



## ***Existential Development of Jason Dessen in Blake Crouch's Dark Matter: A Kierkegaardian Perspective***

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the existential development of Jason Dessen, the protagonist of Blake Crouch's *Dark Matter* (2016), through Søren Kierkegaard's theory of the three stages of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Drawing on close textual analysis, the study demonstrates that Jason initially inhabits an aesthetic mode of existence marked by dissatisfaction, existential anxiety, and an illusory pursuit of freedom grounded in unrealized possibility. His trajectory then moves toward ethical existence, in which responsibility, commitment, and moral accountability, particularly in relation to family, become central to his sense of selfhood and meaning. Jason's journey ultimately culminates in a form of religious existence, articulated in a contemporary, non-theistic mode, characterized by surrender, sacrifice, and a leap of faith that transcends rational calculation and ethical certainty. By mapping Jason's inward transformation onto Kierkegaard's existential stages, this study highlights the philosophical depth of *Dark Matter* and extends existing interpretations beyond scientific or rational-choice frameworks. The article concludes that *Dark Matter* recontextualizes Kierkegaardian existentialism within modern science fiction, demonstrating the continued relevance of existential philosophy for negotiating contemporary anxieties surrounding identity, freedom, choice, and the search for meaning under conditions of radical uncertainty.

### 1. Introduction

Questions of freedom, identity, and existential meaning have long shaped philosophical inquiry, and contemporary literature continues to engage with these concerns through innovative narrative forms. Science fiction offers a productive space for existential reflection by destabilizing fixed notions of reality, selfhood, and causality. Through imagined alternatives and parallel worlds, the genre translates abstract philosophical problems into lived narrative experiences. Blake Crouch's *Dark Matter* (2016) exemplifies this dynamic by combining speculative science with an inward exploration of choice, regret, and responsibility.

The novel follows Jason Dessen, a physicist abducted into a multiverse of parallel realities, each reflecting different life choices he might have made. Jason's confrontation with alternate versions of himself, especially one who chose ambition over family, forces him to reassess the meaning of freedom, fulfillment, and identity. Rather than presenting freedom as purely liberating, *Dark Matter* exposes its darker implications: anxiety, dissatisfaction, and the burden of imagining "what might have been." The multiverse thus functions not only as a scientific premise but as a symbolic representation of existential possibility and despair.

Existentialism provides a critical framework for examining these concerns. While thinkers such as Sartre emphasize freedom and choice as the foundation of human existence, such models offer limited insight into how individuals develop existentially over time. In contrast, Søren Kierkegaard's theory of the three stages of existence, the aesthetic, the ethical,



and the religious, conceptualizes existence as a progressive movement shaped by inward struggle, responsibility, and commitment. This developmental emphasis makes Kierkegaard's framework particularly suitable for analyzing literary character transformation.

Although Kierkegaard's existential stages have been widely applied in literary studies, existing scholarship on Dark Matter has largely focused on narrative structure, rational choice, or decision theory, often privileging cognitive agency over existential inwardness. Consequently, Jason Dessen's philosophical development, especially his movement through despair, ethical responsibility, and faith, remains insufficiently examined.

Addressing this gap, this study analyzes Jason Dessen's existential development in Dark Matter through Kierkegaard's three stages of existence. It argues that the novel rearticulates Kierkegaardian existential philosophy within a contemporary science-fiction framework, demonstrating how modern narratives of radical freedom continue to grapple with enduring questions of meaning, identity, and commitment.

## 2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative literary approach to analyze Jason Dessen's existential development in Dark Matter (Crouch, 2016). Qualitative literary analysis is suitable for examining character development, inward experience, and philosophical meaning as represented through narrative structure, language, and characterization. The primary data source is Dark Matter (2016), treated as a literary text informed by existential philosophy. Textual data consist of selected narrative passages, internal monologues, and dialogues that meet the following criteria: (1) they depict Jason Dessen's moments of existential crisis, anxiety, or despair; (2) they reflect ethical decision-making related to responsibility, commitment, and family; and (3) they illustrate acts of sacrifice or faith that signal a transition beyond rational self-interest. Secondary data include scholarly works on Søren Kierkegaard's existential theory and relevant literary criticism supporting the analytical framework.

Data collection is conducted through close reading, focusing on passages that correspond to Kierkegaard's three stages of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. The analysis follows Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model, adapted for literary study. First, data reduction is carried out by selecting and coding relevant textual segments according to existential themes and stages. Second, data display involves organizing these passages thematically to trace Jason's existential progression. Finally, conclusion drawing and verification are undertaken by interpreting patterns of transformation across the stages and relating them consistently to Kierkegaard's conceptual framework. This systematic process ensures analytical clarity while maintaining coherence between textual evidence and philosophical interpretation.

## 3. Result

This section presents a detailed analysis of Jason Dessen's existential development in Dark Matter (2016) through Søren Kierkegaard's theory of the three stages of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. These stages are employed not as rigid chronological compartments, but as dominant existential orientations that shape Jason's inward experience and transformation across the narrative. The multiverse, which functions as the novel's central speculative device, is interpreted as a narrative externalization of existential possibility, allowing abstract philosophical tensions, freedom and responsibility, choice and identity, selfhood and meaning, to be dramatized through concrete narrative events.

Jason's movement across parallel realities thus constitutes a sustained existential inquiry rather than a conventional quest for resolution. His trajectory illustrates how aesthetic longing and unacknowledged despair gradually give way to ethical responsibility and self-ownership, before culminating in a form of religious existence characterized by surrender, paradox, and faith-like commitment under conditions of radical uncertainty. Through this progression, Dark Matter emerges not merely as a science-fiction thriller, but as a contemporary existential narrative that rearticulates Kierkegaardian philosophy within a modern speculative framework.

### A. Aesthetic Existence: Longing, Pleasure, and the Avoidance of Commitment

In *Either/Or: Part One*, Søren Kierkegaard conceptualizes the aesthetic stage as a mode of existence oriented toward pleasure, immediacy, emotional intensity, and personal distinction. Crucially, however, Kierkegaard emphasizes that aesthetic existence is not defined simply by enjoyment or hedonism, but by avoidance, specifically, avoidance of ethical responsibility, inward self-confrontation, and binding commitment (Kierkegaard, 1987). Individuals who inhabit this stage often live reflectively rather than decisively, masking existential despair through irony, distraction, and imaginative possibility. Jason Dessen's early existential condition in Dark Matter closely aligns with this aesthetic orientation.



At the beginning of the novel, Jason appears to inhabit a stable and socially successful life. He is married to Daniela, maintains a close relationship with his son Charlie, and holds a respectable position as a physics professor. Yet beneath this surface stability lies a persistent sense of dissatisfaction that Jason himself struggles to articulate. This dissatisfaction is explicitly expressed when he reflects, "My life is great. It's just not exceptional. And there was a time when it could have been" (Crouch, 2016). The statement reveals a defining feature of aesthetic existence: life is evaluated not in terms of ethical coherence or responsibility, but in terms of intensity, uniqueness, and unrealized potential.

Jason's dissatisfaction does not arise from deprivation, suffering, or social marginalization. Rather, it emerges from the belief that ordinariness represents existential loss. Kierkegaard describes this condition as aesthetic despair, a form of despair in which the individual resists actuality by idealizing unrealized alternatives (1987). Jason's longing is directed toward a vaguely imagined "better" life, one associated with ambition, recognition, and exceptionality, rather than toward any concrete ethical project. This longing produces restlessness rather than motivation, as it remains oriented toward what might have been rather than what can be inwardly affirmed.

This orientation toward possibility becomes central to Jason's self-understanding. He repeatedly measures his present life against imagined alternatives, particularly the version of himself who pursued scientific ambition rather than family life. In Kierkegaard's terms, the aesthetic self is haunted by possibility precisely because it refuses to commit to actuality (1987). Dark Matter radicalizes this existential tendency by transforming hypothetical alternatives into lived realities. Jason is no longer merely imagining other lives; he is confronted with them through parallel selves inhabiting different worlds.

Jason's admission, "I'll always wonder" (Crouch, 2016), encapsulates this aesthetic condition. Wonder here does not function as curiosity or openness to growth, but as deferral. It allows Jason to remain suspended between selves, postponing existential decision. Kierkegaard warns that such fixation on possibility prevents the individual from becoming a self, since identity requires commitment to a concrete life. Jason's wonder thus functions as paralysis rather than freedom.

Another defining feature of Jason's aesthetic existence is his reliance on irony. Kierkegaard argues that irony enables the aesthetic individual to recognize contradiction and dissatisfaction without assuming responsibility for transformation (1987). Jason's ironic dismissal of his abandoned ambition, "It died of natural causes. Of neglect" (Crouch, 2016), clearly illustrates this strategy. By framing loss as passive and inevitable, Jason avoids confronting the ethical implications of his choice. Ambition is treated as something that happened to him rather than as something he actively relinquished.

This ironic posture extends into Jason's emotional life. Even in moments of vulnerability, he frequently adopts a reflective stance that distances him from full engagement with his own experience. He acknowledges tension, regret, and dissatisfaction, yet treats them as internal paradoxes rather than as calls to ethical or existential action. This condition exemplifies what Kierkegaard identifies as reflective paralysis: the individual becomes acutely aware of despair but remains unwilling to move beyond reflection toward commitment (1987).

Jason's emotional detachment also manifests in social and relational contexts. His tendency to observe situations rather than participate fully allows him to maintain composure while remaining inwardly disconnected. Irony functions as a protective mechanism, shielding him from vulnerability and the risks inherent in genuine engagement. While this posture provides temporary emotional stability, it simultaneously prevents the formation of sustained meaning rooted in responsibility and continuity.

As Kierkegaard insists, such detachment ultimately deepens despair rather than alleviating it (1987). By remaining ironic and emotionally withdrawn, the aesthetic individual avoids decisive involvement in life, allowing dissatisfaction to persist beneath a surface of composure. Jason's reliance on irony thus reinforces the instability of his aesthetic existence and prepares the conditions for its eventual breakdown.

Closely related to irony is the aesthetic illusion of freedom through non-commitment. Jason articulates this belief when he reflects that "no damning choices have been made, no paths committed to, and the road forking out ahead is pure, unlimited potential" (Crouch, 2016). On the surface, this statement celebrates openness and possibility. Yet Kierkegaard argues that such a posture conceals a deeper existential anxiety rooted in the fear of finitude and boredom (1987).

For Kierkegaard, boredom is not a trivial state of monotony but an existential threat arising when life lacks inward commitment and continuity (1987). Jason's reluctance to choose reflects precisely this condition. Commitment threatens to expose the hollowness of aesthetic freedom, whereas preserving possibility allows him to defer confrontation with meaninglessness. As Jason encounters countless versions of himself, possibility loses its promise and becomes repetitive, generating sameness, fatigue, and alienation rather than meaning.



This condition is accompanied by persistent anxiety rather than fear. In Kierkegaard's formulation, anxiety arises not from a specific external danger but from the openness of possibility itself, it is a condition he famously describes as the 'dizziness of freedom' (1987). Jason's emotional life reflects this condition through diffuse unease that cannot be attributed to marital conflict, professional failure, or material deprivation. Satisfaction coexists with restlessness; security coexists with unease.

Significantly, Jason does not initially recognize this anxiety as existential. He interprets it as mood, fatigue, or nostalgia, thereby aestheticizing it rather than confronting it as a demand for commitment. Kierkegaard cautions that within the aesthetic stage; anxiety is often misrecognized and transformed into emotional texture rather than understood as an existential signal (1987). The multiverse amplifies this affective instability rather than resolving it.

Jason's aesthetic orientation is further evident in his tendency to treat life as an artwork rather than as a moral task. Kierkegaard describes this mode of existence as one in which experience is curated, observed, and stylized rather than shaped through responsibility (1987). Jason's sensitivity to atmosphere, music, and memory reflects this posture. He transforms uncertainty into aesthetic experience, as when he reflects, "In the shadow of this moment, my life is achingly beautiful" (Crouch, 2016).

Music functions similarly as an aesthetic refuge. Jason's immersion in sound, "Thelonious Monk spins on the old turntable ... the crackle of static between tracks" (Crouch, 2016), allows him to dwell in mood rather than decision. These moments intensify feeling but postpone commitment, reinforcing the aesthetic preference for reflection over action.

This aestheticization is closely tied to postponement. Jason's attachment to unfinished projects reflects a preference for anticipation over fulfillment. He admits, "The den is filled with stacks and stacks of rare vinyl that I keep telling myself I'll get around to organizing one of these days" (Crouch, 2016). Satisfaction is derived not from completion but from the preservation of possibility.

Jason's treatment of love further reveals the limits of aesthetic existence. His recollections of Daniela emphasize moments of emotional intensity rather than sustained ethical responsibility, as in his memory, "I see you again, like the first time we met ... this new country" (Crouch, 2016). Love is framed as an experience to be remembered rather than a commitment to be renewed. Kierkegaard distinguishes such aesthetic love from ethical love, which requires continuity, obligation, and selfhood over time (1987).

Ultimately, aestheticization does not eliminate despair but refines and conceals it. By transforming uncertainty into beauty, Jason avoids confronting its existential source. As Kierkegaard warns, aesthetic reflection without commitment leads not to integration but to fragmentation (1987). Jason's life remains emotionally rich yet existentially unstable.

The aesthetic stage reaches its terminal point in what Kierkegaard terms unacknowledged despair, a condition that disguises itself as normalcy (1987). Jason continues to function professionally and socially, yet his life lacks inward ownership. His exchange with his alternate self, "You killed your ambition, didn't you?" / "It died of natural causes. Of neglect" (Crouch, 2016), reveals loss without responsibility.

Moments of crisis briefly expose values buried beneath aesthetic evasion. When Jason pleads, "I will do anything ... I love my family ... please" (Crouch, 2016), an ethical core surfaces. Yet these responses remain instinctive rather than reflective. As Kierkegaard insists, despair must be recognized as despair before transformation becomes possible (1987).

Jason's aesthetic existence thus collapses not through catastrophe but through exhaustion. Pleasure, irony, and possibility can no longer conceal the demand for commitment. This internal collapse prepares the transition into the ethical stage, where responsibility, continuity, and self-ownership begin to replace aesthetic dispersion as the foundations of meaning.

## B. Ethical Existence: Self-Ownership, Responsibility, and the Limits of Moral Coherence

Jason Dessen's movement into the ethical stage marks a decisive reconfiguration of his existential orientation. In *Either/Or: Part Two*, Søren Kierkegaard conceptualizes ethical existence as a mode of life grounded in responsibility, continuity, and inward self-ownership (1987). Unlike the aesthetic stage, which privileges immediacy, emotional intensity, and the preservation of possibility, ethical existence requires the individual to affirm finitude and accept the binding consequences of choice. Life is no longer experienced as a series of isolated moments or unrealized alternatives but as a coherent narrative that must be assumed as one's own.

In *Dark Matter*, this ethical transformation emerges gradually through Jason's sustained confrontation with danger, loss, and relational obligation. His repeated encounters with alternate versions of himself expose the existential cost of aesthetic dispersion. Rather than expanding freedom, multiplicity fragments identity and erodes meaning. Jason begins to recognize that meaning cannot be distributed across infinite possibilities but must be grounded in one concrete life



that is actively affirmed and sustained. Ethical existence thus emerges not as an abstract principle but as a practical response to existential fragmentation.

This reorientation is articulated explicitly when Jason states, “I made a life with them” (Crouch, 2016). The ethical significance of this declaration lies in its assertion of agency. Jason no longer treats his family life as an accident, a compromise, or a misfortune resulting from abandoned ambition. Instead, he recognizes it as the outcome of deliberate choice. For Kierkegaard, ethical existence begins precisely at this point: when the individual claims responsibility for their life narrative and acknowledges that their existence is something they must answer for (1987).

Ethical selfhood, however, involves more than retrospective acknowledgment of choice. It requires the ongoing structuring of identity through continuity, obligation, and perseverance. Jason’s ethical awakening therefore entails a revaluation of repetition. His reflection, “What a miracle it is to have people to come home to every day. To be loved. To be expected” (Crouch, 2016), signals a profound reversal of aesthetic values. In the aesthetic stage, repetition is feared as boredom and constraint; in the ethical stage, repetition becomes meaningful because it sustains relationships and obligations over time. To be “expected” signifies acceptance of mutual dependence and accountability, conditions that bind the self to others in enduring ways (Kierkegaard, 1987).

Kierkegaard emphasizes that ethical existence is sustained not by emotional intensity but by perseverance (1987). This understanding becomes evident when Jason responds to relational crisis not with withdrawal or irony but with effort. When Daniela asks, “How do we fix this?”, Jason replies, “I’m working on it” (Crouch, 2016). The language is significant. Love is no longer framed as an affective state or spontaneous feeling, but as labor. Jason’s response reflects Kierkegaard’s insistence that ethical life is lived as a task, requiring patience, discipline, and endurance rather than emotional gratification.

Ethical existence also demands integrity and unity of the self. Jason’s earlier aesthetic identity was fragmented, defined by imagined alternatives and comparisons with unrealized selves. As he enters the ethical stage, he begins to accept the complexity of his lived identity rather than measuring himself against idealized versions of what he might have been. Ethical selfhood does not eliminate contradiction; instead, it integrates contradiction into a coherent sense of responsibility. Jason’s recognition that his identity is multifaceted rather than binary reflects this movement toward inward coherence. He no longer seeks wholeness through dispersion but through fidelity to the life he inhabits.

Moments of stillness play a crucial role in consolidating Jason’s ethical seriousness. His decision to sit across from his house for an entire day represents a departure from aesthetic restlessness and compulsive action. This stillness is not paralysis or indecision but ethical attentiveness. The house symbolizes the life Jason seeks to reclaim his family, his history, and his obligations. By remaining present rather than fleeing into speculation or action, Jason confronts his existence directly. Kierkegaard insists that ethical life requires precisely this capacity for inward confrontation: the willingness to face one’s life as it is, rather than escape into possibility or distraction (1987).

Repentance further strengthens Jason’s ethical selfhood. Kierkegaard defines repentance as moral self-recognition without evasion (1987). Jason’s admission, “I did something else stupid. I used some of our money to buy a phone” (Crouch, 2016), may appear minor in narrative terms, but its ethical significance lies in the manner of acknowledgment. Jason evaluates his action without irony, justification, or displacement of blame. He recognizes fault as his own and accepts its consequences. This moment marks a decisive departure from aesthetic detachment and reinforces Jason’s commitment to ethical integrity.

Through these developments, Jason’s ethical existence takes shape as a mode of life grounded in responsibility, continuity, and self-ownership. Yet *Dark Matter* also makes clear that ethical seriousness, while necessary, is not sufficient to resolve the deeper anxieties generated by radical uncertainty. Ethical existence stabilizes Jason’s identity, but it does not shield him from loss, fear, or existential risk. Responsibility persists even when outcomes cannot be secured.

This limitation becomes explicit when Jason confronts suffering across multiple realities. His reflection, “My son is dead in there. Daniela is dying” (Crouch, 2016), functions not merely as an expression of grief but as an ethical rupture. Jason recognizes that moral responsibility does not grant him the power to prevent loss or restore coherence. The ethical demand to care for others remains absolute, yet its fulfillment becomes impossible. In Kierkegaardian terms, Jason confronts the boundary at which ethical universality can no longer secure meaning (1987).

This confrontation does not negate ethical responsibility; rather, it exposes its insufficiency. Jason does not abandon care, obligation, or accountability. Instead, he discovers that ethical life cannot guarantee justice, safety, or resolution. Kierkegaard describes this condition as the point at which ethical existence opens toward the religious, not through rejection of ethics, but through its exhaustion under extremity (1987).

At this threshold, Jason’s moral awareness acquires a transcendent dimension. He no longer regards alternate lives as morally negligible or interchangeable. His grief extends beyond his own reality, revealing an expanded moral horizon.



Yet this expansion intensifies his isolation. Ethical universality demands impartiality, while Jason's love remains irreducibly particular. This tension cannot be resolved within ethical reasoning itself.

Kierkegaard insists that when universal ethics collides with absolute inward commitment, the individual must either collapse into despair or move beyond ethics (1987). Jason's narrative illustrates this tension with clarity. Ethical seriousness prepares him for the religious leap, but it does not itself constitute that leap. Ethical existence thus functions as a necessary but incomplete stage, one that structures identity and responsibility while simultaneously revealing its own limits. This ethical exhaustion prepares the ground for the final movement into the religious stage, where meaning is no longer secured through responsibility alone but through faith, surrender, and inward commitment beyond rational assurance.

### C. Religious Existence: Faith, Paradox, and Absolute Commitment

Jason Dessen's entry into the religious stage constitutes the most radical transformation in his existential journey. In *Fear and Trembling*, Søren Kierkegaard defines the religious stage as a mode of existence grounded in an absolute inward relation that exceeds ethical universality. Faith, in this sense, is not doctrinal belief but existential trust: a willingness to act decisively without certainty, justification, or social validation (1941). Whereas ethical existence is structured by responsibility, continuity, and moral coherence, religious existence emerges precisely at the point where these structures prove insufficient.

In *Dark Matter*, Jason's religious transformation appears in a contemporary, non-theistic form. His faith is not directed toward a theological doctrine but toward meaning enacted through love, surrender, and commitment under radical uncertainty. This transformation becomes visible through Jason's changing relationship to fear, control, and moral intelligibility. Rather than seeking mastery over contingency, Jason gradually relinquishes the demand for certainty, accepting uncertainty as a permanent condition of existence.

The leap of faith is first articulated in Jason's willingness to act despite anxiety. His admission, "I feel a glimmer of panic ... but I smile in spite of it" (Crouch, 2016), captures Kierkegaard's insistence that faith does not abolish fear but transforms the individual's relation to it. Anxiety is no longer interpreted as a signal to retreat or calculate further; instead, it becomes inseparable from commitment itself. Jason does not overcome anxiety through rational explanation or empirical assurance. He accepts it as the price of decisive action.

This structure of faith is further condensed in Jason's appeal, "Just trust me" (Crouch, 2016). The request offers no explanation and no guarantee. It demands assent without proof, positioning commitment prior to justification. In Kierkegaardian terms, this moment exemplifies the leap of faith, in which the individual acts without appeal to universal norms or shared rationality (1941). Jason assumes responsibility not only for his own action but also for the irreducible risk borne by those who follow him.

A defining feature of religious existence is the establishment of an absolute relation expressed through love without possession. Jason confronts the temptation to secure his family's safety through control and disappearance, yet he ultimately refuses this path, acknowledging, "I don't have the right to keep them for myself" (Crouch, 2016). This renunciation marks a decisive movement beyond ethical calculation. Love is no longer grounded in entitlement, protection, or certainty, but in reverence and restraint. Jason affirms what he loves absolutely while simultaneously relinquishing control over it, embodying the paradox at the heart of Kierkegaardian faith (Kierkegaard, 1941).

The religious stage becomes most controversial in Jason's willingness to suspend ethical universality. His declaration, "I will kill them all for you ... I will do anything" (Crouch, 2016), cannot be reconciled with ethical reasoning or moral impartiality. However, Kierkegaard's concept of the teleological suspension of the ethical clarifies this moment. Jason's readiness to act does not arise from moral indifference or aesthetic impulse, but from absolute inward obligation. Like Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, Jason acts as a single individual standing alone before the Absolute, beyond the mediation of universal norms (1941).

Crucially, Jason does not attempt to justify or defend himself. He does not seek moral recognition, consensus, or forgiveness. This isolation is intrinsic to religious existence. For Kierkegaard, faith must be borne alone; it cannot be translated into ethical language without losing its character (1941). Jason's refusal to rationalize his actions confirms his movement beyond ethical mediation and into religious inwardness.

Religious existence is further defined by absolute risk. Kierkegaard insists that faith requires the willingness to relinquish security, coherence, and even moral intelligibility without assurance of return (1987). Jason's declaration, "We leave with nothing but the clothes on our backs" (Crouch, 2016), signifies more than pragmatic necessity. It reflects detachment from material guarantees, strategic planning, and instrumental control. Meaning is no longer secured through preparation or calculation but entrusted to commitment itself.



This surrender is intensified by Jason's acceptance of solitude. When he acknowledges, "Now I have to go the rest of the way alone" (Crouch, 2016), he confronts the defining loneliness of faith. Companionship, reassurance, and shared understanding fall away. Jason proceeds without witnesses, confirmation, or certainty. This solitude does not signify despair but acceptance of faith's burden, aligning with Kierkegaard's insistence that religious existence isolates the individual even as it grounds meaning.

The metaphor Jason employs, likening his leap between realities to jumping from an airplane without knowing whether the parachute will open, captures the existential structure of faith with striking clarity. The act is undertaken with full awareness of danger and without guarantee of survival. Yet Jason proceeds nonetheless. As Kierkegaard insists, faith begins precisely where calculation ends (1941).

Jason's final affirmation, "I don't want their lives. I want mine" (Crouch, 2016), must therefore be understood not as sentimental closure but as existential integration. This declaration rejects the logic of optimization that governs both aesthetic longing and ethical calculation. Meaning is no longer sought in improvement, comparison, or control, but in fidelity to one finite life.

The multiverse exposes the emptiness of the belief that more options produce more meaning. Jason's journey demonstrates that infinite possibility fragments identity rather than fulfilling it. By choosing one imperfect life and inhabiting it with seriousness, Jason enacts Kierkegaard's claim that authentic existence is achieved not by escaping contingency but by committing within it (Kierkegaard, 1987). Religious existence thus completes Jason's existential development, grounding meaning not in certainty or universality, but in faith, surrender, and absolute inward commitment under conditions of radical uncertainty.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study has examined the existential development of Jason Dessen in *Dark Matter* (2016) through Søren Kierkegaard's three stages of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. The analysis demonstrates that Jason's character arc closely corresponds to these stages, revealing an inward transformation that unfolds alongside the novel's speculative engagement with the multiverse. Rather than functioning merely as a science-fiction thriller, *Dark Matter* emerges as an existential narrative that interrogates freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning under conditions of radical uncertainty.

Jason's journey begins in the aesthetic stage, marked by dissatisfaction, anxiety, and fixation on unrealized possibilities. As the narrative progresses, he moves into the ethical stage, where responsibility, commitment, and moral accountability, especially toward his family, become central to his sense of self. His journey culminates in a religious stage articulated in a contemporary, non-theistic form, characterized by surrender, sacrifice, and a decisive commitment made without rational certainty. This final movement reflects Kierkegaard's concept of the leap of faith, in which authentic existence is achieved through inward commitment rather than control over infinite possibilities.

Theoretically, this study contributes to existential literary studies by demonstrating the continued relevance of Kierkegaard's developmental model for analyzing contemporary speculative fiction. By foregrounding inwardness, despair, ethical responsibility, and faith, the analysis extends Kierkegaardian existentialism beyond its traditional philosophical and realist literary contexts, offering an alternative to readings of *Dark Matter* that privilege scientific logic or rational choice alone.

Future research may build on this study by applying Kierkegaard's stages of existence to other works of speculative fiction or by undertaking comparative analyses with existential frameworks proposed by thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre or Albert Camus. Such approaches may further illuminate how contemporary literature negotiates enduring questions of freedom, identity, and human agency in an age defined by multiplicity and uncertainty.

#### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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