

Saving Isaac: Nietzsche and Kierkegaard on Religion

Kenneth Barton
Boston College
Department of Philosophy
Professor Ingrid Scheibler
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Both Friedrich Nietzsche and Soren Kierkegaard believe strongly in the subjectivity of truth in religion, but differ in that one acknowledges the importance of the objective, in relation to God, while the other discounts it. In this paper, I will compare and contrast both Nietzsche's and Kierkegaard's treatment of organized religion, tracing their arguments back to the two major premises on which they are based, namely their conception of human nature and their treatment of relativity, in the form of the objective and subjective. First, by outlining the general moral philosophies of both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, a superior perspective of each philosopher's conceptions of and alternatives to organized religion is obtained. This reveals the two major premises on which each of their respective critiques of organized religion are based. Finally, by critiquing each premise and thus the argument, through means of both logical validity and experiential observations, one recognizes, though however dogmatic, the pertinence of each philosopher's critique of organized religion.

Soren Kierkegaard, in Fear and Trembling, claims that above all else there is *an absolute duty to God*.¹ He does not reveal how to obtain this faith, nor does he offer a definition of it. He simply presupposes the existence and omnipotence of God and asks one to assess his philosophy within that framework. Kierkegaard then defines and discusses the three modes in which one may exist based upon his two premises stated above. These modes of existence are the aesthetic (where one acts according to the immediacy of his desires and is not judged by any objective standards), the ethical (where one's acts are judged within the framework of universal law), and the religious (where one's acts are judged within the framework of God's will). Discussing the parable of Abraham and Issac, Kierkegaard states,

The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he was willing to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he was willing to sacrifice Isaac; but in this contradiction lies in the very anguish that can indeed make one sleepless; and yet without the anguish Abraham is not the one he is.²

Kierkegaard claims that actions occurring in the religious mode of existence cannot be judged within the framework of the ethical mode. Since Abraham transcends the ethical mode, one cannot call him a murderer. This transcendence allows Abraham to undergo a *teleological suspension of the ethical* and enter into the religious mode, where his actions can only be judged on whether or not they are in agreement with the will of God.

Since Kierkegaard views the religious mode as the highest form of existence, he believes that the individual, who acts according to the will of God, is more important than the community. This is revealed in his discussion of the relationship between the *knight of faith* and the *knight of infinite resignation*. Though both knights have the ability to exist outside of the aesthetic mode, the *knight of faith* has the ability to step beyond the ethical mode, act according to the will of God, and thus become more important than any other individual. The *knight of infinite resignation* sacrifices the finite for the infinite, which though a favorable step, does not allow him to exist in the superior religious mode. The *knight of faith*, on the other hand, can make a double movement, sacrificing the finite for the infinite and through faith, an act of absurdity and passion, step into the religious mode. This double movement creates a paradox within the individual, that allows him to exist as a “particular in opposition to the universal” and as a particular, stand “in an absolute relation to the absolute”.³ In Abraham’s case, it is the paradox of acting immorally in the ethical, so that he may act according to the will of God, which creates *fear and trembling*.

¹ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1985) 96.

Regardless of which mode of existence one adheres to, Kierkegaard requires that all decisions must be made with passion. He believes that “what we lack today is not reflection, but passion” in our decisions.⁴ Decisions in themselves, though important, are not nearly as important as is the passion with which they are made. One is confronted with many decisions in life where the question of whether he should *either* take this path *or* that one, is asked. It is therefore preferable for one to act with passion, regardless of the outcome, than to let other factors make decisions for him. This is Kierkegaard’s reaction against his contemporaries’ overly intellectual Hegelian philosophy, in which freedom was discussed in terms of reason externally ruling the world.⁵ Conversely, Kierkegaard believes that freedom is an internal matter where “the inner deed is the true life of freedom” and not some external force beyond one’s control.⁶

Friedrich Nietzsche in On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life, critiques the demand that history and philosophy, respectively, become a science.⁷ If history is viewed simply as an objective science, it detracts from one’s ability to do “history for life and action” and, in Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s words, “to quicken my activity”.⁸ Similar to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche believes that philosophy is being used improperly in his contemporaries’ constant pursuit of excessive knowledge. He explains that this excess of knowledge creates an inhibition of activity and *inwardness* that creates

² id. 60.

³ id. 90.

⁴ id. 71.

⁵ In The Philosophy of History, Hegel posits that a state of freedom will ensue in the contemporary German state, of which he was apart, through the dialectical movement of reason ruling the world.

⁶ Soren Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, 174.

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1980) 62.

⁸ id. 7.

“no real culture at all, but only a kind of knowledge about culture”.⁹ To prevent this from occurring, the *genuine historian*, who knows the *plastic power* of the culture and can determine the culture’s “ability to grow out of itself”, must act. By understanding the proper relationship between remembering and forgetting, the prosperity of his particular culture will be strengthened.¹⁰ Nietzsche offers the remedy of the genuine historian because he sees his contemporary society as a weak, herd-like mass that is being sucked into the dogmatic constraints of this overly intellectualized view of history.

Since science bases its laws on the foundation of the objective, or will to truth, similarly to Christianity, Nietzsche claims that science has become the modern inheritor of Christianity. In an attempt to dissolve the foundation of both institutions and the philosophy of his contemporaries, Nietzsche dismisses the validity of the objective in lieu of the subjective. To accomplish this task, he inverts the established hierarchy of traditional philosophy, which places the external Platonic forms of ‘being’ in superior relation to the internal humanistic notions of ‘becoming’. He replaces the contemporary belief that the “cardinal instinct of an organic being” is *will to truth*, with his notion of *will to power*, where “a living thing seeks above all to *discharge its strength*”.¹¹ In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche states,

Morality is in Europe today herd-animal morality...it says stubbornly and inexorably, ‘I am morality itself, and nothing besides me is morality.’ Indeed, with the help of a religion which indulged and flattered the most sublime herd-animal desires, we have reached the point where we find even in political and social institutions an evermore visible expression of this morality: the democratic movement is the heir of the Christian movement.¹²

⁹ id. 24.

¹⁰ id. 10.

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” trans. Walter Kaufmann, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, Inc., 1966) 211.

¹² id. 305-306.

Not only is science an heir to the objective constraints espoused by Christianity, but democracy is as well. Christianity subjects nature's "*extra-moral*" treatment of action, where "they do not yet at all belong in the realm of moral valuations", to the objective standards of morality deemed appropriate.¹³ Nietzsche reacts against Christian morality because it constrains man's ability to act according to his nature, which only seeks *will to power*.

In On the Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche reflects on the origin of Christianity's reinvention of morality. Nietzsche hypothesizes that an initial dichotomy once existed within humanity, where one group of human beings was typified by *resentment* and weakness, while the other with *nobility* and strength. Both groups coexisted together and needed each other to survive. Initially, the noble and their active nature were defined as "good", while the herd and their reactive nature as "evil". Eventually, the herd united to overthrow the nobility and redefined morality according to their standards; the stronger were redefined as 'evil', while the weaker were redefined as 'good'. Nietzsche claims the culprit of this inversion is Christianity.

Let us now discuss the strong criticism of organized religion, which both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche pose, in lieu of their moral philosophies previously discussed. Kierkegaard criticizes organized religion because he believes it is an organization filled with hypocrisy. He uses the example of a contemporary man committing the same act as Abraham¹⁴. Since organized religion presides in the ethical, the man would be judged wrongly as a murderer instead of as the *knight of faith*. The church would say, "loathsome man, dregs of society, what devil has so possessed you that you wanted to

¹³ id. 303.

murder your own son?”¹⁵ Kierkegaard criticizes the church for disregarding the possibility of another person, besides Abraham, entering the religious mode. In Irrational Man, Barrett explains that as a solution to organized religion, Kierkegaard recommends “a rediscovery of the religious center of the self...beyond organized Christendom and its churches to a state of contemporaneity”.¹⁶

As Kierkegaard, Nietzsche also criticizes organized religion quite vehemently. He believes Christianity embodies an inherent slave morality, which perpetuates meekness, in order to suppress the truly powerful. He also claims that to act morally, “man must incorporate his devil or, as he put it, man must become better and more evil”.¹⁷ Though Nietzsche criticizes organized religion itself, unlike Kierkegaard, he still views it as having a highly practical purpose. Barrett explains, “Nietzsche, the passionate and religious atheist, insisted on the necessity of a religious institution, the church, to keep the sheep in peace, thus putting himself at the opposite extreme of Kierkegaard”.¹⁸ One finds that both philosophers strongly criticize organized religion, but differ in that Kierkegaard finds little purpose in it’s existence, while Nietzsche sees it as keeping the herd in line.

Both philosophers also posit an alternative to herd-religiosity: Kierkegaard, the *knight of faith* and Nietzsche, the *Urbemensch*. The two differ in whom these alternative figures are, how they act, and why they act the way they do. Kierkegaard’s *knight of faith* is not constrained to the ethical mode, as is the rest of humanity. He alone is the

¹⁴ This refers to the biblical story of Abraham where God asks Abraham to sacrifice his only Isaac as a test of his faith.

¹⁵ Soren Kierkegaard. Fear and Trembling, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1985) 59.

¹⁶ William Barrett, Irrational Man (New York: Doubleday, 1958) 177.

¹⁷ id. 190.

¹⁸ id. 175.

entrance out of universal law and has the ability to move against the herd. Similarly, Nietzsche's *Übermensch* is the "ideal figure of humanity...who is continually experimental, willing to risk all for the sake of the enhancement of humanity".¹⁹ On the one hand, the *Übermensch* attacks the notion of natural and divine order and, on the other, believes in a cosmological intelligence. The *Übermensch*, similarly to the *knight of faith*, offers an option out of the herd religion.

Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche argue against organized religion based upon two major premises, namely their conception of human nature and their claims concerning objectivity and subjectivity. Kierkegaard's claim that human nature is generally a moral one is implicitly inferred by his reference to the Christian God. Translated into Nietzsche's terms, Kierkegaard claims that human nature is guided by *will to truth*, more specifically the will of God. Since Kierkegaard claims that the ethical mode, where moral acts are given credence over immoral acts, is superior to the aesthetic mode, where acts are not judged in any moral framework, he implicitly implies that one should act morally, unless God calls upon him to act otherwise. Even if God does call upon one to commit murder, it cannot be judged within the ethical mode and so does not apply to our discussion of Kierkegaard's conception of human nature. By claiming that human nature is inherently a moral one, Kierkegaard allows himself to criticize the church and move the religious center within the individual. Nietzsche himself also offers us a strong criticism of Kierkegaard by asking why is Kierkegaard so insistent on the existence of God? Nietzsche would answer that it offers him comfort from the cold, hard fact that God is dead.

¹⁹ Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins, "Nietzsche's works and their themes," The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche, ed. Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Contrary to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche views human nature as one based upon power and therefore immoral in the Christian sense. Nietzsche attributes what he views as man's prime instinct and engrains it into his alternative to herd-religiosity, namely the *Übermensch*, who is the essence of *will to power*. In Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche also claims, "a living thing seeks above all to *discharge* its strength—life itself is will to power; self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent *results*".²⁰ If this is the case, organized religion serves no other purpose than to harbor the weak from the powerful. Nietzsche believes that willing, in itself, "should be included in the sphere of morals—morals being understood as the doctrine of the relations of supremacy under which the phenomenon of 'life' comes to be"²¹ Whereas Kierkegaard posits that human nature is generally a moral one, Nietzsche suggests that it is not.

Though Kierkegaard shields his religious alternative from logical invalidation by claiming that faith is a personal matter, something that can be neither proved nor disproved, he does leave it unguarded from common sense. One must only look as far as nature to discover what he claims does not follow from experience. Nature exhibits an innate power struggle within its structure between predator and prey. Though man has entered into a civilized commonwealth, one cannot help but remember the past when he was just as ruthless and cunning as every other animal, constantly exerting his will upon other creatures in the name of self-preservation. It is this harsh reality that seems to bring Kierkegaard's notion of human nature and his criticism of organized religion into question.

Press, 1996) 40.

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil," trans. Walter Kaufmann, Basic Writings of Nietzsche, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, Inc., 1966) 211.

²¹ id. 217

Nietzsche assumes, in a very Hobbesian manner, that *will to power* is humanity's strongest instinct, even above self-preservation.²² Nietzsche infers that one's desire for self-preservation feeds into their will to power. Though life could subsist in this manner for a long time, one would eventually face a decision where one is forced to choose between the two. For instance, if one is confronted with the possibility of possessing great power, but at great risk to his own life, he must choose which he values more. When a decision of this magnitude arises, one may infer that Nietzsche believes one would risk their life for the chance at great power. The very human attribute of cowardice seems to offer a strong criticism of Nietzsche's notion of *will to power*; rather than seeking power, cowards act in the best interest of self-preservation. The state of nature also serves as a strong criticism of Nietzsche's claim that *will to power* is man's primary instinct. After all, man, even in the state of nature, usually acts according to some sort of reason; they kill other animals for food or to defend their habitation. Man, in the state of nature, tends not to exert its power over other creatures just because it can. In this respect, Nietzsche's claim seems to be somewhat excessive.

Now that we have discussed the first premise on which both philosophers base their critique of organized religion, namely their view of human nature, let us discuss the second, how each philosopher views objectivity and subjectivity. Since few individuals ever enter the religious mode, most integrate religion into the ethical mode, which is accomplished through organized religion. Kierkegaard sees that this integration cannot do justice to what he sees as *true* religion. True religion, as he calls it, should not exist as objective dogmatism handed down by the church, but rather should exist within each

²² In Leviathan, Hobbes claims that the general inclination of all mankind is "a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death". As Nietzsche, this leads Hobbes to deduce that morality

individual. Though Kierkegaard adheres to objective truth, in terms of God's will, he sees truth in religion as being radically subjective.

As Kierkegaard, Nietzsche believes truth in religion is subjective, but differs from him in his belief that there is no absolute truth (in relation to God) and if there was, we could not know it. Nietzsche states, "There are no facts, only interpretations of facts".²³ He also attacks logic questioning its "apparent autonomy" in that it fails to "evaluate...physiological demands".²⁴ For Nietzsche, there is only the subjective. Complete subjectivity causes values to become relative and inverted, just as Nietzsche believes they have been. Nietzsche claims that the true morals of man are what the noble dictate, though they have since been twisted and inverted by the herd.

Logically, Nietzsche encounters a self-referential problem in his statement "there are no facts, only interpretations of facts" and thus in his critique of objectivity.²⁵ If there are no facts, what is he interpreting? Nietzsche assumes the very reference that he claims does not exist. In this respect, Nietzsche breaks the most important rule of logic, namely the law of non-contradiction. Also, Nietzsche constantly makes very cryptic claims, concerning objectivity, without ever giving any explanation for them. This is evident in such statements as "suppose we want truth: why not rather untruth? and uncertainty? even ignorance?"²⁶ These, along with many other statements made in such works as

is subjective.

²³ id. 214.

²⁴ This point seems to be a reference to Nietzsche's sarcastic reaction to previous arguments offered by such members of the intellectual revolution as Descartes, who proposed that phenomenon appear when the mind anticipates nature, which is then verified by one's experience. This is greatly opposed to the Aristotelian method, which theorizes phenomenon as being external and perceived through sense experience. [Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1973) 15].

²⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil," trans. Walter Kaufmann, Basic Writings of Nietzsche, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, Inc., 1966) 214.

²⁶ id. 199.

Beyond Good and Evil, make it quite difficult to argue with Nietzsche; he often elusively repels logical critiques by wrapping himself in a blanket of subjectivity. Assuming we do not live in a demon world, this should not stop one from concluding that Nietzsche is at least over-zealous in some of his claims. Though his psychological criticism of humanity is quite astute, it should not deter one from questioning the validity of his claim to subjectivity. At the same time, one must also keep in mind what Nietzsche trying to do, raising the question ‘what in us wants truth?’ A question, I suspect, which demands a very probing and relevant answer.

Religion is central to the philosophies of both Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. Each of the two philosophers is highly critical and discovers many problems within the Christian religion. Though both philosophers believe the role of truth within religion to be extremely subjective, only Kierkegaard acknowledges the importance of objectivity’s role. Both are again similar in their critique of organized religion, but differ in what they view the importance of it to be. Finally, both philosophers offer plausible alternatives to the herd-religiosity, but again differ in what these alternatives consist of. Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are quite similar in that they strongly critique religion; one can attribute this to the nature of philosophy and thus to the nature of philosophers. Yet it still seems amazing that a man of high religious integrity and one of no religious integrity can see the same problems. Where their personal beliefs come into play is in how they posit their solutions. Kierkegaard polarizes towards God, while Nietzsche polarizes towards atheism. Only two of the greatest thinkers of our time could gaze at religion with such clarity and derive such original and plausible conclusions.

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