

**FINDING PEAKS AND
VALLEYS IN A FLAT WORLD**
GOODNESS, TRUTH, AND MEANING IN
THE MIDST OF TODAY'S MAD CHASE FOR
PROSPERITY AND INSTANT FEEDBACK

Mark Ellingsen

Interdenominational Theological Center

Series in Philosophy of Religion



VERNON PRESS

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www.vernonpress.com

In the Americas:
Vernon Press
1000 N West Street, Suite 1200
Wilmington, Delaware, 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Philosophy of Religion

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020947142

ISBN: 978-1-64889-108-3

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FOR

DAVE

STEVE AND LYNN

For more than half of century of friendship, fun, games, and
good conversation

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If life in our globalized economy and interconnected world is as challenging as it seems to be for a lot of us, as difficult as I seem to say it is in this book, I must confess that I haven't found life in our context so impossible and completely unsatisfying. Of course, the author of a book aiming to help you cope had better be pretty competent in executing the advice he gives, to have found what he advises to be personally helpful. It is true that I've been trying to take the great 19th-century Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's advice on how to cope, trying to leap away from aestheticism, too much dour morality, and trying to become a Christian and have fun doing it. That will be my (Kierkegaardian) advice to you in this book. But along the way, I've had some advantages that a lot of us daring to live that way don't have. I'm not really the "solitary individual" in these quests. I've had a number of precious friends. I think first of my wife of 48 years Betsey, who does a lot of editing of my books. But then I've had two friends, Dave Lawton and Steve Strumlok who've known me more than half a century (back to elementary school in Dave's case and since freshman year of college in the case of Steve). Soccer teammates in high school and college ball respectively. And I've known Steve's special wife Lynn almost as long as I have known Betsey. All of us are teachers in some way (I'm the odd man out, not working in public schools like all of them.) We've maintained these friendships, though separated by thousands of miles sometimes (even without internet connectivity). Had he not died tragically in his 20s serving his country in the military, our dear friend Pat Smith would have been included in this number too, and he's not forgotten whenever we get together. With special lifetime friends like I have, life gets a lot easier, and this book will tell you a little bit why.

What's really neat about dedicating this book to my longest-term friends is that even before Betsey and Lynn and Dave's special ladies came into the picture, Steve and Dave and I encountered Kierkegaard, and back in our 20s were already thinking together about what he might have to say to us about life. How appropriate, then, that this book is for them, and Betsey who's already had 9 of these book dedications from me thought so too. I might not have felt ready to tell you about Kierkegaard had I not had all these years talking about him with these friends. So thanks, life-long friends, for all the support, the good times, and the feeling that you and I have got each other's backs through thick and thin, even when the world feels flat.

FOREWORD

Will Willimon
Duke Divinity School

I've just gotten around to reading David Epstein's *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*. The complex, wicked problems that we face require generalized thinking and an ability to make connections with seemingly disparate fields of knowledge. As a pastor, a preacher—that is, as a generalist par excellence—I found encouragement in Epstein's praise of conversation between academic disciplines.

Mark Ellingsen's *Peaks and Valleys in a Flat World* is a remarkable exercise in creative connection-making in service to more abundant living in today's world. Mark successfully performs the seemingly unlikely feat of introducing cultural commentator Thomas Friedman to Nineteenth-Century theologian/philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. The collaborative conversation that emerges is remarkable.

After analyzing the nature of contemporary life in the technologically flattened world with its insane pursuit of material prosperity and lust for instant gratification, Ellingsen asks Kierkegaard to speak to our modern quandary. Using SK's typology of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious modes of existence, Ellingsen discovers fresh insights that startle us with sparkling insights and immediate applicability.

Throughout my own life, at certain key moments, Kierkegaard—that allegedly “melancholy Dane”—has brought me joy by giving me just the word that I needed to hear, just the right handle to grab hold of perplexing reality, whether I wanted to hear his truth or not. I'm sure that under Ellingsen's lively, skilled reading of SK, he will do the same for you.

Noble words like “truth,” “goodness,” and “meaning” are brushed off and used to challenge a culture in which many of us seem to have gained the whole world but lost our souls. Ellingsen's is a remarkable achievement: to give us a trenchant critique of contemporary life combined with a hopeful, practical way through the peaks and valleys.

Will Willimon

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author of *Accidental Preacher: A Memoir*.

INTRODUCTION

WHAT MAKES THE WORLD FLAT?

“The World Is Flat!” The title of Thomas Friedman's best-seller has almost become a mantra for our time. But what is life like for those of us living in our new globalized economic order? It's so bewildering, so draining, so uncertain, and even so lonely sometimes. This is a book about how to thrive in our new contexts, and if you're a Christian, it's also a book about how to live faithfully in the flat world.

In some ways, things are better. Globalization has fostered international competition, to the benefit of the consumer. Combined with the computer revolution, it has provided a leveled playing field making it possible for smaller companies to compete with the large international corporations and also individual empowerment. The start-up company has marketing resources and the ability to do research, in some cases even means of production, comparable to the mega-corporation. And the individual is likewise empowered in ways unthinkable before the 1990s. We have a global communications platform and can conduct research at an astronomical speed. Collaboration and individualization which allows us to create our own values are now the order of the day. All of us can now become celebrities – at least on YouTube.

Because these new opportunities are, in principle available to anyone with the skills to compete, regardless of social standing or the old company hierarchy, the old hierarchies which gave some insuperable advantage are abolished. Class distinctions have been flattened. And because these new possibilities extend all over the world, Friedman concluded that the world is flat.

Friedman proceeds to describe some of the characteristics of the flat world which make these other developments and opportunities possible. The world is flat, he maintains, insofar as we live in a business environment in which low-cost interconnectivity and global networks for collaboration, providing business owners all over the world the ability to pull together low-cost labor and high levels of technology have reached hitherto unimaginable levels.¹

As we are all well aware, though, there have been costs for these technological developments and the new opportunities they have created. At least we can speak of new challenges we now face as a result.

With the new individual opportunities has come an eroding sense of tradition and community. In a business environment in which flexibility, adaptability,

creativity, a willingness to change, and team-work on short-term teams are keys to success, there is less and less need for tradition or institutional memory. On the job, you learn to eye with suspicion long-standing traditions and communities which have endured for generations. Besides, workers cannot count on being at a job for decades since lifetime employment with a company is no longer a way of life in the flat world. These dynamics may not immediately translate into a total rejection of community and tradition, but at least your subliminal bias is to retreat from these investments.

Likewise, even the teamwork, the collaborative style of successful businesses in the flat world undermines traditional values and a sense of community. The teams and the collaboration undertaken for the sake of growing the market or establishing the supply chain are not created for the sake of establishing long-term relationships. They are formed for short-term tasks, or at least until the next stage of the business cycle renders them obsolete. Because you are not likely to remain in touch with your colleagues and co-workers your entire working life, indeed in the flexible economy you probably will not stay with the company for your whole career, you are actually alone at work, just working for yourself along with others. The long-term friendships among co-workers that used to develop when lifetime jobs were the norm are not likely to form in the flat world. And this may subliminally create a sense of distance from one's own political community, if not one's family.

It may be that it takes "people-skills" in the flat world in view of the networking and teamwork that have become a way of life in modern business. But these dynamics tend to create a superficiality in relationships. In a therapeutically dominated ethos like ours (all the major businesses contract or hold retreats with psychologists), conflict is perceived as bad for business (just as American society as a whole has come to look askance at conflict and debate). This encourages masking ill feelings, being a people person who is always hiding one's real self. In addition, you have to be cautious in your relationships, because colleagues on your team are ultimately competitors. Thus I had better not share my true self and all my skills, or they could be used against me by these colleagues. If I share all I know, I am no longer indispensable.

This sense of distance creates a sense of irony about life. Because of the need to be flexible and a people-oriented team player, but never with the full investment of one's self, the flat world effectively nurtures workers who are ironic. The ironic character type is Narcissistic. Such people are willing to compromise what they stand for in order to advance their careers. They stand for nothing; they are empty.

Later in the book, I will explore with you how and why this style of life leads to unhappiness. Together we will consider cutting-edge research on the human

brain which demonstrates why such a life leads to unhappiness. The first two chapters also address this matter.

The Neurobiological research we'll consider also provides clues regarding how we can find happiness in the flat world. These insights converge, interestingly enough, with the thought of the great 19th-century Christian philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard. This Danish writer is often identified as the founder of or inspiration for Existentialist philosophy. Kierkegaard hypothesizes that one cannot find fulfillment in life without experiencing fear or sickness of the soul. We need valleys if we are to find mountain-top experiences. This is what I mean by peaks and valleys in the flat world Chapter Three explores Kierkegaard's thinking, especially about three stages of human existence. He believed that most people live aesthetically, that is, as works of art, trying to find what is beautiful and enjoyable to them. This is a feel-good mode of existence that makes no commitments. Such people are ironic in the sense of never defining themselves by taking a stand. They are eminently adaptable to circumstances, seeking enjoyment in order to avoid boredom. But a combination of this analysis with a close look at life in a flat world reveals that this is the way most Americans live. We'll explore this point in the fourth chapter along with some of the recent research on the human brain I just mentioned. The analysis will help us understand the why of what we already know – that the flexible, self-concerned lifestyle we need to succeed (or cope) in the flat world does not lead to happiness. In fact, it results in a life of despair.

Though Kierkegaard was a Christian who believed that we can only have a meaningful life if we live in faith, he did not think that the way to move people to such faith was to preach to those living aesthetically. Such individuals, he correctly postulated, will not hear the Gospel. If they attend church it is only because it feels good to them – is entertaining or meets their needs. In order to get a hearing for faith, Kierkegaard and I are concerned to provide another alternative for living in the flat world, a way of life in which people will have a little more to live for, one which is more conducive to appreciating the religious way of life as a viable option in the flat world.

In Chapter Five, this Ethical way of life and what it might look like in a flat world receives attention. Again Kierkegaard's analysis is most helpful. In his view, Ethical people have leaped to this mode of existence after realizing that the aesthetic life of the successful denizens of the flat world leads to despair. In that valley, they yearn for a mountaintop, a place above the hustle and bustle and meaninglessness of the rat race. They find these mountaintops in living lives dedicated to high ideals.

According to Kierkegaard, people committed to an Ethical mode of existence are not spectators, like Aesthetic people who flexibly go with the flow. They are

individuals who make free decisions which define who they are. For this reason, they experience a more intense self-concern.

We'll explore in this chapter what an Ethical way of life might look like in a flat world. Some of Friedmann's suggestions are on target in sketching such a lifestyle, but he is inadequate in helping us to thrive. I will propose ways, already working well in several Scandinavian nations, to remain compassionate in a flat world.

Ultimately, though, Kierkegaard makes clear, that even the Ethical mode of existence fails to deliver goodness, truth, and meaning. As we'll observe in Chapter Five, an ethical lifestyle drops us into a valley from its promised peak. Kierkegaard helps us to recognize that ethical people eventually come to despair over living a morally perfect life. Even apparent saints fall short of their ideals. We never can fully reconcile what is to what should be. Kierkegaard calls such despair the "sickness unto death."³ Religious life becomes an attractive alternative to such people, a way of coping with despair. Only ethical people are really able to hear the Word of God, to be raised to the peaks even in a flat world.

The remainder of the book explores these themes, what Kierkegaard calls the Religious way of life. He envisions religious life as a paradoxical style of existence, one that isn't reasonable in the strongest sense of the word. In fact it is a lifestyle that, while outwardly engaging the ways of the world, actually contradicts the world's values and operates at cross-purposes with the world. We'll see that this vision entails a life that, while recognizing that the world is flat and that you have to practice some flexibility in order to cope, religious life needs to be lived on the edge – so consumed with God that the things of the world ultimately do not matter while still living among them. The religious life is a life lived on a mountaintop, while ever on the edge of the fragility of life (of the valleys) in a flat world. People trying to become Christian in a flat world are so single-mindedly and passionately devoted to eternal realities that these convictions outweigh all the demands for flexibility and creative sensitivity to one's environs. Such people truly stand for something; they are saturated by a relationship in passion which renders all that they do and think to be of eternal significance.

Of course, Kierkegaard also makes clear that this mode of existence involves renunciation, even suffering. Because human life (life in the flat world) is an illness, to align oneself with the joys of eternity is to put oneself in tension, to suffer. One suffers when going against the grain of what seems reasonable in the flat world. But we will see that this lifestyle provides significant resources for living in this world of ours. The individual trying to become a Christian is in the process of becoming.⁴ In that sense, such a person is open, even to a point

flexible. We will see in more detail how this is a mode of existence that can offer meaning, joy, and fulfillment in a flat world.

There are exciting neurobiological research results which seem to authorize these conclusions about the validity of applying Kierkegaardian advice to the flat world. It seems that when human beings are preoccupied with themselves and their circumstances the back parts of their brain (the parietal lobe) are activated. This segment of the brain orients us in space and time. But it is only when the front part of the brain (esp. the frontal lobe) is activated that pleasurable neurochemicals which promote pleasure and health are secreted and flow in the brain. This part of the brain which is saturated by these chemicals (the executive part of the brain) is activated especially when we become less focused on ourselves (when we renounce/ aesthetic modes of existence) in favor of projects bigger than we are. In other words, the Ethical mode and even more so, the Religious mode of existence are more likely to offer joy and fulfillment than a life dedicated only to success in the flat world.

With this background, the Conclusion provides some advice on how to live religiously in the flat world. You will have the opportunity to explore some ways that you can use Kierkegaard's insights to help you find some peaks and valleys. You'll learn some ways to break free of meaningless reinvention of yourself, be reminded of the sense of meaning ethical conviction can offer (and the sorts of moral commitments that are especially pressing in our flat world), along with spiritual exercises which can aid you to recognize that even this morality ultimately leads to emptiness, that only a leap of faith into the loving arms of God can break off the monotonous meaninglessness of life in the flat world.

Our map for exploring the ups and downs of life lies before you. But first, we need to clarify for ourselves what it's really like to live in this flat world that today's economic forces have created.

NOTES

1. Thomas L. Friedman, The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century (paperback ed.; New York: Pacidor/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), esp. pp.400,8,449-457.
2. For these insights, I have learned from Richard Sennett, The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), esp. pp.23-25.
3. Søren Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death (Copenhagen, 1849).
4. Søren Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), pp.403-406.

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