

# Kierkegaard And Wittgenstein

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The connections between Ludwig Wittgenstein and Soren Kierkegaard as philosophers are not at all immediately obvious. On the surface, Wittgenstein deals with matters concerning the incorrect use of philosophical language and Kierkegaard focuses almost exclusively on answering the question 'how to become a Christian'. But this account belies deeper structural similarities between these men's important works. Thus, this paper suggests that their methods, rather than exclusively content, contain a strong parallel on which a natural and hopefully fruitful examination of their work can be based. I claim that on at least four counts, Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein present clearly analogous form: indirect communication; examination of the 'limit of thought' as applied to their respective spheres of inquiry; and the relationship to nonsense or the absurd. I claim that a careful study of these categories with respect to the philosophers' major works will reveal sufficient similarity to have warranted our inquiry: hence a clear understanding of one philosophy should help to explain the other's. I will assume a reader has only cursory familiarity with Kierkegaard's ideas for the purposes this paper. To begin, a brief outline of Kierkegaard's background and philosophy is germane. He was a Danish philosopher, literary figure, and ardent Christian living in the 19th century. As was mentioned above, his self-proclaimed intent was to examine what it means to be a Christian and how precisely to become one. Hence all of Kierkegaard's works (*Either/Or*; *A Sickness Unto Death*; *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*; *Fear and Trembling* being among the most notable) have a decidedly religious flavor to them. For his adamant insistence on subjectivity rather than objectivity (in reaction to Hegel) when dealing with questions of personal importance, he has been labeled the father of modern existentialism. Kierkegaard's works are not straightforward proclamations of his philosophy: he wrote under pseudonyms and assumed the persona of these fictional characters in his writing. Thus, one must be careful when attributing a particular position to Kierkegaard – often the view is advanced by a pseudonym, so various inferential processes must be applied in order to substantiate a claim that Kierkegaard really meant any statement. Foremost among the structural similarities between Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein works is the use of indirect communication: as paradoxical as it may sound, both authors deliberately obfuscate their philosophy for the purposes of clarifying it. Clarification of the preceding assertion is obviously required. Each author felt that, due to inherent properties of their subject matter, outright delineation of their conclusions would somehow be a self-contradiction. Clearly their respective subject matter, the logical structure of language and the task of becoming a Christian, is inherently disparate. But let us examine more closely particular instances of indirect communication from both of the philosophers with the intention of finding similarity. "By indirection, find direction out." – Polonius, (*Hamlet*: II, i, 72) Soren Kierkegaard The use of pseudonyms: The purpose of pseudonyms was to present a viewpoint which the reader was initially to sympathize with. As the work developed, further assertions by this persona were to be found objectionable by the reader. The initially sympathized viewpoint would now be seen to be flawed and therefore have been rejected. Thus the reader was to have reached through self-reflection a conclusion that would not have been internalized if it had been simply communicated directly. Kierkegaard was writing for self-proclaimed Christians whom he believed were not truly faithful. Any clear suggested improvement in behavior would have been regarded by the reader as not applying to him or herself. Pseudonyms qua indirect communication helped readers to achieve personal understanding, rather than merely intellectual apprehension of an idea without application. Stories: Many portions of Kierkegaard's work contain fictional narratives to help illustrate or illuminate some of his points. As is explained in his book, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, Kierkegaard takes advantage of the engaging quality of fiction to prevent the reader from disinterestedly analyzing his points, and to focus on how the reader feels personally about his ideas contained within the story. As indirect

communication, story uses concrete instantiations of ideas rather than presenting an objectified, analytic theory to pick through and not relate to oneself. Heavy irony: An element of all forms of Kierkegaard's writing include stating assertions that he does not completely agree with, in order to get the reader thinking. An extension of other forms of indirect communication, heavy irony in his work helps to indicate which statements Kierkegaard emphasizes, positively or negatively. Oftentimes, many pages can be taken up in what seems to be an extensive description of something unimportant, idle philosophizing, or heaps of glorious praise. The content of these digressions may not necessarily be ironic, though it sometimes is. More often, the form or motivation for the digression contains the irony. For example, he writes an extremely verbose essay from the perspective of a person debating whether or not to walk to the park, implying by it that this kind of extensive fascination with a topic should permeate our religious lives every moment, not just on Sundays for an hour. Again, as indirect communication, Kierkegaard's irony serves to elucidate his points without coming out and directly saying them.

Ludwig Wittgenstein Logical format of 'Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus': In the Tractatus, Wittgenstein's points are ordered in a recursive numerical way, without explanation or elucidation. Concise and patterned, the Tractatus reads like a mathematical proof, except that proofs contain more justification. "What can be said at all can be said clearly." We must assume that any attempt at further clarification Wittgenstein believed would have obscured the veracity of his presentation. Lack of enlightening exposition in this case is enlightening since we can deduce that nothing more need be said: the Tractatus must be able to speak for itself, in a sense. Showing, not saying: 'Some things cannot be said; they show themselves'. As one of Wittgenstein's major contentions, he tends to abide by it, systematically refusing to explain where an example will do instead. Thus many general assertions are left unjustified, leaving to the reader to see the logical form of an argument from specific instantiations (how a painting pictures the world cannot be explained, etc.). This is nearly as indirect as communication can be – leaving a reader to infer the author's point from facts about the world. Saying things which admittedly cannot be said: Over and over in different ways, Wittgenstein states that what cannot be spoken of must be passed over in silence. Yet the Tractatus was written despite the full knowledge of its author that the premise of the book is that such a book cannot be written; if what the Tractatus says is true, the Tractatus is nonsense since it says the very kinds of things it claims cannot be said intelligibly. How much more of a perplexing contradiction can a work contain? Any attempt at direct communication of the truths in the work must inevitably fail; the author must 'spout nonsense', so to speak, in order to show the reader that what he says (and therefore, what many others say) is in fact nonsense. The reader is left to see how what he says is nonsense, rather than having no book to read. Indirect, indeed. The authors share the common assumption that the nature of their conclusions demands that they convey those conclusions by indirect methods. For Kierkegaard, any casual listing of his ideas about subjectivity and the self would be taken objectively – the very opposite of his intentions for writing them. Therefore, through alter egos, stories and irony he attempts to draw the reader into a nonintellectual grasp of the material as it relates to the individual. For Wittgenstein, nearly any attempt at discussing the logical form of 'what cannot be said' results in a contradiction. By abiding by his stringent conclusions where possible, and committing the same mistakes he criticizes others for when necessary, he manages to say both too much and not enough. Both authors creatively use indirect methods to advance their ideas when those ideas have to be shown, rather than said. In another vein, both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein spent much of their writing concerning the limit of thought, as applied to their respective fields. What exactly is the limit of thought? For Kierkegaard, it involved the point at which no further rational analysis of religious concepts can take place, and the individual must accept that logic ceases to apply to non-rational ideas in religion. The significant moment in this realization comes with the 'leap of faith' toward God, which can have no justification. Most of Wittgenstein's Tractatus is taken up with the notion that there exist limits of thought and language beyond which discussion is literally nonsensical. In it, he carefully describes what he considers to be the logical structure of the world and how that structure necessarily

imposes limits on any language used to picture it. A careful examination of particular aspects of their ideas concerning the limits of thought will no doubt further our understanding of both. For the purposes of helping to clarify what it means to be a Christian, Kierkegaard invents a useful characterization of the stages or developments in a person's life. These stages, or spheres as he often refers to them, characterize how an individual appropriates truths about his or her world. The first and most basic is the aesthetic sphere, in which individuals acknowledge only sensory truths and live life according to hedonistic pleasure/pain principles. This progresses into the ethical sphere, which is achieved by recognizing the importance of making decisions, universalization, and the community. The ethical sphere is logical and involves the justification to others of decision-making. This is in distinct contrast to the final sphere, the religious. The religious sphere for Kierkegaard transcends logic and is intimately subjective (read: personal, not arbitrary), involving a one-on-one relationship with God. Since language is public and shared, it lies in the realm of the universal ethical sphere, and hence has no relevance in the religious sphere. Hence those who are religious cannot communicate their knowledge of religious matters. No explanation of or justification for the religious sphere can exist, since it would take place in language, which is not available as an option. Further application of the limit of thought for Kierkegaard includes the notion of subjective truth. Subjective truth deals with how one apprehends ideas, rather than the ideas themselves, which is in the realm of objective truth. According to him, objective truth is by its nature public, verifiable, and hence uninteresting and unimportant. We can all agree what color a given chair is, or any other objective fact of science. Even if there were a contention among people as to a fact, facts about the world are not what matter to individuals – it is how one personally apprehends them that matter. As an example, Kierkegaard praises Socrates for vehemently questioning the existence of God over a Christian who believes he or she has all the right answers and need no longer be concerned. It is how one is connected to a topic that is important, rather than the topic itself. This creates a limit to rational thought, in that rational objective consideration only amounts to so much. To wit, since what is most important in one's life is subjective and not available for public scrutiny, ethics for Kierkegaard are entirely internal; others are not capable of being judged, as we cannot know their subjective apprehension of ethics. Contrast and compare that with Wittgenstein, who believes that ethics cannot be discussed for different reasons. For him, the meaning of the world is not in the world, and therefore ethics are entirely transcendental and hence are incapable of being discussed intelligibly. The idea of the 'limit of thought' permeates the Tractatus. The clearest exposition I can find offered in it comes from 4.12: Propositions can represent the whole of reality, but they cannot represent what they have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it – logical form. In order to be able to represent logical form, we should have to be able to station ourselves with propositions somewhere outside logic, that is to say outside the world. This seems to be the most basic contention about concepts unable to be properly expressed in language, that the content of a nonlinguistic fact must somehow pertain to logical form. The logical form is the structure of the simple components in a complex object. So the logical form of a photograph is what it has in common with what it pictures. The logical form of a sentence is what it has in common with the fact it states. To return to the concept of ethics for a moment, we can see that any statement that purports to contain ethical content cannot, since it would necessarily show the logical form of the state of affairs beyond logic and therefore the world, which is impossible. Therefore since whatever can be thought can be said, the limit of thought for Wittgenstein is the boundary between statements and the logical form of those statements. The relationship between Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein intensifies then, as we examine more how the structure of their work displays another strong parallel. The religious sphere and its associated properties of subjectivity and non-rationality set the limit of thought for Kierkegaard. The inherent structure of logic and language creates natural boundaries for Wittgenstein. Which leads us to the final point of comparison between the two: absurdity and nonsense. These concepts stem from their parallel construction of the limits of thought, but are obviously unique. Kierkegaard's 'absurdity' is motivated by the desire by many to explain the religious sphere through the

ethical sphere. The central focus in this discussion is on faith and the religious sphere's placing more importance on the individual over the universal, which according to the ethical sphere is absurd. The subject of his work *Fear and Trembling*, the Bible's Abraham was asked by God to sacrifice his only son without explanation. An exemplar of faith, Abraham remained dutiful and prepared to do what his God asked of him without qualm. This conflicts with ethical ideas we all generally share about right and wrong: it seems unethical to kill any child, let alone one's own child for no reason. But Kierkegaard maintains that the religious transcends the ethical, and therefore that faith will always remain unjustified and hence absurd. Wittgenstein's notions of nonsense ultimately stem from the misuse of language and violating the limit of thought. By nonsense, he means statements that are neither true nor false or questions that have no answers. In this way, many of the so-called deepest philosophical problems resolve by dissolving, or showing that they are really nonsense in disguise. It is in this spirit that he says that if one understands him, one will recognize what he says as nonsense: that he is abusing language in order to show how there can be such a thing as language abuse. It should become clear at this point that Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein share enough methodology to warrant significant comparison. Is this result trivial, though? Had Wittgenstein merely read Kierkegaard and adapted or incorporated his mode of thought? There is documented evidence that Wittgenstein had at least read some of Kierkegaard's work, but nothing to indicate he appreciated anything more than its religious content. Regardless of possible influence, these philosophers' works exhibit so many parallels that an understanding of one should greatly help in understanding another. Further, the emphasis by both on the limits and delineations of their respective fields serves to remind us to pay attention to them in our own work. And finally, they offer a new way of thinking about problems when faced with the inability to communicate directly that we can undoubtedly learn from.

## **Bibliography**

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