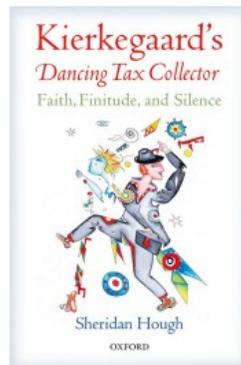




## Our exhausted (first) world: a plea for 21st-century existential philosophy



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BY [SHERIDAN HOUGH \(HTTPS://BLOG.OUP.COM/AUTHORS/SHERIDAN-HOUGH/\)](https://blog.oup.com/authors/sheridan-hough/)

SEPTEMBER 27<sup>TH</sup> 2015

**C**onsider: A lecture hall of undergraduates, bored and fidgety (and techne-deprived, since I've banned computers and devices in class) in distinctive too-cool-for-school Philosophy 101 style. Ah, but today will be different: The current offering is not Aristotle on causation, or Cartesian dualism, or Kant's transcendental unity of apperception. Today the reading is from Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and surely these students are eager to talk about the significance (or lack thereof) of our own fragile, brief lives. With some anticipatory relish, I give them Kierkegaard's ontology in broad strokes. "Kierkegaard," I announce, "is concerned about one thing: meaningfulness, the meaning of life, *your* life, materially realized."

Now for the question: what is it that a human being might initially move towards in an effort to realize her or his existential birthright of selfhood? Why, pleasure, yes?

Yes?

Strangely, no one bites. I try again: 'Think about what it would be like to commit yourself to a life of pleasure—not as an occasional relief, but as a vocation? What would you do? Where would you start? Be specific. If, right now, you were *defined* as a pleasure-seeker, what would you do, where would you go, right now?'—Aha! Hands in the air.

Dear Reader: what do you think I hear? Sex, you say? Drugs? Sex and drugs on the beach?

No. Here are the first two responses I got:

"Lunch."

"A Barcalounger and a TV."

Seriously.

I press them: What kind of lunch? (I wondered if they would approach the fabulous heights of Kierkegaard's own champagne-soaked aesthetes.) "Grilled cheese," the student shrugs, "you know, comfort food."

That's it? And our Barcalounger? "Just ready to zone out."

Indeed. And, lest you think these students are somehow more dispirited than the usual hormonally wracked/existentially pumped variety (undergraduate and graduate alike), let me tell you that this is a phenomenon I've observed over the years, on a number of North American campuses, and it continues to astonish me.

They are exhausted. These children of first world everything, every material good and privilege that humans have wrought, fashioned and fought for over millennia, are simply tired of the whole thing.

What does this mean?

It means, in part, that Kierkegaard's diagnosis of our age (originally of his 'early 19<sup>th</sup>-century backwater of Europe' age, but *plus ça change...*) is correct: we are failing to think in the right way about the demands of subjectivity, and indeed what it is to be a subject.

Trained as we are to occupy the objective mode, to quantify, analyze and measure—how much bandwidth? Points scored in the debate? Jelly beans in the jar, or dollars in the bank account? We forget that all of these facts, the torrent of Googled information ever exponentially increasing, are meant to mean, or to be, something for us. More to the point: something for *you*, or for *me*.

Evidently, we need some help in knowing ourselves (to crib a line), or with coming to terms with what it is to *be* a self. One of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, Anti-Climacus, describes a person who 'lives fairly well', has a family and a good job, is in all respects honored and esteemed, and yet no one detects that he lacks a 'self'. Anti-Climacus trenchantly concludes, "the greatest hazard of all, losing the self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly; any other loss—an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc.—is sure to be noticed."

We might observe that the students in the existential 'check-out' line are in a different condition from this redoubtable, yet empty, human being: they aren't even aroused by the prospect of taking up the gleaming mantles of propriety and esteem—those letters after the name! The corner office and the elaborate business card! Oh, they will *do* all of it, of course, but the point of their activity, any of it, except for indolent repose, has gone missing: their subjective condition is not fully functioning.



*Søren Kierkegaard by Sigfrid Lundberg. CC-BY-SA-2.0 via Flickr (<https://flic.kr/p/oVZbzq>).*

Hence Kierkegaard's often misunderstood, generally misquoted notion of 'truth is subjectivity'—which does not mean, as someone once said to me at a faculty party, "Oh, yeah, he's just saying that if you think it's true then it's true for you, right?" Not right. (As if the clause 'true for you' had any epistemic purchase at all.) In fact, Kierkegaard is merely amplifying the ancient Socratic dictum that there is an absolute, incontrovertible difference between *orthê doxa*, correct opinion, and *epistêmê*, knowledge. Two persons holding the same belief can't be distinguished on the basis of, say, an utterance; both will claim 'X.' The difference between the two is *how* the belief is held. A merely true belief is unreliable, not located in a network of relevant justified true beliefs. Knowledge, of course, is a true belief that is held in the *right* way, standing in the proper relation to other pieces of knowledge; it can be accounted for, and recognized when approached from multiple epistemic perspectives.

Now the issue is clear: Merely holding, and espousing, a true belief is not necessarily to be in the right *relation* to that truth. Our students utter all manner of truths, but they often seem delivered as *materiel* stolen from a construction site: here's a couple of worthy boards, there's a bag of nails, and what's it all about, anyway? Another of Kierkegaard's voices, Johannes Climacus, provides a trenchant example of just such a subjectively-deficient truth claimant: he imagines a madman who has escaped from an asylum. Of course, the madman doesn't want to be captured and taken back: what to do? He must convince everyone around him that he is in fact sane, and how better to do this than to speak the objective truth? He finds a 'skittle ball' on the ground, and he secures it in the hem of his coat, vowing to utter a true sentence every time it bumps his bottom. What does he choose? 'Boom! The world is round'. He visits friends in order to convince them of his renewed sanity and paces the floor, uttering this sentence at each posterior prompt.

But surely the earth is round?

Of course it is: the fault of the madman's recitation doesn't lie in the truth of the utterance, but in his relation to it. His objectively true remark is subjectively empty, an incantation to ward off the asylum supervisor, not a meaningful remark about the world through which he moves.

'Truth is subjectivity' is thus, in part, a meditation on the way in which a truth is held. And indeed, those who teach—any subject at all, but particularly philosophy—have an intersubjective obligation to underscore not only why the lesson at hand is important to understand, but how each student should consider what that text, or argument, or historical account, might mean particularly for *them*. The task of education is not (again, borrowing from Socrates) to pour external facts and claims down their willing (or unwilling) gullets, but to set a challenge, that of developing what Kierkegaard calls 'interiority,' the *aduton* or sanctuary that is an established self, one committed to a task in the world.

Or getting a life, you might say.

Back to the lecture hall: I try once more to peddle the life of pleasure, that first and ultimately hopeless attempt in the Kierkegaardian quest for selfhood, and ask the question again. One of them sits forward to ask: "what do you mean by 'defined as a pleasure seeker'?" You mean that's my *identity*?"

Indeed. Seeing that human beings have, and are responsible for, an identity—ethical, sexual, religious, racial, political—is a good place to start the subjective conversation.

*Featured image credit: Lecture theatre fills up by portableantiquities, CC BY 2.0 via Flickr (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/finds/8178208608>).*

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[...] Philosopher Sheridan Hough writing about the enervated hedonism of many of his students (by their own admission, “just zoning out on a Barcalounger with a grilled cheese”): [...]

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**[John Uebersax \(http://www.john-uebersax.com\)](http://www.john-uebersax.com)** 28<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER 2015

This line of thinking only brings us back (as it should) to Platonism. Human beings have a nature, prior to experience, which is (1) innate, and (2) in common across all human beings. We share a common sense of the Form of the Good. Hence a person, while it may seem subjectively that they are constructing themselves without any constraints, is actually acting according to a prior template of self-actualization. We are not free to choose the dictates of conscience!

“Make thyself!” and “Know thyself!” mean the same thing. To know oneself is to know oneself as a particular kind of moral being. And this carries with it the subjective imperative to fully actualize oneself as this moral being.

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**eder erinstein** 4<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 2015

Kierkegaard was born to an affluent family. The point is, you can't sit around and philosophize if you're trying to survive. Many of these students care about jellybean counts and bank account scores, because all the jobs are being automated and we have scores of health problems from SSRIs and amphetamines. If we don't figure out how many jellybeans are in a jar we're going to end up living on ramen in our parent's house.

When is their time to find and nurture yourself?

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**Drew Sheridan** 6<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 2015

Sheridan,

Let me compliment you on such a readable and thoughtful article. Most of the Reddit posts are as dry as confident dust, most of the Reddit posts are as dry as confident dust, irrelevant and pontifical. To respond to your question, I see pleasure as not just of the body, but also of the ego and the mind. The reason we sit around philosophizing, which some may see as an entirely useless past time, is for its mental pleasures. We do good for how it makes us feel about ourselves and about how others feel about us. At some point we must look back on our lives and ask whether it has been good or not, have we helped others, have we loved and been loved, have we seen and felt beauty. If you take God out of the Kierkegaard equation, I think existential meaning pretty much just boils down to that. I hope that when you look back on your life you will have seen students whose minds were awakened to greater thoughts.

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