

# PHILOSOPHY FOR BEGINNERS

## THE MEANINGS OF LIFE

**Kierkegaard and faith**  
**Week 5. 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2018**



# What we'll cover today

- Introduce Kierkegaard
- Subjective freedom and faith
- Anxiety and despair!
- The three stages of existence...
- Abraham and the Leap of faith



Marry, and you will regret it; don't marry, you will also regret it; marry or don't marry, you will regret it either way. Laugh at the world's foolishness, you will regret it; weep over it, you will regret that too; laugh at the world's foolishness or weep over it , you will regret it either way ... Hang yourself, you will regret it; do not hang yourself, and you will regret that too; hang yourself or don't hang yourself, you'll regret it either way; whether you hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret both. This, gentlemen, is the essence of all philosophy.

- *Either/Or*



# Søren Kierkegaard

- Danish Philosopher (1813 – 1855)
- Philosopher, poet, social critic, satirist, literary critic, journalist, religious writer
- The “Father of Existentialism”
- Prolific, often using pseudonyms and dialogue
- Famous slogan: “Truth is Subjectivity”
- Saw his task as “making life difficult”
- “What I really need to do is to get clear about “what am I to do” not “what I must know”



# Truth is subjectivity...

- Truth is not just about cognition of facts...
- It has an inescapably personal dimension, in that it also raises the question of our own *relationship* to that truth
- He affirms ‘the truth that is true for me’
- Kierkegaard emphasises subjective over objective truths, in that truths must be appropriated subjectively, inwardly, for us

# Truth is subjectivity

- We must appropriate a truth subjectively for it to have an impact on us
- The problem with 'rational', abstract or objective thought (particularly religious) is it makes the subject indifferent, and diminishes our relationship with God
- The way of objective reflection leads to abstract thought, mathematics, historical knowledge, and leads away from the subject, whose existence or non-existence becomes infinitely indifferent
- For Kierkegaard, that is not enough...

# The Meaning of God

- For Kierkegaard, to pose the question “does God exist” as if it were merely a factual question is to completely miss the point
- God’s existence is not a factual state of affairs, to which one could choose to be interested or choose to be indifferent
- It is a question of *meaning* – if God exists or does not, that is something which must make a meaningful difference to my life
- This is not something that can be decided “objectively” – it is a matter of our commitment to that truth, the subjective difference it makes to our lives





# Over to you – three groups

Let's turn to the two excerpts, Inwardness and Faith

Group 1: Inwardness, first para

*What does Kierkegaard mean by inwardness? How does it relate to passion, and truth?*

Group 2: Inwardness, second para

*How is truth related to subjectivity?*

Group 3: Faith

*What kind of argument for faith is he making?*

*All groups – what makes Kierkegaard's approach distinctive?*

# Faith

- The point of Faith is that it is “infinite inwardness, it is passion”
- If approached objectively, we miss that inwardness – it is just a matter of fact
- But we also cannot attain the position of Faith from another kind of objectivity – that of our social situation
- Kierkegaard is strongly critical of the attitude that says that to be a Christian is to be part of a particular cultural community
- The question of faith is radically individualising and subjective

# Faith

- “Christianity is spirit, spirit is inwardness, inwardness is subjectivity, subjectivity is essentially passion, and in its maximum an infinite, personal, passionate interest in one’s eternal happiness”
- Kierkegaard will go on to say that this can only be attained on the basis of “the leap of faith” which precisely is done on the strength of “the absurd”



# The Leap of Faith

- In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard uses Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac to explore the demands of faith
- He is a "Knight of Faith" in that he commits himself to God "on the basis of the absurd"
- Why does Abraham choose to believe that the Voice talking to him is God?
- *What is the leap of faith here?*
- *Take a look and discuss what you think Kierkegaard is trying to put across in the excerpt*

# The Leap of Faith

- “The Teleological suspension of the Ethical”: Divine Command transcends (“suspends”) the ethical order
- From the perspective of the Ethical, we cannot understand Abraham
- Act of sacrifice is un-ethical – contrary to moral law, the family and the community
- It falls under the Religious: Abraham believes that he will sacrifice Isaac and get him back
- This depends on being able to believe that God would ask him to sacrifice Isaac in the first belief



# The Leap of Faith

- More generally, Abraham represents the “absurdity” of commitment to Christianity
- The “paradoxes” that Christianity represents are what makes it possible for it to be the object of the highest form of subjective, passionate commitment
- But the absurdity means that the commitment can never spill over into objective certainty
- Faith is a leap, a choice – we cannot reach God by way of reason



# Infinite resignation

- In *Fear and Trembling*, the knight of faith must experience a 'double movement': *infinite resignation*, where he gives up everything he loves and reconciles himself with this...
- Like 'the tragic hero', e.g. Agamemnon, losing his daughter Iphigenia
- But the Knight of Faith then experiences the 'movement of faith', via the absurd, in which he fully regains what he has lost
- The knight can finally delight in the finitude of the world through experience of loss

# The dizziness of freedom

- Can you think of a situation where you've faced a difficult, potentially life-changing choice?
- Are there times where freedom might not be a source of happiness, but paralysing indecision?



# Anxiety

- What do we experience in this situation?
- A desire to jump – and a fear of this
- Anxiety is closer to the second of these, we experience our freedom in this moment – that we could *choose* to jump
- This experience of *our freedom as a matter of fundamental choice* is the basis of anxiety
- Anxiety is the reaction of the soul when faced with the terrifying abyss of freedom



# Anxiety

- In the Bible, Adam experiences anxiety in the face of God's prohibition on eating the fruit
- Adam has no concept of good or evil (eating the fruit is the original sin, but Adam does not know this)
- The anxiety comes from the knowledge of God's prohibition – because this implies that *Adam is free* to ignore God's prohibition
- Anxiety therefore precedes sin
- A major theme of Kierkegaard's work – subjective freedom is prior to objective questions of morality



# The burden of freedom?

- Anxiety is the realisation of our freedom – our ungrounded capacity to make a choice of which kind of subject we wish to be
- Take a look at the excerpts and discuss:
- Why is anxiety the ‘dizziness of freedom’?

# Despair

- *How would you define despair?*
- Anxiety is the realisation that our being a self is a matter of our freedom to choose...
- Despair by contrast is our anxiety in the face of the eternal, our fleeing from this fundamental freedom
- Despair involves a loss of self, or the wrong conception of ourselves
- In *The Sickness Unto Death*, despair characterises and raises human beings over other animals



# Despair

- Despair is over something – ourselves, our wish to be something objective, that we fail to attain
- For example: we become “one of the crowd” and as a result lose our self
- In despair we flee from the freedom revealed in the experience of anxiety – we displace it into objectivity
- But there are also forms of Despair where we do not do this and make the genuine choice in the face of Anxiety to choose to become a certain kind of person
- Kierkegaard presents a kind of typology of different selves in ‘Stages on Life’s Way’ and ‘Either/Or’

# Stages of Existence

- Kierkegaard identifies three 'stages' of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious
- They are less periods, more states
- Aesthetic concerned with self-gratification, everyday matters, and is unreflective
- Ethical with a personal responsibility for one's choices and doing good, and a commitment to help others through a moral absolute
- The religious overlaps, but involves a commitment to a Christian God

# Stages of Existence

- Religiousness A: the individual feels guilt before God; Religiousness B: a transcendental leap of faith
- Although the commitment to each of the stages does represent a genuine choice to be a particular kind of person, each has its own particular mode of despair in that it cannot be objectively successful
- Kierkegaard does not present the transition between the stages as a kind of rational, logical progression – the transition is made on the basis of a groundless subjective decision: “A Leap”

# The Stages of Existence

## ■ Aesthetic:

- *Hedonistic, live for momentary pleasures, satisfy one's desires*
- *Life of immediacy and reflection (finite ends)*
- *Acts without constraints or consideration for the future*
- *Boredom and pain are the enemy; despair*

## ■ Ethical:

- *Choice, commitment and responsibility*
- *Duty to universal rules*
- *Realization of not being able to live up to duty; guilt*

## ■ Religious:

- *Fulfillment, paradoxical inward movement of the individual which places the particular above the universal in a relationship to the Absolute (Infinite)*
- *“simultaneously to be out on 70,000 fathoms of water and yet to be joyful”*

# Rounding up

- Kierkegaard does not present faith as being a matter of claiming certainty, regardless of evidence
- It is a passionate commitment to *uncertainty* in the full realisation that what is being committed to is objectively absurd
- But he will also stress that *all* questions of Subjective commitment are like this
- Truth is something subjective, that one lives
- *How would you summarise Kierkegaard?*

# Next week...

- We turn to Nietzsche!
- Look out for: the 'death of God', nihilism, master and slave morality, the Dionysian vs Apollonian aspects of Greek thought, and eternal recurrence.
- Any questions, do email me  
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