

Kierkegaard's «Silent» Voice

Sergia Hay

Columbia University (Columbia)
Department of Philosophy

It appears inappropriate to claim that Kierkegaard used silence as one of his many voices since he could be considered one of the «noisiest» philosophers of all. He hardly kept his thoughts to himself: he was extraordinarily prolific and within his pages can be found scathing criticisms of his age and the Danish church. The volume of his noise is increased by his frequent repetitions and discussions of what he has already written. So what then could be his connection to silence? In order to determine this connection, we first must take into account Kierkegaard's understanding of silence. For Kierkegaard, silence is not equivalent to soundlessness, stillness, or a lack of words. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Indeed, one can fail to be silent in the relevant sense while not making a sound, and inversely, one can be silent in the relevant sense while screaming. The relevant sense of silence has little to do with aural experience: rather, silence, (*Taushed*), is dependent on the notion of concealment.

Silence conceals the individual's relationship with God. The authenticity of this relationship depends on its privacy. Kierkegaard perceived in his age a tendency to believe being Christian equates to being born in Denmark and going to church equates to going to a social event. As opposed to the public nature of so-called religiousness in Christendom, Kierkegaard wrote that faith is a matter exclusively between the individual and God. Cowardice and conceit are the motivations that Kierkegaard cites when one attempts to disclose the essence of the faith relationship: a disclosure that Kierkegaard describes as «an emptying that weakens.» (*JP* 3985/*PAP* X2 A, 43)

Silence conceals the self. Kierkegaard wrote, «Silence is the way of interiorization for us ordinary human beings.» (*Ibid.*, p. 99) Silence marks the individual's withdrawal from society and «the crowd»: withdrawal which is necessary for inward reflection and self-development. This concealment is not the concealment of some thing that resides outside of or is separate from the self. Rather, it is the process of self-development that is concealed: a process that holds meaning only for the self. Since it only applies to the self, it cannot properly be an object of discourse. Although it makes no sense to ask what this form of concealment communicates, because there is no object to com-

municate, it may be asked what purpose the concealment serves. Kierkegaard wrote that this concealment provides the correct conditions for self-development: it prevents misunderstanding in others and prevents trivialization of the self.

Silence does not always guarantee a positive direction for self-development, however. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard wrote,

I always run up against the paradox, the divine and the demonic, for silence is both. Silence is the demon's trap, and the more that is silenced, the more terrible the demon, but silence is also the divinity's mutual understanding with the single individual. (*SVI* III, 136/*KW* VI, 88)

The «demonic» aspect of silence describes an entanglement in the process of self-development: an entanglement from which there is no escape. In this case, the self continues to close inward on itself and cannot regain attachment to the world, to God, or to others. The «divine» aspect of silence describes self-development that necessarily begins with an awakening of self-consciousness that makes the self aware of his isolation and separateness from the world, but it does not end here. «Divine» silence also indicates the transformation of the self's relations beyond himself. The self does not now relate to others and God in the same way he did before concealment of the self in silence. Rather, these relations are freshly established and in many ways have gained authenticity.

Silence conceals authority. In Part III of *Two Ages: A Literary Review*, Kierkegaard noted that his age was characterized by a reflective apathy which caused a «leveling» of society to take place. Because of this «leveling», visible leadership had vanished and the true leaders became unrecognizable. In the present, age Kierkegaard wrote, «not one of the unrecognizable ones will dare give direct help, speak plainly, teach openly, assume decisive leadership of the crowd.» (*SVI* VIII, 101/*KW* XIV, 108) Without the claim of authority, the leader is placed on an equal level to the one who is led: outwardly, they are indistinguishable from one another. Kierkegaard carried out his writing and teaching in this context. His concealment, his shedding of authority, came in many forms among which included his use of pseudonyms and his penning of reviews that allowed him to develop his ideas while discussing another's literary production. These methods distance Kierkegaard from the sentences he wrote and raise questions about whether the opinions that are expressed in these works can really be attributed to him. Without the authority of the author, the burden of meaning belongs to the reader. No longer can the author's words be matched up to the author's life, rather the reader is left alone to discover how the words relate to his own life. The author is unrecognizable, silent. The reader is alone, active.

Now we begin to see the significance of Kierkegaard's silent voice. Although he *says* much, he is primarily concerned with *doing*. As an ethical and religious teacher/writer, Kierkegaard concentrated on how to make his

reader *do* something, namely learn about and develop himself. Since there is no advice or manual to instruct one about the course of self-development, the individual must plunge into silence.

Although all of them, when they are supposed to act, discuss it with «the others» and all that- they all nevertheless say depreciatively of someone: He went and discussed it beforehand with «the others».

Consequently they betray themselves, betray their awareness of the fact that authentic intensive actions spring from an individual and from silence. (*JP* 3986/*PAP*X4 A, 16)

Like all significant of concepts of Kierkegaard's philosophy, silence is ultimately paradoxical: the moment of concealment is at the same time the moment of profound disclosure. This disclosure still does not take place in the realm of words and sound, for when the individual hides the self, the relationship with God, and the claim of authority, he is simultaneously plunged into an action based, rather than word and idea based, ethic. The silent individual is not paralyzed by reflection, unless his is demonic silence. He is self-responsible and decisive. The action of the silent individual is a form of communication that surpasses the language of description.

Examples of «taushed» in Kierkegaard's work

- Throughout *Papier*
See KIERKEGAARD, Søren, *Journals and Papers, Volume IV, S-Z*. Trans. Howard and Edna Hong. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975. p. 98-100.
- *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*
See KIERKEGAARD, Søren. *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. Trans. Howard and Edna Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978. p. 21, 97-99.
- *The Sickness Unto Death*
See KIERKEGAARD, Søren. *The Sickness Unto Death*. Trans. Howard and Edna Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980. p. 34, 66, 161.
- Part III of *Fear and Trembling*.
- Part III of *Two Ages: A Literary Review*.
- *The Concept of Anxiety*
See KIERKEGAARD, Søren. *The Concept of Anxiety*. Trans. Reidar Thomte. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980. p. 55-56, 66, 124-128.