely not resist-no one dared resist him. But would she love him?

She would say she loved him, of course, but would she truly? Or would she live with him in fear, nursing a private grief for the life she had left behind? Would she be happy at his side? How could he know for sure? If he rode to her forest cottage in his royal carriage, with an armed escort waving bright banners, that too would overwhelm her. He did not want a cringing subject. He wanted a lover, an equal. He wanted her to forget that he was a king and she a humble maiden and to let shared love cross the gulf between them. For it is only in love that the unequal can be made equal.

The king, convinced he could not elevate the maiden without crushing her freedom, resolved to descend to her. Clothed as a beggar, he approached her cottage with a worn cloak fluttering loose about him. This was not just a disguise – the king took on a totally new identity – He had renounced his throne to declare his love and to win hers.

How is the story of the King and the maiden absurd?

How is it true?

How does it relate to Christianity?

Genesis 22
New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹ After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ² He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." ³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. ⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." ⁶ Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. ⁷ Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" ⁸ Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

⁹ When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ¹² He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." ¹³ And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

¹⁵ The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, ¹⁶ and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, ¹⁸ and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice." ¹⁹ So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba.

How is the story of Genesis 22 (Abraham sacrificing Isaac) an example of faith?

How is the faith of Abraham neither rational nor emotional?

How are his actions faith?

Could you do what he did? Why? Why not? How could he?

What does that say about you?; him?; the human condition?; God?