

DECISION / RESOLVE†

Decision/Resolve [*afgjøre/beslutte*–verb; *Afgjørelse/Beslutning*–noun]

The Danish verbs *afgjøre* and *beslutte* have overlapping definitions. The former means to decide, determine, or settle something. The latter, when used in the phrase *at beslutte sig*, means to make up one's mind or arrive at a decision. In this sense, it signals (like *afgjøre*) the end of a process of deliberation. However, *beslutte* also conveys the idea of resolve, which points to an ongoing commitment to think and act in a certain way.

The word “decision” is found most often in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and *Philosophical Fragments* (under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus), followed by *Two Ages* and *Works and Love* (eponymous). The term “resolve” likewise appears most frequently in Climacus' writings, followed by *Either-Or*, and then *Stages on Life's way*. Some salient remarks can also be found in the *Notebooks*. Kierkegaard, for the most part, stays close to and builds upon the ordinary meanings of these words. While they are not the subject of long reflection like “love,” say, or “irony,” Kierkegaard does give them an existential coloring that sets them off sharply from speculative thinking

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as a whole (1). His non-cognitivism is further brought out by linking “decision” and “resolve” to the notions of “will” (2), decisionism (3), “the Moment” (4), and “the stages” (5).

(1) *Existential vs. Cognitive*. Kierkegaard seems to acknowledge both the distinct and overlapping meanings of the terms “decision” and “resolve.” He stakes out a semantic range for these concepts that he then contrasts sharply against both systematic speculation and thought in general. This may be summarized as follows:

“Decision”

- (a) refers primarily to real or essential (*væsentlig*) decision, which is related to the eternal and so is absolute.¹
- (b) happens in time,² in the medium of existence, and is rooted in subjectivity rather than in systematic speculation, public debate, voting, deliberation, or reflection.³
- (c) requires a leap⁴ in the moment.⁵
- (d) is passionate, qualitative, involving the will.⁶
- (e) is required for faith.⁷

¹ *SKS* 7, 39, 43, 96, 350 / *CUPI*, 33, 37, 98, 384.

² *SKS* 7, 93 / *CUPI*, 95.

³ *SKS* 7, 39, 112, 121, 178, 186, 202-203, 311, 443 / *CUPI*, 33, 115-6, 129, 194, 203, 221-2, 341, 488; *SKS* 8, 66-67 / *TA*, 68; *SKS* 23, 246; *SKS* 24, 239-40 / *JP* 4, 4203.

⁴ *SKS* 7, 100, 347 / *CUPI*, 102, 381.

⁵ *SKS* 4, 260-2, 306 / *PF*, 57-61, 111.

⁶ *SKS* 7, 48, 94, 280, 311, 347-348 / *CUPI*, 42, 95, 307-8, 341, 381.

⁷ *SKS* 7, 24, 545 / *CUPI*, 15, 601.

“Resolve”

(a') is also understood chiefly in relation to the eternal and is absolute as well.⁸

(b') is found in subjectivity or individuality and is opposed to speculation, deliberation, and reflection, being that which begins and stops all human thinking.⁹

(c') is related to the moment.¹⁰

(d') involves the will.¹¹

(e') is required for faith.¹²

“Resolve” can also mean:

(f) Power, firmness, single-mindedness.¹³

This scheme raises some key questions. Both “decision” and “resolve” are closely tied to the will. But how exactly do they fit with this concept and why the stark dichotomy between will and reason? Second, how do we reconcile their eternal form with their taking place in time, and how is this tied to faith again?

⁸ *SKS* 7, 450 / *CUPI*, 497.

⁹ *SKS* 7, 41, 109-110, 112, 174, 450 / *CUPI*, 35, 112-3, 116, 189, 497.

¹⁰ *SKS* 4, 232 / *PF*, 24-5.

¹¹ *SKS* 3, 64 / *EO2*, 58-9; *SKS* 7, 127 / *CUPI*, 136.

¹² *SKS* 7, 174, 450 / *CUPI*, 189, 497.

¹³ *SKS* 7, 319, 420 / *CUPI*, 349, 462-3. Cf. *SKS* 20, 212 / *KJN* 4, 211; *SKS* 21, 121 / *JP* 1, 962; *SKS* 24, 289 / *JP* 2, 1269.

(2) *The Will*. Decision and resolve are clearly voluntary in nature and, as we have seen, tied to willing. Generally speaking, “decision” is more about choosing or settling an issue; “resolve” is more about strong-mindedness and staying power. Kierkegaard is not all that interested in the physiological and psychological aspects of the will. Instead, he focuses narrowly on one specific thing: Existential orientation or choice. What this means is that decision and resolve, properly understood, are not about psychological or bodily states, but rather about choosing an orientation, i.e. a way of seeing and relating to one’s life as a whole, and then sticking by this choice.¹⁴

(3) *Decisionism*. Kierkegaard’s take on the will, and by extension decision and resolve, is voluntarist. He strongly denies that either is an expression or epiphenomenon of the human intellect or practical reason. It is the will that moves and actualizes the understanding, not the other way around. And since decision has less to do with plural choice and more about going for a broader existential orientation in life, there is also less scope for concrete deliberation. For Kierkegaard, it seems, everyone just knows what is the right thing to do in a given context, so no real ethical dilemmas calling for deliberation are even possible.¹⁵ Finally, in an existential-religious sense, careful reflection is actually a way of dodging decision—being irresolute.¹⁶ A good case could be

¹⁴ Cf. *SKS* 3, 165-6 / *EO2*, 169; *SKS* 18, 223 / *KJN* 2, 205.

¹⁵ E.g. *Pap. X A* 169 / *JP* 3, 2874.

¹⁶ *SKS* 3, 166 / *EO2*, 169; *SKS* 10, 95-98 / *CD VII*, 88-90.

made then for human reason not playing a positive, integral role in the Kierkegaardian corpus at all. Real choices always involve a leap. Seen in this light, Kierkegaard is a decisionist.

(4) *The Moment*. True decision and resolve, as we have seen, are eternal and absolute but also happen in time. This is really only a problem if we think the human being is self-sufficient in all things involving truth, or that there is no way to unify time and eternity. Kierkegaard, along with his pseudonyms, reject both assumptions. As a freely operating cause and a self-relation the will is both spontaneous and free, but as *relational* it is always limited by something beyond itself. Though the self is a synthesis of freedom and necessity, this synthesis is, paradoxically, never achieved by the self in isolation.¹⁷ Something outside the individual's own thought and will must give the criterion (truth-condition) for real, existential choice and resolve to happen, or at least force the individual to engage in the first place.¹⁸ Only in the Moment are true decisions made and determination shown, the Moment being that which unifies eternity and time in itself.¹⁹ That is why true decision and resolution are never quite up to the individual alone.

(5) *The Stages*. The lowest form of choice is *aesthetic*. That is, in the aesthetic stage of life the individual is focused only on choosing

¹⁷ Cf. *SKS* 11, 129-30 / *SUD*, 13-14.

¹⁸ Cf. *SKS* 4, 258-71 / *PF*, 55-71.

¹⁹ Cf. *SKS* 4, 242-53 / *PF*, 37-48.

between different options in concrete situations, and on inventing and trying out different life-projects or self-images. This is because the aesthete imagines she is self-sufficient and absolute. Such a person is a mere observer of life, lost in plurality.²⁰ The next form of choice is *ethical*, which is more engaged. The ethical individual realizes she is a relational being, tied to others, and she tries to act on this insight in a responsible way.²¹ This is bound to fail, however, since she is still trying to unify freedom and necessity *in herself*—in her own thought and will (moral autonomy).²² Neither in its aesthetic nor ethical form is the existential nature of choice acknowledged or resolve truly demonstrated. Only when human self-sufficiency is given up does the individual become open to eternity, the absolute (God).²³ Only when the eternal condition (truth-criterion) has been given in time by God is she able to make a leap of faith in the Moment.²⁴ Only when the individual is helped by God to will and endure Eternity is resolve actually achieved.²⁵ For Kierkegaard, decision or resolve in its true, existential form is religious—i.e. Christian.

²⁰ Cf. *SKS* 3, 163-4 / *EO2*, 166-7.

²¹ Cf. *SKS* 3, 163-4 / *EO2*, 166-7; *SKS* 7, 290-3 / *CUP1*, 318-321.

²² Cf. *SKS* 23, 45-6 / *JP* 1, 188.

²³ Cf. *SKS* 4, 140-7 / *FT*, 45-53; *SKS* 7, 477ff.; 505-10 / *CUP1*, 525ff.; 555-61.

²⁴ Cf. *SKS* 4, 161-2 / *FT*, 69; *SKS* 7, 97 / *CUP1*, 98-9.

²⁵ Cf. *SKS* 8, 123, 157, 169, 182; 184ff., 227-37 / *UD* 7, 46, 60, 74, 76ff., 127-39.

To sum up: Decision and resolve involve making a determination, with the only real difference between them being that decision is about making a choice, while resolve is about sticking by it. Kierkegaard has an existentialist take on this: Decision and resolve are more about an individual's choosing and committing to a total way of looking at and relating to life than to concrete or situational choice. The motivating element in all thought and action, decision and resolve are tied to the will, essentially cut loose from systematic speculation and public deliberation—indeed, from human reason as a whole. True decision or resolve has a religious, Christian form: It is a leap of faith in the Moment, empowered and sustained by God.

See also: existence/existential; immediacy/reflection; leap; politics; reason; religious/ Religiousness; stages; time/temporality/eternity; voting; will.

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