

Kierkegaard and Socrates

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Prefatory note

On November 11, 2005, one hundred and fifty years will have passed since the death of Soren Kierkegaard at the age of 42. Kierkegaard's philosophy dissertation was entitled *On the Concept of Irony with constant reference to Socrates*. He may have seen himself as continuing the Socratic mission of freeing people of passively received dogmas and making them turn inwards into themselves. But in this paper I find more contrasts than similarities between these two differently exceptional personalities. I try to bring out this contrast, or rather opposition, by examining Kierkegaard's exposition of his notion of the 'teleological suspension of the ethical.' But first let us try to get an overview of the intricate relations between their outlooks.

Kierkegaard and Socrates

Greek thought and Hebrew thought do not make a good mix. Christianity of course is such a mix and that is one source, perhaps the major source, of its difficulties. You can either think in Greek terms or in Hebrew terms without experiencing internal discord, but when you try to weld the two together you cannot be true to yourself all the way through; at some point you have either to forget about the rationality of Greek thought or throw overboard the sanctified presuppositions of Hebrew thought. Kierkegaard, like many old and present-day theologians and Christian thinkers, was trapped between the horns of this dilemma, but unlike many who found themselves in that predicament, Kierkegaard was willing to save his skin by sacrificing the rationality.

That is why Kierkegaard, while seeking to emulate Socrates, could not proceed Socratically. Socrates sought to free people of received preconceptions by examining, disentangling, clarifying ideas, by shedding a flood of light. Kierkegaard sought to pull people out of their quiescent, lukewarm acceptance of dogma by shocking them. As Professor William McDonald puts it, 'He used irony, parody, satire, humor, and deconstructive techniques in order to make conventionally accepted forms of knowledge and value untenable.'^[1] But when he made 'conventionally accepted forms of knowledge and value untenable' his intention was not that people should discard them but that they should hold them with heightened fervency. He did not want people to reject dogma but to hold it in 'fear and trembling'.

The title of Chapter II of Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 'The Subjective Truth; Inwardness; Truth is Subjectivity', sounds so deceptively Socratic that we may be excused if we are shocked by the revelation that the positions of the two men are in fact totally opposed. While both Socrates and Kierkegaard found the proper being of humans in subjectivity, the subjectivity Socrates valued was a subjectivity of reason, its essence was intelligibility, while the subjectivity of Kierkegaard was a subjectivity of feeling, its essence was a state of agitation. He asserts that 'passion is the culmination of existence for an existing individual', and again that 'passion is also the highest expression of subjectivity.'^[2]

Kierkegaard's project

Kierkegaard sought to rescue Christians from the tepidness, the superficiality, and the matter-of-fact adherence that is the bane of institutionalized religions. On this point his position was unequivocal: 'If one who lives in the midst of Christendom goes up to the house of God, the house of the true God, with the true conception of God in his knowledge, and prays, but prays in a false spirit; and one who lives in an idolatrous community prays with the entire passion of the infinite, although his eyes rest upon the image of an idol: where is there most truth? The one prays in truth to God though he worships an idol; the other prays falsely to the true God, and hence worships in fact an idol.'^[3]

He wanted to restore individuals to their individuality. Hence his watchword was 'become who you are', which we may designate as his version of the Apollonic/ Socratic *gnothi sauton*.

Kierkegaard and mysticism

Although Kierkegaard saw his work as a continuation of Socrates' mission to free people of thralldom to unexamined preconceptions and received notions, he stopped short of questioning the tenets of Christian theology. His contemporaries may have seen his positions as unorthodox and it pleased him to make a show of his unorthodoxy, perhaps the better to assert his individuality, yet he was too deeply immersed in traditional doctrine to shed away its basic tenets. The unreasonableness of those tenets rather than affording ground for their overthrow was seen as a virtue, heightening the intensity of the sentiment engendered by the desperate, blind grasping at nothingness. This is perhaps more akin to the drug-addict's grasping at the phantom of bliss than to the mystic groping for an undefinable, unfathomable something. The mystic's experience comes closest to pure subjectivity; Kierkegaard's paradoxical faith mars the subjectivity by reaching out towards an unreachable heaven.

With Kierkegaard, in place of the mystic identification with the ultimate source we have a constant assertion of the otherness of the power which constitutes the self. Since Kierkegaardian faith is neither the experience of mystic identification nor the self-evidence of phronetic intelligibility, it has repetitively to be renewed in anxiety, fear, and trembling.

Kierkegaard and existentialism

Kierkegaard's purpose was to shock Christians into revitalizing their faith. It was his representation of the religious experience as an inward passionate anxiety that earned him the title of 'father of existentialism' and that led to the re-assertion of the connection between philosophy and life, a connection which had often been lost sight of and which has now once more been obliterated in many professional and academic circles.

Unfortunately, Kierkegaard's emphasis on the inwardness of the spiritual life was clouded and marred by entanglement with Kierkegaard's acceptance of the Christian dogma and by the consequent insistence on the absurdity and paradoxicality of faith. I suggest that, if Kierkegaard could have broken free of the fetters of dogma, he would have arrived at a purer conception of faith as the immediacy of spiritual inwardness.

Kierkegaard and dogma

The assertion of the absolute transcendence of God was pivotal to Kierkegaard's position, but what is that but to equate God with the area of our ignorance? If God is what I don't know and can never know, then what is he to me? At most the illusion of somehow knowing something that I know I don't know. And it is this illusion that is meant to give us the intense subjective feeling of knowing what is unknown and unknowable: the height of absurdity, but then absurdity is just what Kierkegaard was after. 'Without risk there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty.' [4]

In Professor McDonald's succinct formulation, 'Christian faith, for Kierkegaard, is not a matter of learning dogma by rote. It is a matter of the individual repeatedly renewing h/er passionate subjective relationship to an object which can never be known, but only believed in. The belief is offensive to reason, since it only exists in the face of the absurd (the paradox of the eternal, immortal, infinite God being incarnated in time as a finite mortal).' [5] Let us try to understand what is supposed to lie outside the sphere of understanding. Christian faith, we are told, is a matter of a passionate subjective relationship to an object which can never be known: yet that which 'can never be known' is distinctly presented in that closing parenthetical clause: the eternal, infinite God incarnated in time as a finite mortal. All of Kierkegaard's circuitous subterfuges end in the requirement to embrace unquestioningly this absurdity not in spite of its absurdity but precisely because of its absurdity. Kierkegaard never wanted to free us of dogma: he was opposed to 'learning dogma by rote' but he was all for imbibing dogma with our eyes wide open.

The teleological suspension of the ethical

To give some substance to my generalities I will comment briefly on Kierkegaard's examination in *Fear and Trembling* of the question 'Is There Such a Thing as a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?' [6]

In advancing the notion of the 'teleological suspension of the ethical' Kierkegaard's immediate target was the refutation of Hegelianism. Following the plan he devised for that purpose, Kierkegaard (in the persona of Johannes de Silentio) starts from Hegel's definition of the ethical as the universal and of the single individual as a 'moral form of evil', and proceeds to show that, on these terms, Hegel had to condemn Abraham as a murderer. This conclusion would, according to Kierkegaard, be absurd. Why absurd? Because 'correct' Christian doctrine tells us to revere Abraham as the 'father of faith'. We have to choose between Hegelian rationalism and justifying Abraham by faith. In his treatment of this question, Kierkegaard provides a most flagrant example of the utter sottishness we can fall into when we allow ourselves to be enslaved by a given theology.

After distinguishing clearly between the tragic acts of Agamemnon in sacrificing his daughter, Jephthah, also sacrificing his daughter, and Brutus, ordering the execution of his son, on the one hand, and Abraham's sacrificing his son, on the other hand, and after arguing that Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Brutus, all remain 'within the ethical' and that there is no 'teleological suspension of the ethical' in their case, he goes on to justify the act of Abraham. (Parenthetically I would say that ranging Jephthah along with Agamemnon and Brutus as a tragic hero is an enormity: I cannot see how Jephthah can be said to remain 'within the ethical', [7] but I will not go out of my way to discuss this point at length.)

Kierkegaard asks, 'Why then did Abraham do it?', and he answers, 'For God's sake and (in complete identity with this) for his own sake. He did it for God's sake because God required this proof of his faith; for his own sake he did it in order that he might furnish

the proof.' I must confess I find no sense in this. Why would God 'require this proof of Abraham's faith'? Could he not find a less barbarous test? And if he could not, and allowing that his omniscience failed him in just this one instance, could he not opt for giving the man the benefit of the doubt instead of putting him to this cruel test? And why would Abraham find it so important to furnish the proof? To find favour in the eyes of God? To earn the rewards of subservient obedience? Prometheus proved himself nobler than Zeus; why could not Abraham aspire to that kind of nobility?

Kierkegaard continues, 'Here is evident the necessity of a new category if one would understand Abraham. Such a relationship to the deity paganism did not know. The tragic hero does not enter into any private relationship with the deity, but for him the ethical is the divine...' He concludes: 'The story of Abraham contains therefore a teleological suspension of the ethical. As the individual he became higher than the universal: this is the paradox which does not permit of mediation.' And this is faith as Kierkegaard understands it, an absurd paradox or a paradoxical absurdity.

The final conclusion of Kierkegaard's discussion of the teleological suspension of the ethical is that faith transcends the ethical. Here we find the final and ineradicable contradiction between the position of Kierkegaard and that of Socrates. In the *Euthyphro* Socrates poses the question: Is what is righteous righteous because it is favoured by the gods or is it favoured by the gods because it is righteous? Although the *Euthyphro* does not spell it out, the Socratic answer rings loud and clear in the works of Plato as a whole and finds its clearest expression in the *Republic*: the Idea of the Good is the fount of all reality, all truth, and all value.

Kierkegaard advances the category of the 'religious' as a new category, a category higher than the ethical, not known to the Greeks or to Hegel. In fact it is nothing but the naive 'piety' of the soothsayer Euthyphro that Socrates finds unsatisfactory, piety as that which is pleasing to the gods.

Concluding remarks

Sin and guilt loom large in Kierkegaard's thought. It is the sense of sin that instils in us the idea of the transcendent God towards whom we are 'always in the wrong', and it is the anxiety arising from our consciousness of guilt that impels us to seek salvation by the absurdity of faith.

Kierkegaard holds that the life-work which God judges in a person is that person's fulfilment of the task of becoming a true self. This would constitute a very fine philosophy indeed — and it has in fact been a source of inspiration to many^[8] — except that for Kierkegaard that fulfilment could only be achieved through that necessarily absurd faith which alone secured salvation.

Kierkegaard's theoretical position was largely a reaction against Hegelianism. Against Hegel's hubristic logicalism Kierkegaard set up the irrationality of a paradoxical faith. Saner than either was Socrates' rationalism that valued understanding freed of the illusion of knowledge. Kierkegaard discovered the deceptiveness of the dream that promised to lead humanity to its highest goals (however defined) through scientific knowledge. Had he been more consistently Socratic he might have spared us something of the scientism that in our day poses as the sole way to understanding.

Footnotes

1. McDonald, William, 'Soren Kierkegaard', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2005 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta(ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2005/entries/kierkegaard/>.
2. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, translated by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie, Princeton, 1944.
3. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.
4. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.
5. McDonald, William, 'Soren Kierkegaard', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2005 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta(ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2005/entries/kierkegaard/>.
6. 'Is There Such a Thing as a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?' (reproduced in *Approaches to the Philosophy of Religion*, edd. Daniel J. Bronstein and Harold M. Schulweis, New York, 1954).
7. See Book of Judges, 11.
8. See, for instance, Richard Schain, *In Love With Eternity*, 2005, *passim*.

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