



# Have we cause for despair?☆

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## ABSTRACT

Man is a social being. Man's identity, preferences, place and status are defined in reference to society and that society is the arbiter of man's success or failure. In this paper I examine societal linkages in the context of their dissolution, arguing that if the societal link is damaged or broken, man is fundamentally changed. Since despair evidences eviction from society, I examine despair, the loss of hope, and the behaviors associated therewith from the perspectives of many disciplines to define despair and to characterize the despairing individual and his relationship to society. I then develop a model of a goal-oriented, socially-embedded agent in which the usual concept of the individual is challenged, and hope and despair are fundamental to this challenge. Using this theoretical framework, I return to the economics literature and examine the extent to which economics has, at least implicitly, recognized despair without necessarily confronting it either in theory or policy design, argue why this failure has weakened both our theory and our policy, and suggest a possible remedy.

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## 1. Introduction

Man is a social being, in and of society. The nature of this societal link is essential to defining who man is (Aristotle) since man's identity, preferences, place and status are defined in reference to society. Who he is and is not, as opposed to what he is or is not, are socially construed, and his behavior, as well as others' behavior in response to him, depends on these social construals (Arrow, 1994; Nienass and Trautmann, 2015). This social dimension of man is stripped out of most economic analysis, and the atomistic individual, or the methodological equivalent of the individual, is left to take decisions based on his endowments, tastes, and technology, all of which are taken as given without reference to the society in which he lives. If something is lost by this approach, it is often argued that it can be regained relatively easily within the context of our individual-centered models by the careful design of, for example, rules of the game, information sets, constraints, or institutions. Yet, if society cannot be so easily subsumed, and if the essence of the individual is not immutable but can be and is changed by society and social interaction, wherefore economic analysis?

In this paper I examine societal linkages in the context of their dissolution, arguing that if the societal link is damaged or broken, man is fundamentally changed. Since despair evidences eviction from society, I examine despair, the loss of hope, and the behaviors associated therewith, both by the despairing and by society as cause and response.

To establish the importance of despair in western thought, to define despair and to characterize the despairing individual and his relationship with and to society, I examine despair from the perspectives of many disciplines, from theology to literature and art to clinical psychology. Having done so, I contrast despair with hope, its behavioral opposite, and then develop a model of a goal-oriented, socially-embedded agent in which the usual concept of the individual is challenged, and hope and despair are fundamental to this challenge. Using this theoretical framework, I return to the economics literature and examine the extent to which economics has, at least implicitly, recognized despair, without necessarily confronting it either in theory or policy design, argue why this failure has weakened both our theory and our policy, and suggest a possible remedy.

## 2. Characterizing despair

### 2.1. Despair in Christian thought

From St. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians onwards, Christian theology has defined despair as the loss of hope of salvation. To be saved, one must repent one's sins and seek forgiveness. Since all sins can be forgiven, by God if not by man, no one is excluded from salvation, from entrance to God's kingdom, a priori. Yet if the sinner

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despairs, he determines that his own sins are unforgivable by God and that penitence, no matter how sincere, will avail of nothing. In this it is the sinner who damns himself by rejecting God's capacity to forgive rather than God rejecting the truly penitent sinner. This perspective was given weight by Origen and other early scholars of the Church, who argued that God would have forgiven even Judas Iscariot and welcomed him into his Kingdom had he repented rather than judging his sins to be unforgivable, even by God, and taking his own life in despair. Later medieval scholars, uncomfortable with the premise that all sins were forgivable, qualified this position by suggesting that the act of suicide signaled impenitence, since it was the Devil who induced he who despaired to self-harm and suicide (Altschule, 1967) while still leaving open the path to salvation to the truly penitent.

The association of despair with suicide generally and Judas specifically was reflected in art that reached even the illiterate. Despair was represented by the very recognizable suicide, Judas, paired with Hope, represented by the crucified Christ, or by a suicide alone, defiantly unrepentant even in death, such as Giotto's fresco in the Arena Chapel in Padua (Barasch, 1999). Despair was personified in morality plays and other literature as a character, variously named Despaire or the Devil, who provided the means of suicide, a rusty knife, poison or a noose, to the wavering Christian, Everyman, weighed down by sin perceived as unforgivable and seeking release (Beecher, 1987; MacDonald and Murphy, 1990). The message was clear, accepted and central to medieval theology (Lederer, 2006), so much so that even suicides that had a secular motive, such as crippling debt, a love affair gone wrong, or mental illness, were treated as spiritual despair in both law and custom. Specifically, it was common in the Middle Ages for the bodies of suicides to be left unburied, to be mutilated and for their property to be seized or destroyed, thereby financially ruining and socially excluding their families (Murray, 2000; MacDonald and Murphy, 1990). The sins of the fathers were visited on their sons.

Thomas Aquinas, in *Summa Theologica* (Aquinas, 1947 [1265–1274]), examines despair in the context of his exploration of the 11 passions (emotions). Aquinas characterizes these passions as either concupiscible or irascible. Each of the concupiscible passions is directed to the understanding of good or evil absolutely. Each of the irascible passions is also directed to good or evil, but these passions reflect what is arduous to obtain or to avoid (Miller, 2012). Thus, the object of despair is an unattainable good, well worth attaining but perceived to be beyond the despairing's grasp no matter how hard he tries, leaving him to do without the good (King, 1999). When hope (of one's own salvation through the grace of God) is given up, that is, when one despairs, one is drawn away from the good, from God and from one's fellow man, and into sin. Despair, which destroys hope, does not require that one is without faith and consequently does not believe in God's grace, but only that God's grace does not extend to oneself. This can lead, eventually, to the loss of faith and to the hatred of God, the worst of all sins (Snyder, 1965).

Luther suggests that, contra Thomas, despair leads to rather than away from salvation (Snyder, 1965). For Luther, there are two sources of knowledge: God's law and the Gospel. Through God's law, man learns that he is born in sin and is, thereby, damned. Man, through the Gospel, which he can only access via God's law, discovers God's mercy, the only means of man's salvation. God's law forces man to recognize that he is damned, and this recognition leads to despair: he is nothing without God's grace. This realization opens to him the knowledge of the Gospel and the prospect of salvation. Despair, the descent into and journey through hell, for Luther, was a prerequisite for salvation. So, too, for Calvin, yet for Calvin despair afflicts only the pre-conversion elect or those who have not truly converted and are thus not of the elect. For Luther, life is a continual struggle against despair since the spirit is always beset by doubt. For Calvin, not so, except for those who were not members of the elect who were forever barred from God's mercy. The journey to salvation, in the Protestant tradition, was through hell (despair)

where many remained. The Protestant and Thomist portrayals of despair permeate Western culture. Spenser's Redcrosse Knight in *The Faerie Queene* (Spenser, 1978 [1590–1609]) journeyed through hell to emerge strengthened and saved (Snyder, 1965), as did Bunyan's pilgrim Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Bunyan, 1996 [1678]), while the lives and deaths of Graham Greene's protagonists in his novels *Brighton Rock* (Greene, 1938) and *The Heart of the Matter* (Greene, 1948) exemplify Thomistic despair (Sinclair, 2011).

For Kierkegaard, like Luther, life, the process of discovering one's true self, a self only defined in relation to God, is a battle with despair (McDonald, 2012). Kierkegaard defines three levels of despair: ignorant despair, in which the individual is ignorant of having a self, despair in weakness, in which the individual does not try to be himself, and defiant despair, in which the individual recognizes the eternal aspect of himself, that which makes him himself, determines to become himself, but rejects God's essential role in the process (Banks, 2004). Thus, despair comes from trying to know oneself without God, although it is only in relation to God that the self, the true self, can be realized (McDonald, 2012). That is, in despair one despairs of one's own sins and despairs of the forgiveness of those sins: the sinner, and everyone is a sinner, rejects God's forgiveness, a sin against the Holy Spirit, and thus is unforgivable. In winning the battle with God to become oneself by oneself, one loses oneself: the self is not defined in the absence of God. To defeat despair one must go beyond the finite and humanly attainable, have faith in God, have faith in the infinite possibility of God's forgiveness to effect what is humanly impossible, accept God's judgment and thereby find one's true self in relation to God (Podmore, 2009). Kierkegaard's philosophy mirrors his own spiritual struggle. It is also the struggle faced in Ibsen's play *Brand* (Ibsen, 1912), where the protagonist, the Reverend Brand, unlike Kierkegaard, rejects God, and in his defiant despair not only loses his own life but the lives of his family and his parishioners (Banks, 2004).

While Kierkegaard examines despair in the context of man's relationship with himself and with God, Gabriel Marcel examines man in the context of the world in which he lives (Treanor, 2010). Man is defined by his ontological exigencies, his sense of being, and his need for experience that transcends the material world. This need is accompanied by a sense that something is amiss, that the world is broken, a dissatisfaction that cannot be assuaged, as the transcendence of the material world cannot be achieved on one's own, that is, without God. But, if man does not feel that something is amiss, does not feel dissatisfied, and cannot reflect on the need for transcendence, his transcendent exigency will atrophy to the point of absence. He will not view the world as being broken yet it is its brokenness that killed his transcendent exigency leaving him as only a functional entity. He will be reduced to a machine-like existence living a life in despair unable to participate meaningfully in his own reality. Having will replace being. He will neither be available to himself nor to others (Pamplume, 1953). He will be without hope so that the current situation, despair, is final and irrevocable. He will be alienated from being.

## 2.2. Despair in secular thought

Over the centuries while the understanding and characterization of despair evolved, despair remained fundamentally defined as the loss of hope of salvation. Theologians explored what despair meant to the individual in this life and the next. Philosophers, psychologists and others, moving away from theological characterizations, expanded the analysis by defining despair more generally as the loss of hope, subsuming the theological in a more general characterization of despair.

Steinbock (2007) defines despair, from the perspective of phenomenology, as the impossibility of the ground for hope. This impossibility is not attached to a particular situation or event, for were this the case, while the particular situation would be hopeless

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