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Wisdom

Søren Kierkegaard: anxiety as "the dizziness of freedom"

The Danish philosopher who broke off his engagement, wrote under pseudonyms and said that life is understood looking backwards but lived going forwards

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Søren Kierkegaard was born in 1813 in Copenhagen, the last of the seven children of a wealthy and deeply religious merchant. His childhood was marked by his father's melancholy and the deaths of several brothers and sisters. He studied theology and philosophy, but never became a pastor or a professor.

Regine

In 1840 Kierkegaard became engaged to **Regine Olsen**, a young woman from Copenhagen. A year later he broke off the engagement, deliberately behaving coldly so that she would feel the separation less. He never fully explained why. He mentioned Regine in his journals until the end of his life, and many of his works can be read partly as attempts to understand this choice.

The pseudonyms

Many of his books were published under invented names: Victor Eremita, Johannes de Silentio, Vigilius Haufniensis. Each "author" represented a different way of seeing life. In **Either/Or** (1843) he presents two ways of living: the "aesthetic", which seeks pleasure and avoids commitment, and the "ethical", which takes responsibility and chooses. The reader must decide for himself. In Fear and Trembling (1843) he examines the biblical story of Abraham and asks what faith means.

Anxiety

In **The Concept of Anxiety** (1844), Kierkegaard describes anxiety in a way that has influenced modern psychology and philosophy. Anxiety, in his view, is not fear of something specific. It is the feeling that arises in the face of possibility, of the fact that we are free to choose. He compares it with the dizziness of someone looking into an abyss: anxiety is "the dizziness of freedom".

> *In his journals Kierkegaard wrote that life can only be understood backwards, but must be lived forwards.*

Solitude and legacy

In his last years Kierkegaard fiercely criticised the official Danish church, accusing it of turning Christianity into a comfortable habit. He was also caught up in a quarrel with a satirical paper, which made him an object of ridicule in the streets of Copenhagen. He died in 1855, only 42. In the twentieth century philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and many theologians rediscovered him as a forerunner of existentialism.

Lessons for today

1. **Anxiety before a big decision is normal.** It shows that we are free, not that we are making a mistake.
2. **Not choosing is also a choice.** The "aesthetic" life that avoids commitments has its price.

3. **We understand backwards.** Do not wait to have all the answers before moving forward.

Sources

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