

# How kierkegaard and c.s lewis self and trump over despair

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## **Kierkegaard's Despair**

To begin to understand Kierkegaard's argument one must first understand how Kierkegaard chooses to define the self. Kierkegaard attempts to accomplish this by showing the self as "a relation that relates itself to itself". To explain this phrase, Kierkegaard describes this phenomenon as the relationship which must bond together these factors in the correct way. The first example of this relationship must exist between necessity and possibility and describes the way in which human possibility in the form of the power of choice is offset by basic human necessities. Whether these necessities may be biological in nature or needs on a more individual level such as personal limitations, they still serve as a check on the possibilities of human existence. Much in the same way however, the necessities of human existence cannot be allowed to gain too much precedence in one's existence overriding the possibility of human nature. Though the relationship between necessity and possibility often prove to be the most basic and most easily understood portion of what Kierkegaard defines as the self, it is not the only relationship which he will choose to associate with his definition of the "self".

The other examples of this relationship which Kierkegaard deems necessary for the self to occur are markedly different, however for the main focus of this piece are similar enough to be regarded in the same sense. These factors which must carry the relationship Kierkegaard views necessary to gain one's self is that of temporal and eternal and finite with infinite. Though the first of both these pairs is easily identifiable in regards to the human self

(human mortality easily lends to these ideas of temporal and finite), the subsequent halves of these pairing are much harder to define in regards to the human condition. For Kierkegaard, this relationship is heavily based on the notion of what he describes as becoming. That is, in our attempts to become our immediate selves we are in a way fixing or making permanent who we are as human beings. In this way, the relationship which is necessary to realizing a self becomes evident between these two factors as the finite definition of who we are naturally becomes associated with the everlasting or eternal version of what we shall forever be.

Therefore, by understanding how Kierkegaard defines the essence of a human self, it is much easier to understand his description of just what despair is in regards to this "self". For Kierkegaard, despair can be defined as any factor which causes a disruption or failure to achieve these sort of linking between factors. Due to the fact that the very relationship itself is the self, any break in this link disrupts the human achievement of realizing ones self. That is to say, any imbalance between the relationship, which essentially is the self, could easily be defined as despair. In order to better explain his argument however, Kierkegaard distinctly describes the three ways in which a human being could live in despair; these three modes being not being aware of having a self, willing in despair not to be oneself, and willing in despair to be oneself.

An important point to reference in Kierkegaard's mention of despair is that this is a state exclusive to human beings. Animals are not subject to being in despair as there is never any question about what an animals self is, as they

simply are meant to be said animal. A cow does not dread waking up every morning wondering “ what sort of cow am I going to be today?” it simply is a cow. Due to this these animals are unable to be placed into despair as they cannot face disharmony in Kierkegaard’s set of relationships because they are not expected to have these relationships. Once again, the cow is not tasked with the struggle of maintaining balance between the finite and infinite, nor the temporal and eternal.

The first of these modes of despair is also the least important for Kierkegaard, that being the occurrence of not being aware of having a self. For Kierkegaard this is a state in which the person in question has not considered the possibility of who they are or want to be perhaps due to simply not reaching that point yet or perhaps mental deficiencies which prevent them from understanding the overall concept of the “ self”. A practical example of this second instance could perhaps be someone who is mentally handicapped and due to its effects have no knowledge of his/her self and lives their life in ignorance of their own despair. The second of these forms is much more consequential to Kierkegaard and is the occurrence where a person is willing in despair not to be oneself. For Kierkegaard this occurs out of weakness and is one of the more easily recognizable versions of despair. In this version of despair, the victim does not believe that they have lived up to their expectations or “ higher-level” desires. That is to say, the victims of this sort of despair feel as if they are not living the life they are supposed to live and are somehow missing out on all it is to be a human being. In fact, these beings are so in despair that they view achieving their

purpose or becoming all it means to be human as out of reach. According to Kierkegaard this occurs as a result of the fact that human beings are capable of acknowledging ideas of perfection and things which are incalculable. Due to this, human beings who are victimized to this mode of despair see themselves as falling short of what it means to be themselves.

Perhaps the greatest issue in deciphering Kierkegaard's versions of despair is understanding how the aforementioned mode of despair can coexist with Kierkegaard's final version of despair, that of willing in despair to be ones self. Kierkegaard defines this form of despair as one willing unsuccessfully to be ones self (this later being called defiance). That is to say, despite the fact that one cannot reach the balance needed to achieve being one's self, certain individuals defiantly spend their lives attempting to achieve this unreachable goal. The way in which this individuals choose to continue is to Kierkegaard a form of defiance in the fact that these individuals fully comprehend the furtiveness of their tasks and the finite nature of their lives yet continue to despair to be ones self in defiance of the despair facing them. The issue with this for many readers of Kierkegaard is it seemingly renders humans incapable of living without despair. What appears to be the only three options in life have all sent us down a path which Kierkegaard would describe as a state of despair. What path then should we take as rational beings? For Kierkegaard, the answer to this question is that of faith.

Despite the fact that Kierkegaard's description of despair lends itself to inevitability, he later makes the argument that those living in defiance have the opportunity to employ a mode or method which allows them to escape

the despair, that method of course being faith. For Kierkegaard those living in defiance without faith are still living in despair despite their defiance therefore faith is needed in accordance with defiance to escape the despair. Faith as described by Kierkegaard, is the process by which human beings are able to recognize ideas of the incalculable or immense and then strive to express these ideas in the finite world. By doing this, we are able to achieve the balance or harmony which Kierkegaard associates with a "self". That is to say, Kierkegaard argues that expressing such ideals as the incalculable or unconditionable in the finite world requires faith, and likewise these expressions require Gods assistance. Without God, Kierkegaard would argue, human beings would either live in defiance or weakness therefore continually being subject to the despair. However, defiance along with faith in god along as an omnipotent all powerful being allows a release from the despair.

One interesting way to analyze Kierkegaard's method on overcoming despair is to compare it to Camus views about despair as shown in the Myth of Sisyphus. For Camus, defiance as characterized by Sisyphus is the fact of acknowledging that one lives in despair, yet continuing on with their task anyway. Therefore, by continuing to push the boulder uphill despite his knowledge that it will simply fall back down again, Sisyphus is exemplifying defiance by his refusal to fall into the overwhelming pit of despair that is his circumstances. That is, for Camus the very act of continuing to push the boulder despite the fact that he has no hope of accomplishing his task is the very defiance that we as humans should seek in our lives. Thus, Camus tells the reader that we should simply imagine Sisyphus as happy in this task as

he is simply defying the despair into which he has been cast. In contrast, Kierkegaard would categorize Sisyphus's lack of hope as being that which places him in despair. Kierkegaard would argue that since Sisyphus lacks any hope or faith he is thereby prevented from achieving the sort of balance which leads to the achievement of ones " self" and therefore an escape from despair. These are some of the main points which categorize Kierkegaard's lengthy argument on the components of despair.