



Philosophy of Religion

Is Kierkegaard's Absolute Paradox Hume's Miracle?

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ABSTRACT: I clarify Hume's concept of *miracle* with Kierkegaard's concept of *absolute paradox*. I argue that absolute paradox is like that miracle which, according to Hume, allows a human being to believe Christianity against the principles of his understanding. I draw such a conclusion on the basis that Kierkegaard does not think Christianity is a doctrine with a truth value and, furthermore, he holds that all historical events (such as miracles) are doubtful. Kierkegaard emphasizes the absolute paradox as the condition of faith in such a way that it becomes close to Hume's idea of personal miracle which causes the subversion of the believer's principles of understanding. Hence, the absolute paradox cannot be a possible supporting event (Hume's first miracle) for the credibility of Christianity. Absolute paradox more closely approximates Hume's second miracle insofar as it makes *persons* believe contrary to their custom and experience.

Introduction

In the following, I clarify the relation between Hume's concept of a miracle in *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*(1) (=EHU) (1748) and Kierkegaard's concept of the absolute paradox in *Philosophical Fragments*(2) (=PF) (1844) and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*(3) (=CUP) (1846). Kierkegaard writes in PF that "the paradox is the wonder"(4) but I claim that the synonymity of a miracle and the paradox is not a straightforward matter.(5) I argue that the absolute paradox is like that miracle which, according to Hume, makes a human being believe Christianity against the principles of his or her understanding. My arguments for this conclusion are that because Kierkegaard does not think Christianity is a doctrine with a truth value and because he thinks that reports of all historical events (cf. miracles) are doubtful, for Kierkegaard the Humean problem of miracles possibly establishing the truth of Christianity is not relevant. On the other hand, Kierkegaard emphasizes the absolute paradox as the condition of faith in a way that it becomes close to Hume's idea of a personal miracle which causes the subversion of the principles of the believer's understanding.

Hume-Hamann-Kierkegaard Connection

The X. section ("Of Miracles") of Hume's EHU comes to an end with the following lines:

"... the Christian Religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us its veracity: And whoever is moved by Faith to assent to it,

is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience."(6)

Kierkegaard read this conclusion of Hume's discussion of miracles in the fall of 1836. On the other hand, it seems that Kierkegaard did not know that he was really reading Hume because in fact he found those to him fascinating lines in the writings of Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788), who had written them down for his own purposes after reading Hume's EHU.(7) Hamann, that cryptic German literary figure, was a severe critic of, as he saw it, the rationalistic and materialistic ideals of the Enlightenment and passionately sought for a Christian alternative. In Hume's ideas of the nature of belief he found means for his deeply personal quest. Hamann emphasizes, according to his own interpretation of Hume, the independence of faith from reason.(8) According to Pojman(9) the writings of Hamann were important to Kierkegaard, when the antispeculative nature of Christianity began to take shape in his mind.

Hume, Miracles and the Usual Course of Nature

According to Hume, "a miracle may be accurately defined, a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent."(10) Hume wants to show that "a miracle can never be proved, so as to be the foundation of a system of religion."(11) On the other hand, Hume admits explicitly the possibility of "miracles, or violations of the usual course of nature"(12) that can be established by human testimony. So why cannot a well established miracle be that "foundation of a system of religion"?

According to Hume our most obvious beliefs concerning our immediate environment are almost inevitable in nature. They are not results of sophisticated arguments, but have been forced on us by our own nature.(13) This means that our experience of the common course of nature is so compelling that when we experience one thing (say, see a fire in a fireplace) we are inevitably led (or forced) by our earlier experience to expect that thing (flames will burn if I get too close to them) which usually accompanies the first one. All beliefs of matters of fact are derived from these customary conjunctions.(14) This idea, or as Hume puts it, "that the objects, of which we have no experience, resemble those, of which we have"(15) is important to Hume, since he describes it as "the maxim, by which we most commonly conduct ourselves in our reasonings".(16)

According to Armstrong,(17) as I see his inspiring interpretation, when Hume writes "that a miracle can never be proved, so as to be the foundation of a system of religion" Hume means that if the occurrence of an event (including miracles) has been undeniably established, this is because of the fact that human experience supporting it is so universal that the event (miracle) cannot be claimed by members of any particular religion to support just their religious convictions. I think the Humean idea behind this is that we call miracles only those events which violate those of our beliefs which our most uniform experience has established, i.e., laws of nature.(18) Consequently, an established miracle would ipso facto mean that something very exceptional but at the same time universally acceptable has happened. Again consequently, because of the universal approval, it can be seen, as Armstrong(19) does, that a miracle loses its religious significance in the sense of serving as the foundation of a particular system of religion, or as Armstrong puts it, "it would be an act of arrogation for a particular religion to claim a miracle so widely witnessed".(20)

Then, because we cannot find miracles in the outer world that would establish the truth, say, of the Christian Religion, we must look into ourselves. A reasonable person

must turn to Faith if he or she wants to become a believer. After this, as Hume concludes, a believer is conscious of a "a continued miracle in his own person".(21) This not so visible miracle leads to the subversion of all the principles of believer's understanding. A conclusion, which Hume probably presented, as Pojman puts it, "with a tongue in cheek", (22) but which Kierkegaard took very seriously.

Kierkegaard and the Absolute Paradox

According to Kierkegaard in PF, a human thinker is passionately interested in the boundaries of his or her thinking faculty and is committed to, in Kierkegaard's own words, "the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think".(23) That unknown, which thought tries to think, but cannot do it, is "the god".(24) Hong comments this rather peculiar expression in an earlier(25) than now standard(26) edition of PF. According to him(27) "the God" means Eternal in time or God in history-the Incarnation, i.e., the embodiment of God the Son in human flesh as Jesus Christ. Kierkegaard also describes the unknown as "the absolutely different", (28) which means, as I see it, the totally alien nature of the unknown. Kierkegaard seems to think that a human thinker is so fundamentally locked in his or her categories of thought that even when he or she is trying to grasp something totally different from anything human there is no way avoiding those basic categories.(29) Kierkegaard also suggests that "the god" is "the paradox", (30) so "the paradox" would also mean "the Incarnation". In CUP he writes explicitly that "the paradox is primarily that God, the eternal, has entered into time as an individual human being", (31) and of course, this "thesis that God has existed in human form, was born, grew up, etc. is certainly the paradox *sensu strictissimo*, the absolute paradox".(32) I point out that Kierkegaard is not always clear about the difference between the meanings of "the paradox" and "the absolute paradox", i.e., when he writes about "the paradox" or "the absolute paradox", he sometimes uses "the paradox" when he is clearly referring to "the absolute paradox".(33) In the following I use only "the absolute paradox" meaning "the paradox *sensu strictissimo*".

The Hume-Hamann-Kierkegaard connection emerges in the chapter of PF called "APPENDIX: Offence at the Paradox (An Acoustical Illusion)". In there Kierkegaard states explicitly that "the paradox is the most improbable[and] the paradox is the wonder".(34) Shortly after these descriptions he recognizes Hamann as one of his sources of inspiration behind his concept of the absolute paradox.(35) A thorough study of the historical connection between Hume, Hamann and Kierkegaard would be fascinating to read, but how miraculous the absolute paradox really is on the conceptual level?

The Origin of Religious Belief

As I see it, Hume's "miracle" may be seen to refer to at least two things. Firstly, "a miracle" may refer to an alleged historical event, which may be useful when one wants to establish the truth of the Christian Religion. This is consonant with Hume's actual definition of a miracle. Secondly, "a miracle" may refer to a radical personal experience during which a person is led to assent to the Christian Religion against his normal principles of reasoning and against "custom and experience". I claim that Kierkegaard's "absolute paradox" refers clearly to Hume's second miracle.

To support my claim I present briefly few observations on Kierkegaard's view of the nature of Christianity. Kierkegaard brings forth a vision of Christianity which is based on a clear distinction between knowledge and faith.(36) Kierkegaard stresses that "faith is a sphere of its own, and the immediate identifying mark of every misunderstanding of Christianity is that it changes it into a doctrine and draws it into

the range of intellectuality".(37) It is misleading to think that the religious problem (my phrase) is a one of gaining reliable knowledge of the historical events relating to Christianity or finding a satisfying philosophical analysis of the dogma of Christianity.(38) Faith should always involve the element of uncertainty and risk and it should avoid objective justifications or it "loses that infinite, personal, impassioned interestedness, which is the condition of faith".(39) Being or becoming a Christian is the most important thing and in this project knowledge of, say, the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin is of no use. Being a Christian involves having faith in the absolute paradox which cannot be an object of knowledge because it is something that thought itself cannot think.(40) So, the absolute paradox must be very far from being a foundation for Christianity in the sense of establishing its intellectual or doctrinal truth. Christianity does not lack objective justifications because it "is not a doctrine but the fact that the god has existed".(41) Consequently, because this fact is incomprehensible, its possibility cannot be a result of some objective (historical or philosophical) research. So, it is evident that "the absolute paradox" cannot be a candidate for Hume's first "miracle". Its status is totally different from being a possible confirming case of the truth of Christianity which, in fact, cannot be true or false.

Hume rejects the first use of "a miracle" because of the nature of the testimony of the established events. Kierkegaard too rejects, but for different reasons than Hume, the use of a miracle as a base for, as he calls it, "an eternal happiness".(42) Kierkegaard does not define "eternal happiness", but in my view, it refers to the eternal spiritual well-being of a human being. Kierkegaard discusses or rather mentions miracles in the sense Hume defined them in context where he discusses ideas of German religious thinker G. E. Lessing (1729-81).(43) The reason why Kierkegaard does not discuss miracles as a group of special events, as Hume does, is that to Kierkegaard all historical reports (including those dealing with miracles) are doubtful because only "immediate sensation and immediate cognition cannot deceive".(44) Anything that reaches beyond these immediacies (cf. reports about past events) is susceptible to doubt, so miracle reports do not deserve any special attention. This doubtfulness means that there is an inevitable "incommensurability"(45) between historical events and a human being's eternal happiness. So how could a human being base something eternal on something historical and ipso facto doubtful? (46)

In my view both Hume and Kierkegaard think that it is a grave misunderstanding to try to establish the truth of Christianity by appealing to the faculty of human reason. I suggest that from Hume's discussion of miracles and Kierkegaard's discussion of the absolute paradox in PF emerges a view of what I call a non-human origin of religious belief. This is more evident in the writings of Kierkegaard, but even Hume seems to be thinking that what causes human beings to believe Christianity is something that is not a common thing in their ways of thinking. Hume writes about "a miracle in believer's own person" and in passive tense "whoever is moved by Faith ". These formulations make it sound like believing Christianity is something that happens to a person independent of his or her own control. On the other hand, Kierkegaard in PF is looking for an alternative for a Socratic view of learning the truth by a way of remembering. He suggests that if the truth cannot be remembered then the truth and the condition for understanding it must be given to the learner from outside himself or herself by the teacher, i.e., the god.(47) This alternative is a real alternative if not only the truth (meaning, as I see it, the authentic state of learner's existence) but also the condition for understanding are provided from somewhere outside human resources. So, according to Kierkegaard in PF, there is not much a learner can do when he or she wants to get in touch with what is crucial for his eternal spiritual well-being. Only faith clinging to the absolute paradox can help in this tormenting situation, but "faith is no an act of will"(48) because its condition is not present in human faculties.

I conclude, based on this paper, that both Hume and Kierkegaard can be seen to hold

at least partly similar views about the nature of Christianity. They both think that the question is not the objective truth of Christianity. Hume concludes that miracles cannot be used as possible confirming events for the truth of the Christian Religion because established events enjoy so wide support among human beings that they cannot be used to serve just certain particular religion. Also more generally Hume thinks that reason alone is not enough to convince us of its truthfulness. Kierkegaard thinks that Christianity is not a doctrine and consequently that the question of truth does not even rise because the object of faith is the absolute paradox. Miracles explicitly defined by Hume do not interest Kierkegaard because reports describing them are just as historical as other historical reports and ipso facto always doubtful. The absolute paradox cannot therefore be a possible supporting event (Hume's first miracle) for the credibility of Christianity. It is more like that Hume's non-human factor (Hume's second miracle) which makes a believer believe contrary to custom and experience. Both Hume and Kierkegaard stress the humanness of human nature. Only a miracle can help us if we want to get hold of something totally different from ourselves.

Notes

(1) In Hume, David, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd revised ed., ed. by P. H. Nidditch, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.

(2) In Kierkegaard, Søren, *Philosophical Fragments / Johannes Climacus*, (Kierkegaard's Writings, VII), ed. and transl. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong with Introduction and Notes, 2nd printing, with corrections (1st printing, 1985), Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987.

(3) Kierkegaard, Søren, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, (Kierkegaard Writings, XII (1, 2)), ed. and transl. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong with Introduction and Notes, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992.

(4) PF 52.

(5) I do not discuss the possible difference between the meanings of "a miracle" and "a wonder".

(6) EHU 131. I do not consider whether Hume is being ironic or not.

(7) See Pojman, Louis P, 'Christianity and Philosophy in Kierkegaard's Early Papers' 135-6 in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44 (1983): 131-140.

(8) See his *Socratic Memorabilia* (Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten, 1759) 391-2 in Dickson, Gwen Griffith, *Johann Georg Hamann's Relational Metacriticism*, (Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann; 67), Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995.

(9) See his 'Christianity and Philosophy in Kierkegaard's Early Papers' 134-5.

(10) EHU 115, note 1.

(11) Ibid. 127.

(12) Ibid.

(13) Cf. ibid. 46-7.

(14) Ibid.

(15) Ibid. 117.

(16) Ibid.

(17) 'Hume's Actual Argument Against Belief in Miracles' in *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 12 (1995): 65-76.

(18) Cf. EHU 114-5.

(19) 'Hume's Actual Argument Against Belief in Miracles' 72.

(20) Ibid.

(21) EHU 131.

(22) 'Christianity and Philosophy in Kierkegaard's Early Papers' 136.

(23) PF 37.

(24) Ibid. 39.

(25) *Philosophical Fragments*, orig. transl. and Introduction by David Swenson, new Introduction and Commentary by Niels Thulstrup, revised transl. and transl. of the Commentary by Howard V. Hong, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974.

(26) Cf. n. 2.

(27) PF 1974 (see n. 25) x.

(28) PF 44-5.

(29) Ibid. 45.

(30) Ibid. 47.

(31) CUP 596.

(32) Ibid. 217.

(33) Cf. PF 61.

(34) Ibid. 52.

(35) See ibid. 52-3.

(36) Cf. CUP 29.

(37) Ibid. 327.

(38) Cf. ibid. 19-57.

(39) Cf ibid. 29.

(40) "Thinking" must now mean understanding what really is involved in the absolute paradox for of course a human being can think about the absolute paradox.

(41) CUP 326.

(42) Cf. ibid. 94-99.

(43) Ibid. 95-8.

(44) PF 81.

(45) CUP 98.

(46) This is, of course, the basic problem of PF.

(47) Cf. PF 14-8.

(48) Ibid. 62.

