

KIERKEGAARD - A FLAG IN THE WINDS OF CHANGE

1. Person

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55) lived his relatively short life in Copenhagen where he lived off his inheritance and wrote incessantly. He also liked to frequent the theatre and walk the streets observing people. He became well known in the small capital city town (about 200.000) and he was mocked by cartoons in the press. He in turn wrote sarcastically about important people and about the church. He was not known internationally during his own life time, but soon became increasingly relevant as a 'father of existentialism'. His life was typified by anxiety, about which he endlessly psychologised and philosophised. He claimed: "Our whole earthly existence is a sort of indisposition...."¹ He also said: "My grief is my castle, which like an eagle's nest ... nothing can conquer."² Indeed, S. Kierkegaard had a frail body, a melancholy spirit, but (as he says himself) a witty mind.

A typical Kierkegaardian remark goes like this: one of S. Kierkegaard's teachers who always let things get out of control became exasperated one day when the boys started eating food and turned the class room into a picnic area. The teacher said he was going to report this to the headmaster. Thereupon the boys began to beg the teacher to forgive them one more time. But the youthful S. Kierkegaard said (something like): 'Sir, when you get to the headmaster's office, please tell him that your class always is like this.'³ The typical Kierkegaardian irony here is that the challenges the teacher to face the unpleasant truth and say so to others.

Kierkegaard's anxiety and melancholy came straight from his father and the family. S. Kierkegaard was the last of seven children. Over the years the first five died and their father saw this as a punishment by God and also assumed that he would outlive the last two. Søren expected the same. Søren's father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard grew up very poor in the barren region of Jutland (Northwest Denmark). The family name: churchyard, i.e., graveyard came from where the grandfather lived in the poor parsonage in Jutland. Søren's father tended sheep as a boy and suffered hunger and cold for which he cursed God. But he was taken to Copenhagen as a young man and set up in business by an uncle and he eventually became wealthy and entertained prominent citizens. When his wife died he drop-

¹Peter Rohde, ed., *The Diary of Søren Kierkegaard* (New York: Carol Publishing, 1993), 22.

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Eiðer/Or*, in Robert Bretall, ed., *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (New York: Modern Library, 1946), 35.

³ Incident told in Walter Lowrie, *A Short Life of Kierkegaard* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970), 39-40.

ped out of business at 40 years old and read philosophy and theology. But his morbid sense of punishment by God only increased with the death of the children - now grown up. Two of S. Kierkegaard's sisters died in childbirth, a brother died while on business in New York. A cousin committed suicide. Other's like S. Kierkegaard's brother Pedersen and he himself talked about suicide. S. Kierkegaard was the youngest by seven years.

S. Kierkegaard wrote more than 25 books. His *Journals* or *Diary* runs into several thousand pages. He seems to be talking about painful subjects like how morbid his father was or how painful that he himself called off the engagement relationship with the girl he loved (Regine Olsen) – but in the end S. Kierkegaard is talking about all of us – and like those who entered into dialogue with Socrates, we end up saying: I don't know what to think, what to do, or who I am. S. Kierkegaard wants us to raise the existential questions for ourselves.

Toward the end of his life S. Kierkegaard abandoned his 'indirect' approach and wrote openly and scathingly against the church and its leaders (he called this his 'attack upon Christendom'). It was an extreme attack, which raised strong counterattack. S. Kierkegaard declared that this was a sign that he was 'on the right road'. Indeed, "...obviously I ought not to be exactly in a hurry to get rid of it [counterattack, slander, misrepresentation against him], unless I wish as soon as possible to get on the wrong road".⁴ Tillich remarks that S. Kierkegaard's critique of the church was in a sense more radical than that of Marx and Nietzsche combined (S. Kierkegaard's was an attack from the inside).⁵ His critique towards the end of his life became fanatical, yet even in the Danish church papers a couple of years after his death there were articles admitting he had pointed to problems of worldly clergy and a complacent faith. It was said that after Kierkegaard, it is clear: "There exists a wordly-minded clergy; that many things in the Church are rotten; that all need daily repentance...."⁶ Indeed, Kierkegaard is now recognized in the Calendar of Saints of the Lutheran Church (Nov.11) and of the Episcopal Church (Sept.8).

For his further influence, see point 4 in this essay: 'After Kierkegaard'.

2. Big steps in philosophy: which way is the wind blowing? Kierkegaard's reaction.

Kierkegaard was a flag in the wind, indicating the turn to the subjective and to authenticity. He flaps in several cross winds, reacting to Kant and Hegel.

*KANT (1724-1804)*⁷ – S. Kierkegaard rejected Kant's 'pure reason' and whereas Kant talked about 'religion within the limits of reason alone', S. Kierkegaard talks about 'reason within the limits of religion alone'. S. Kierkegaard could rejoice in Kant's positing of the 'antinomies' (see paragraph below) as the limit of reason, for this indicates that we need more than pure reason. For Kant that meant that we

⁴ S. Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon Christendom*, 1853-54, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton University Press, 1944), 95.

⁵ Paul Tillich, *Perspectives on 19th and 20th Century Protestant Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 163.

⁶ Newspaper article, 'Remarks on the State of the Danish National Church', by the Rev. Dr. Kalkar, Copenhagen, August 1, 1858. Cf. also www.en.wikipedia.org/kierkegaard.

⁷ Peter Kunzmann, Burkhard & Wiedmann, *Atlas Philosophie* (Deutscher Taschenbuch, 2005), 137ff.

need ‘practical reason’. For S. Kierkegaard it meant that we need commitment. Kierkegaard could also rejoice that Kant began the ‘Copernican revolution in epistemology’, which says that our knowledge does not come unmediated or unfiltered from the object, but also or perhaps primarily from the subjective mind’s composition of an understanding of what our empirical senses portray to us. But S. Kierkegaard, while accepting this turn toward ‘the subjective’, could not accept Kant’s bifurcation of the phenomenal and the noumenal.

Kant is complex. It helps to define his phrase ‘*transcendental unity of apperception*’.⁸ For Kant the mind is not a ‘blank tablet’ (Locke). The mind is an active composer of understandings. In other words, the data of empirical experience via our senses (sight, sounds, shapes, colours, time) are organized or integrated by the active mind into unified meanings. This **transcendental** (wider integration) is by means of the mind’s **apperception**, which is an understanding which goes beyond empirical **perception**. ‘Transcendental’ refers to the mind’s integration or composition of meaning, which is outside (beyond) empirical experience – but the transcendental insights of the mind are necessary for **knowledge**. ‘**Transcendent**’, however, refers to that which is beyond experience and knowledge. Kant said that the commandment against making images of God exactly tells us that we should not be deluded into thinking that we can see beyond the bounds of that which is sensible (empirical).

In short terms we may explain Kant’s **phenomenal realm as empirical** reality known via our senses. The **numenal** in Latin (‘numen’) refers to higher power and to divinity, the **transcendent** (beyond direct experience and not certain to reason due to the antinomies this raises). For Kant the noumenal realm refers to ‘things in themselves’ which we do not directly know, for our knowledge is always filtered via our experiences and our mind. We do not experience things as they ‘are’, but as they appear (phenomena = appearances) to us. The noumenal is also called the transcendental realm, or ideal but unknown ‘essence’ of things. We do not know ‘things in themselves’. Later Rudolph Otto would write about *The Idea of the Holy* (1917) as the numinous, that is, the intuitive experience of the Divine as the Holy, as Other, Incomprehensible, and Awesome. Heschel would say that our experience of awe at the unfathomable (ungraspable) and ineffable (unspeakable) is based on objective givens which produce the subjective experience. Such themes remain throughout dialectical theology. Kant did not mean that the mind works only subjectively (as in Hume’s scepticism of contact with reality). Rather there is a correspondence between a reality that is graspable by transcendental apperception and the mind’s activity. Kant did not deny the data of religious knowledge and experience, but wants to place the infinite God beyond our finite categories – which became a main pillar of dialectical theology. Kant put God out of reach of ‘reason’, but Kant’s ‘categorical imperative’ leads back to God. So does Kant’s awe before the ‘sublime’. By the sublime he means the overwhelming sensation of power and majesty we find in the ocean and sky, thunder and lightning, high waterfalls and gorging streams. We cannot avoid the feeling of **amazement**, sometimes fear, sometimes a sacred thrill. Nietzsche said that Kant left the cage of immaturity when

⁸ See Oliver A. Johnson, ‘Immanuel Kant’, in Ian P. McGreal, ed., *Great Thinkers of the Western World* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 281-285.

he dared to use his reason, but he crept back into the cage when he let ethics and the sublime point us back to the presence of God. One influence of Kant is that Schleiermacher (1768-1834) took a turn toward a more anthropocentric theology, dealing with religious experience. Kierkegaard deals very much with psychological and religious experience, but also with the leap of faith toward unity with the infinite. Kant's acknowledgement of the sublime that fills us with awe opened this existential alternative to finding God avenues other than reason (alone).

Kant spoke about 'antinomies' as unsolvable questions from the viewpoint of pure reason. These include: Is there a beginning and an end to time? To space? How can there be causality (determinative natural laws) and freedom? Is there a 'necessary being' as the ground of being? Kant 'solves' the question of antinomies by pointing out that two opposite answers could both sound logical and nonlogical. Our lack of a final answer tells us that our experiences and our reasoning are limited and we do not know the 'whole'.

S. Kierkegaard could agree with Kant that 'pure reason' falls short of dealing properly with the transcendent realm; and indeed that we approach the transcendent via 'practical reason' – morality and the need for deciding about our lifeview and values. But for S. Kierkegaard, there is a dialectical relationship between the two 'realms' of the phenomenal and the noumenal, and rather than setting our epistemological limits according to the primacy of reason, S. Kierkegaard believed that 'the leap' beyond what we can reasonably know, is as such the very beginning of another kind of 'Copernican revolution', namely an ethical-spiritual one. By separating the noumenal from the phenomenal, Kant said that he was "making room for faith" (since pure reason can't decide about antinomies nor about the realm of faith). Kierkegaard could agree that reason cannot grasp the truth of faith; but S. Kierkegaard did not like Kant's over-ethical interpretation of faith. For S. Kierkegaard, Kant was still too tied down by reasoning even within his 'practical reason'. Kant ended up with a reduced faith.⁹ S. Kierkegaard wanted to expand the role of intuitive faith. Kant was by no means denying all reasons for faith; but he wishes to keep these in the sphere of 'practical reason'.¹⁰ Kant offered a moral proof – or rather reasoning, as to why we may (still) believe in God and immortality. But this is all part of the Enlightenment (and beyond) 'battle of the proofs' for theism or at least deism (or at least agnosticism). Supernatural revelation faded away as a 'proof'; leaving only natural reason, which as Kant pointed out, involves us in 'antinomies' in relation to the noumenal sphere or essence of reality goes. Kant stated that the question of morality leads irrevocably to religion, and he deduces God, human freedom, and immortality from man's moral nature.¹¹ Kierkegaard reacted against the idea of 'proofs' and a reasoned understanding of God; however, Kierkegaard does work with a correspondence between our moral nature and especially our existential thrownness (as Heidegger would call it), and the need for God.

⁹ G. van den Brink, *Oriëntatie in de filosofie* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2000), 224: "Het is in elk geval wel een zeer *versmald* geloof dat Kant overhoudt."

¹⁰ Cf. Keith Ward, *God and the Philosophers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2009), 76ff.

¹¹ Franklin L. Baumer, *Modern European Thought: Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1600-1950* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 'Theism and Atheism', 182-200.

Kant had an admirable ethics of duty, illustrated in such maxims as: always treat others as an ‘end’ (valuable person in their own right) and not as a ‘means’ (to my ‘ends’ or goals). However, S. Kierkegaard wanted to go beyond an ethics of duty to an ethics of sacrifice (Abraham; Jesus) – i.e. – an ethics of more than common duty. The question is not merely: what should people do? Rather: what must I do? And of course, S. Kierkegaard was not content to philosophise; he also did a lot of theologising. But he wanted to say that to become a ‘disciple’ is the real goal.

HEGEL (1770-1831) – S. Kierkegaard became known for various reasons, but one is certainly his reaction to Hegel. While Plato based reality on Eternal Forms (being produces becoming), Aristotle sees the ‘becoming’ as present within things. Plotinus conceived a hierarchical ladder from the One descending through the spiritual, the natural, the material and back again by means of thought and exstasy (moving out of the material and finite toward the spiritual and infinite). Hegel was one of the first to integrate ultimate reality in the development of history itself.¹² History for Hegel is the self-unfolding and self-realization of the Absolute *Geist* (Spirit, Mind). In this system all of reality is interrelated in a continuum of the progress of the Absolute Spirit. This is a progress in freedom in which everything contributes to the higher evolvment and actualization of the Spirit, in all aspects of existence, but especially in art, religion, and philosophy. Hegel explains that as lower historical moments, institutions, understandings, cultural results pass away, they are at the same time raised higher and taken up within the new synthesis of things. Everything, including the infinite and the finite, are ‘reconciled’. They find each other and their common meaning (progress in freedom).

S. Kierkegaard reacted against Hegel’s main concepts of progress, integration (synthesis), cultural optimism, collectivity, the Great Plan/System (rather than personal existence) and the dialectical unity which displays rationality and development. S. Kierkegaard posits absurdity, freedom (in anxiety), personal choice, inadequacy of reason, dialectical either/or. S. Kierkegaard saw Hegel’s historical reconciliation of all things as a logical theory and not as answering the dialectical question: what is my true self and how do I form a true self? Estrangement in Hegel is conquered dialectically, while in S. Kierkegaard the dialectical nature of reality guarantees estrangement which cannot be conquered (in this life). But actually in Hegel, too, the higher reconciliation is always in the future. Or: it is in the mind of God and therefore can be confirmed in the mind of the philosopher. What Hegel called a great ‘logical’ solution Marx criticized as ‘mysticism’. And Kierkegaard said that to speculate on the *reconciliation of everything* in an ‘essential’ way is not to be able to say that this has taken place ‘existentially’.

S. Kierkegaard’s writing was often focussed on providing a parody of the philosophical Idealism of Kant and Hegel. But at least Kant had talked about the limits of pure reason. Hegel, S. Kierkegaard remarks, is a no doubt “a professor on a large scale, because he *a tout prix* [at any price] must explain all things”.¹³ S. Kierkegaard was clear that the ‘price’ was the loss of the existing individual. S. Kierke-

¹² Kunzmann, *op.cit.*, 152ff.

¹³ S. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton University Press, 1980), 20.

gaard knows no bounds in criticising Hegel, for Hegel (and others) trick us into thinking that we can approach the truth as a “continuous world-historical process” in an objective way and this process says nothing about the individual.¹⁴ S. Kierkegaard also said that the Hegelian world-historical dialectic was like a cow chewing its cud and regurgitating it and chewing it again.¹⁵ But the repetition does not guarantee the result promised.

Compared to Kant and the Enlightenment, Hegel (and the Romantic Movement) had a renewed emphasis on the person of Jesus Christ (and the theme of incarnation fit perfectly for Hegel with the presence of the Divine *Geist*). Hegel restored a philosophy of optimism.¹⁶ S. Kierkegaard like Hegel, emphasised the Incarnation, but not as a general reconciliation of all of reality in which we are all included, like it or not, but as requiring a leap of faith. Like Hegel, S. Kierkegaard turns to the primacy of will – but unlike Hegel, this is not the bulldozer effect of Absolute Spirit, but the will to choose. “In proportion as will has gone up in the scale, knowledge has gone down.”¹⁷ And looking at the movement from Enlightenment to Romanticism to Existentialism, we can say vice-versa: as the grasp of universal reason lost credibility, the turn to the subject and to will (or ‘my choice’) increased.

However, S. Kierkegaard reacted to a number of basic Hegelian thoughts, such as: ‘The finite has no genuine being’; or, ‘Man owes his entire existence to the state’; or, ‘The real is the rational and the rational is the real’. S. Kierkegaard did at times imitate Hegel’s dense manner of explaining things, so that the more he explained, the more complicated things became. Over against Hegel’s philosophy of (rational) continuity between everything, S. Kierkegaard places the discontinuity of things and the need for a leap beyond reason. Reason can compose a system but existence disposes this when we face crises and ultimate questions. Then we cannot rely on calculation; we are left with an intuitive leap.

A few dominant themes which S. Kierkegaard distilled from his reaction to Kant and Hegel, are:

- Crisis of reason (reacted to Kant’s pure reason & Hegel’s dialectical system)
- Existential emphasis (and intuitive living)
- Significance of doubt: he was a master of suspicion
- Life becomes real by means of crisis & choice (leap of faith)
- Danger of collectivity (*The Present Age*)
- Three stages in life/radical discipleship (*Fear and Trembling*)
- Freedom with anxiety
- Authenticity (commitment)
- Life as primarily paradoxical (ambiguous and open to more than one interpretation)
- False or true religion (comfortable or self-sacrificial)

¹⁴ S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. H. & E. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1992), 33.

¹⁵ S. Kierkegaard’s *Journals and Papers*, translated H. & E. Hong (Indiana University Press, 1975).

¹⁶ Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 221ff.

¹⁷ Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972), 759.

3. Kierkegaardian dictionary of concepts

ABSURD – For S. Kierkegaard all existential decisions are ‘absurd’, because they are based on (a leap of) ‘faith’ and ‘freedom’ and cannot be the result of mere deductive reasoning. (*Fear and Trembling*)

AESTHETIC – When people live on the (lower) plane of the aesthetic, they are guided by pleasure and self-interest, with the result that they fall into boredom and despair. The paradox of this kind of life is that we think we are free, but we are enslaved. (*Either/Or*) Aesthetic does not refer to art, but to pleasure/enjoyment.

AMBIGUITY – more often called absurdity, but entered Tillich’s systematic theology in a significant way. Life and its choices are ambiguous and therefore a matter of a risk. Kierkegaard of trust/faith. Our reasoning cannot clarify life’s ambiguities because we are finite and not all-knowing. Even in more limited and relatively clear choices, there are not only unknown past and present facts, but especially unknown future results. (If I accept this job....if I marry this person....)

BAD FAITH – actually coined by Sartre, but found in S. Kierkegaard’s ideas on escaping from our own freedom and being paralyzed by the anguish of not knowing what to choose. (*Sickness Unto Death*)

BIBLE – S. Kierkegaard wrote meditations on some Bible texts (*Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing; Training in Christianity*) and throughout his writings quotes from or refers to biblical passages. Some of his basic thoughts are echoed in such texts as: God’s ways are not our ways (Isaiah); Those who lose their life shall find it (Jesus). S. Kierkegaard said at one point that his *Either/Or* was his best book, and this deals with Abraham from the point of view of absurdity and faith. S. Kierkegaard remarked that what we need is someone with “the courage to forbid people to read the Bible”¹⁸, because the Bible is mainly used for arguing about doctrine or legalistic interpretations, whereas it should be a book that creates new life.

CHURCH & CHRISTENDOM – a comfortable and complacent falsification of true Christian discipleship. (*Attack Upon Christendom*) “Every Sunday they [the geese] came together, and one of the ganders preached. The essential content of the sermon was: what a lofty destiny the geese had, what a high goal the Creator (and every time this word was mentioned the geese curtsied and the ganders bowed the head) had set before the geese; by the aid of wings they could fly away to distant regions, blessed climes, where properly they were at home, for here they were only strangers. So it was every Sunday. And as soon as the assembly broke up each waddled home to his own affairs.”¹⁹ They never made serious use of their spiritual wings.

¹⁸ *Diary*, 110.

¹⁹ S. Kierkegaard, *The Journals*, reproduced in *Anthology*, 433.

CHRISTIANITY as true faith – only realized by individuals, not groups. It is an ‘inward’ risk of faith which leads to passionate authenticity. “Christianity is not a doctrine...it is a message about living.... Christ did not appoint professors but followers.”²⁰ It is harder to be a disciple of Christ if one is born in Christendom than if one begins life as a pagan. Christianity no longer exists. Preachers perform the magic of gaining their salary from nothing (since true Christianity no longer exists). (*Training in Christianity*) . Or: “Faith expressly signifies the deep, strong, blessed restlessness that drives the believer so that he cannot settle down at rest in this world... – a believer travels forward.”²¹

DESPAIR – the opposite of faith. Despair is the choice of not creating our own ‘self’, and thus we move toward our own self-annihilation. (*The Sickness Unto Death*)

DIALECTIC – in Kierkegaard means that opposites are not resolved but held in tension; in the area of knowledge dialectic means that what we think something means (even life itself) is not what it means. This is part of the irony of existence, which cannot be grasped directly but only indirectly and dialectically. There is a polarisation of thesis & antithesis, but no abiding synthesis for S. Kierkegaard. In Hegel polar opposites are ‘over come’, resolved by being integrated into a higher unity (synthesis) which become a new thesis. S. Kierkegaard rejects integration and synthesis in the name of individual authenticity in which the absurd cannot be overcome but must be acknowledged as always present because of our finiteness and our sinfulness. There is continuing estrangement. The dialectical or polar tension in Kant is born through consideration of the limits of empirical experience and the limits of reason, which in turn leads to the distinction between ‘pure reason’ and ‘practical reason’. In Hegel the dialectic is within historical reality with roots in the dialectic between the Infinite and the finite. In Kierkegaard the dialectic is between the estrangement of the individual and the creation of a new existential self.²² S. Kierkegaard could say: “doubt is conquered by faith, just as it is faith which has brought doubt into the world”.²³ Faith brings doubt because we must face a crisis of decision.

DISCIPLESHIP – S. Kierkegaard was a follower of Socrates’ method of raising questions that would destabilise people and a follower of Jesus Christ as indirect revealer (dialectically the Lord becomes a servant) of the way of faith. And Job suffering on his ash heap teaches us many things (existentially speaking), but not as a professor in front of a chalk board. The problem today is that Jesus has no disciples, only admirers (of his teaching). But we cannot gaze like detached speculators

²⁰ S. Kierkegaard, *Diary*, 117.

²¹ S. Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses*, trans. H.&E. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1993), 218.

²² See further William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1962).

²³ S. Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, trans. Howard & Edna Hong (Indiana University Press, 1976), 399.

at the Christ: either we reject him or we follow him. Christianity means voluntary suffering (but paradoxically, this is the ‘radical cure’).²⁴

DOUBT – for René Descartes (1596-1650) doubt was a philosophical exercise to find a basic foundational starting point. Everything is to be doubted (*de omnibus dubitandum est*) until we arrive at the indubitable, which Descartes clarifies as *cogito ergo sum*: since I am thinking, I know I am. S. Kierkegaard mocks this, since ‘I am’ does not mean I ‘exist’ (have made earnest choices). For Descartes, consciousness is a form of certainty; for S. Kierkegaard, consciousness is a form of uncertainty. This is because we become aware of contradictions and dialectical estrangement from ourselves (how we see things and what we hope for but do not find). Doubt in S. Kierkegaard can be positive or negative. It is a positive search for a starting point (but a different one than for Descartes). S. Kierkegaard starts with the dialectic of estrangement. Once this is recognized through crises, we may see the need for a leap. Doubt is also negative, when it becomes a refusal to take the leap of finding a new self – ultimately a leap of faith – or a leap of ultimate commitment or ‘ultimate concern’ (Tillich). S. Kierkegaard also emphasizes that the opposite of faith is not mere (logical) doubt, but to be offended at Jesus as the divine revelation of the infinite.²⁵

DREAD & DESPAIR – anxiety, fear of our own freedom, a fear of what is unknown (‘nothing’) but can be chosen in freedom. Dread is a “sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy”. Or: a desire for what one fears and a fear of what one desires. Freedom will always be abused: what can be done will be done. Even in normal choices, whatever one chooses one will regret the choice or regret not knowing how life would be with a different choice. This may lead to the ‘sickness unto death’, not knowing what to choose and settling down by imitating the crowd, thereby ‘losing one’s soul’. All that’s left then is a masquerade. But by facing this pathos we may actually arrive at a ‘true self’. Despair is dialectically both a defect and a merit. It shows our ‘loftiness of spirit’, and can lead to a positive leap. Despair is not just a wrong emotion, but a wrong concept of oneself. (The Sickness Unto Death)

EITHER/OR – especially between the lower choice of aesthetic living and the higher choice of commitment and freedom of (the leap of) faith. S. Kierkegaard was not opposed to enjoyment of pleasures; but he was opposed to the exclusive dominance of pleasure in one’s life.

ETHICAL – is better than living only according to ‘aesthetic’ enjoyment. However, the weakness of a focus on the ethical is that we become proud of our morality, or we despair of living up to our own standards. We need to go beyond the ethical in a step (leap) towards religious grace. If we really live ethically we will be

²⁴ See David E. Roberts, *Existentialism and Religious Belief* (Oxford University Press, 1959), ch. III, 103-143.

²⁵ S. Kierkegaard deals with ‘faith or offense’, in *Practice in Christianity*, trans. H.&E. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1991), 80.

“essentially persecuted, or else we would be [shown to be] ethically mediocre”.²⁶ The paradox of the ethical sphere is that we think we are better than we are.

FAITH – S. Kierkegaard emphasizes faith not (finally) as doctrine, but as an attitude and action (leap of trust). An act of faith involves “infinite resignation” (a choice against ourselves in order to become new selves). The ‘Knight of Faith’ must be bold in the face of the difficulty (absurdity) of faith: but ‘the leap’ breaks the power of the ‘world’ over us, and we enter a new creative freedom coram Deo. Faith is a risk and an adventure. The paradox here is that the leap cannot be tested ahead of time, but only in its commitment. (Either/Or)

FREEDOM – the past does not (need to) determine the present & future. Existential choice has priority over the givenness of being (when it comes to creating a ‘self’). The person living on the aesthetic level desires false freedom by turning limited choices into “infinite possibility” without commitment. False freedom leaves choices infinitely open, thus negating the demands of ‘either/or’ and thereby abolishing the ‘self’. S. Kierkegaard talked about the ‘dizziness of freedom’. Just as looking down into a great abyss makes us dizzy, so looking into the depth of our freedom/possibilities does the same. (The Concept of Irony).

GOD – appears continually in S. Kierkegaard’s writings, as the Other who challenges and disturbs us, whom we partly know but do not understand and certainly cannot control; Divine ways are not open to our scrutiny. How can we understand God if we cannot understand ourselves? Wisdom consists in knowing we know nothing (fully) – Socrates.

GRIEF – “It requires moral courage to grieve; it requires religious courage to rejoice.”²⁷

IRONY – relates also to S. Kierkegaard’s ‘indirect [rhetorical] communication’. This is the Socratic method of questioning, disturbing, and pulverizing a person’s opinions. The goal is to open up space for new and better understandings. Also called the ‘maieutic method’ or birth of truth. S. Kierkegaard loved irony, overstatements and understatement, metaphorical parodies, sometimes biting sarcasm, and continuous witty remarks. We are reminded of Erasmus. He also liked to point out incongruities, such as the man who comes face to face with the Almighty and Eternal One, and says: ‘Oh Lord, is it THOU? I hope my socks match!’

LEAP – the leap is a passionate moment in which one moves from the aesthetic to the ethical, and from the ethical to the religious (act of trust). All the objective and self-centred reasoning of the old self are put behind (even though this is absurd) and there is a “blessed leap” into a relationship with the Eternal One.

²⁶ *Diary*, 113.

²⁷ S. Kierkegaard, *The Journals*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 67.

OBJECTIVE THOUGHT – “In the objective sense, thought is understood as being pure thought...and the truth becomes the correspondence of thought with itself. This objective thought has no relation to the existing subject.”²⁸ (‘I think’ does not equal ‘I exist’.)

PARADOX – for S. Kierkegaard there is no (Hegelian) synthesis: subjective & objective sides of life, body & spirit, sin & grace, are always in dialectical tension without any guarantee of progress in freedom nor guarantee of progress in morality and faith).

PHILOSOPHY, THEOLOGY – are too detached and speculative. Like most deceptions, they settle us in comfort, while the ‘ship is drifting toward the rocks while the helmsman delays to turn the ship’.²⁹ “Philosophy moves farther and farther...from actual life [which] is reduced to a shadow existence.”³⁰ We may recall Plato’s shadows in the cave.

PSYCHOLOGICAL/RELIGIOUS MADNESS – S. Kierkegaard quoted Socrates who said madness can be a gift of the Gods, and Aristotle & Seneca who said there is no genius without madness. S. Kierkegaard often refers to divine madness (as when Abraham took steps to sacrifice Isaac), and he distinguishes divine madness from its opposite, demoniacal madness. Paul Tillich had a lot to say about the demonization of religion and other ‘goods’ (moral, technological, etc.). (*Fear and Trembling*)

POET – S. Kierkegaard calls himself a ‘poet’ in a harbour market town (Copenhagen). By ‘poet’ he means one who deals with inner feelings of beauty, suffering, paradox, and can only communicate indirectly (eg. through ambiguous metaphors, even if they become longer parables or stories).

REASON – objective reasoning works in the objective sphere but is insufficient for the subjective sphere: what should I do? How should I live? What should I choose? The most basic questions and the many choices and crisis situations in life cannot be solved by mere calculation. What may be the right answer in a certain situation for one individual cannot be applied to another individual who by definition is situated differently. If this is S. Kierkegaard’s ‘situation ethics’, it was not meant to weaken general ethical guidelines and norms, but to make them stronger. S. Kierkegaard was not looking for an ‘aesthetical’ answer of an easy way out; the real self is formed through challenges and crises.

SYNTHESIS/RECONCILIATION – S. Kierkegaard reacted to Hegel’s logical synthesis and harmonization of everything (in the philosopher’s mind). Yet S. Kierkegaard does have his own synthesis. For example: “By faith I make renuncia-

²⁸ S. Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, in *Anthology*, 205.

²⁹ Quoted in Lowrie, *A Short Life*, 85.

³⁰ From Kierkegaard’s *Postscript*, quoted in James Brown, *Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Buber and Barth: Subject and Object in Modern Theology* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 39.

tion of nothing; on the contrary, by faith I acquire everything....”³¹ He also speaks of “seeing the aesthetical, the ethical, and the religious as three great allies”.³² So while he rejects a logical synthesis, he accepts a new wholeness through the leap of faith, which gives a new integrated meaning to life. “Faith is precisely this paradox, that the individual as the particular is higher than the universal...[and] *stands in an absolute relation to the absolute*. ...Faith is a miracle, and yet no person is excluded from it; for that in which all human life is unified is passion, and faith is passion.”³³ (‘Passion’, because it is more than logical unification.) The three stages of life are not necessarily evident (only) in an outward way. What counts is the inner attitude of the heart. The highest ‘religious’ level of love for God does not cancel the aesthetic joy or the ethical duties of life, but arrives at the new synthesis of the self. Until we reach this stage, we are merely ‘on stage’, acting a part which is not our true identity.

SYSTEM – “System and finality are pretty much one and the same, so much so that if the system is not finished, there is no system....A system which is not quite finished is an hypothesis; while on the other hand to speak of a half-finished system is nonsense.”³⁴ “The systematic Idea is the identity of subject and object, the unity of thought and being. Existence, on the other hand, is their separation.”³⁵ (This is a good Kierkegaardian definition of Idealism and Existentialism. Idealism is harmonized logic; existentialism is painful reality.)

SUBJECTIVITY – we do not live by ‘objective’ facts (even though these are important); we live by subjectivity, or the composing of a ‘self’. (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*)

TRUTH – objective truth deals with the content of the facts; subjective truth deals with acts: our personal response to the facts. ‘Truth’ for the *existing individual* (who is not merely part of the crowd, nor merely enumerating truths from a distance) is an “objective uncertainty” held fast with “passionate inwardness”. It is ‘my truth’ (S. Kierkegaard is here very postmodern). We only discover truth by means of living through crises: finiteness, failure, suffering, difficult choices, and facing death. Early in his *Journals* in 1835 he wrote: “What matters is to find a purpose...the crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die.”

UNIVERSAL/PARTICULAR – universalizing concepts say everything about being but nothing about my individual existence – myself and my choices.

UNDERSTANDING – we may know many things through objective reason and factuality, but we only understand things intuitively and in the subjective relationship of commitment & trust. Life is understood ‘backwards’, even though it must

³¹ From S. Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, reproduced in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, 127.

³² *Anthology*, 96.

³³ S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, in *Anthology* 130 & 134.

³⁴ From S. Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, reproduced in *Anthology*, 195-6.

³⁵ *Postscript*, *ibid.* 205.

move forward. Socrates was right, “If a person does not become what he understands, he does not really understand it.”³⁶

WORLDLINESS – not restricted to S. Kierkegaard’s critique of aesthetically reduced living and ethical pride, but includes his critique of the wide range of ways we seek false safety (as in numbers – the majority – and in facts). The ‘worldly’ person lives by trust in something finite (contingent), whether enjoyment, logic, success, technical possibilities, or any other pseudo-method of salvation. The worldly person does not create a new self.

Questions

i.) SYSTEM – It is noticeable that S. Kierkegaard’s concepts are highly interrelated and form a unified framework or approach to reality. The more they are defined the more they seem tautological. So the question can be asked: has he fallen into systematic and synthetic thinking (which he so despised)? The answer is that the integration of his *concepts* empower him all the more to ‘socratically’ challenge and in fact disintegrate the false assurance we place in our own systems. There is a kierkegaardian irony in the fact that S. Kierkegaard protested against philosophers and theologians, but spent his whole life writing on these two areas (mediated by psychology and packaged in a variety of literary genre). In an important way, S. Kierkegaard’s philosophy negated philosophy (ie., the assumption of the adequacy of reason). Similarly, his theology negated theology (ie., the idea that we can explain faith, doctrine, the ways of God, and perhaps even Godself (*das Ding an Sich*)). He uses his concepts to destruct the façades of our lives.

ii.) LEAP – How can a ‘leap’ of faith be justified. Answer: it cannot be a totally blind leap (Tillich). It would be worth pursuing in S. Kierkegaard statements about the grounding of our leap of faith. He certainly says that the leap cannot be logically grounded; so it is likely intuitively grounded.

iii) BEYOND ETHICS? – Is S. Kierkegaard’s ‘suspension of the ethical’ in the area of faith not dangerous, leading to fanaticism or religious terror? Answer: he basically means (like Augustine and numerous others) that when we fulfil the highest level of love for God and our neighbours, we are already beyond the minimal duty of the law. The Heidelberg Catechism comments in this way on the ten commandments. However, this does not answer the demand that Abraham sacrifice his son Isaac, which is beyond the logic of ethics. S. Kierkegaard leaves the question unanswered (unreconciled logically), except to say that God has that sovereign right. The New Testament letter to the Hebrews says that Abraham trusted that God could raise Isaac back to life. The Genesis account says that God provided a sacrificial ram. This in turn ends up to be the central message of the coming of Christ.

iv.) DOCTRINE – What happens to religious doctrine (dogmas) with S. Kierkegaard? Doctrines about creation, sin, salvation, future hope, are taken out of the

³⁶ *Diary*, 126.

abstract speculative sphere and impinge upon our identity, feelings, and existential choices. This is similar to Jesus' answer when the disciples asked: Will many be saved? Jesus said: Strive yourself to enter the kingdom of God.

4. After Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard helped prepare the way for the modern and postmodern 'question of God'. First God was hidden, then absent, then dead. Or: there was a movement from theism to deism, from deism to agnosticism, from agnosticism to atheism, and then on to either nihilism or the triumph of some ideology (several by turn). After Kierkegaard several thinkers expanded on K's themes and developed their own, significantly different approaches to the basic themes raised by S. Kierkegaard. For example, Barth agrees with Kierkegaard that God is wholly other. Hans Küng calls Barth an initiator of steps toward a postmodern theology.³⁷ This is because Barth criticized the ideological tendencies of modernity and developed a dialectical theology which (like S. Kierkegaard) did not wish to hold to closed concepts or closed systemic approaches. Heidegger (*Being and Time*) deals with our thrownness in the world and some of other themes similar to S. Kierkegaard, such as 'care'. Sartre (1905-80) & Camus (1913-60) dealt with absurdity (but not as theistic thinkers like S. Kierkegaard was). Indeed, when Sartre wrote about "existentialism as humanism", he was (among other things) rejecting S. Kierkegaard's theism. Theologians like Paul Tillich (1886-1965), concentrated on ambiguity (similar to absurdity in S. Kierkegaard's writings); and 'ultimate concern' (similar to S. Kierkegaard's 'passionate choice'). Martin Buber (1878-1965), deals with the eclipse of God (there are parallels S. Kierkegaard) and subjectivity; it would be interesting to research Buber's 'I and Thou' views, and see if S. Kierkegaard's striking individualism does not also include a strong 'I and Thou' (which I believe it does). Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973), in comparison to S. Kierkegaard was more joyful, not dealing mainly with the negative limits of experience, but focussing on the mystery participation, and love, hope, and fidelity (a rosier view than many existentialists present). Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) is also significant for his emphasis on situations of 'limit', such as guilt, failure, conflict, suffering and death. These limit situations, such thinkers say (in line with Kierkegaard) put us in a situation to hear the voice of transcendence. Faith then is no longer a 'custom'. It becomes a life and death matter. Much of this belongs to dialectical theology, which was a reaction to liberal Protestantism and to the idea that discourse about God and Bible interpretation is mainly a matter of logical propositions put together into a system. Dialectical theology echoes Kierkegaard's view on time and eternity as in dialectical tension and his views on estrangement and freedom. All this is solved paradoxically not by reason but by a divine leap: by the Incarnation and by faith. We further understand that God is both against us and for us: God judges us and God saves us (also from ourselves).

In short form: Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living. For Descartes, Kant, and modernity, that is the life in which a person does not think for one's self. For Kierkegaard, it is the indecisive life which is not worth living. For Tillich, it is the life which does not recognize its ultimate concern. For

³⁷ Hans Küng, *Great Christian Thinkers* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 199-204.

Heschel, it becomes the life without amazement and thankfulness which is not worth living. We see here some general lines of agreement and some nuances.

5. The postmodern situation for systematic theology

PREMODERN/MODERN

grand narratives/ideologies
given meaning(s)
classifications
hierarchy
form/design
mechanical/physical
traditional paradigms
established patterns
allegiance to group identity
community identity
conformity
identity given by community
in-depth startingpoints
causal logic (deductive)
objective observation
'sapere aude' – dare to know
established values
culture as finished products
construction of systems
calculating logic
past & present
slower change/durability
reformation of old organizations
'chronos'
paranoia (defend systems)
fanaticism
judgement on others
antithesis
good/evil categorically clear
faith as doctrine/system
institutional religion
sin
law of God
God the Creator
Christ the Divine Saviour
church as institution
divine revelation completes our
natural understanding

LATEMODERN/POSTMODERN

personal stories/experiences
chosen meaning(s)
new mixing
networking
chance/openness
electronic/virtual reality
new paradigms
flexible choices
irony/scepticism toward group allegiance
selfexpression
own path/true to self
search to create own identity
surfing perspectives
results based (inductive)
subjective passion
what can I know?
search for values
cultural expressions as happenings
deconstruction of systems
surprise/random opportunity
present & future
rapid change/the moment
birth of new networks
'kairos'
schizophrenia (loss of integral meaning)
escapism
we are all sick: therapeutic mode
synthesis
what is right/wrong?
faith as pathway/pilgrimage
freedom of spirituality
estrangement
voice of conscience
presence of the Spirit
Jesus our friend/leader
church as fellowship
divine revelation initiates a new under-
standing

ÖSSZEFOGLALÁS

KIERKEGAARD – ZÁSZLÓ A VÁLTOZÁSOK SZELÉBEN

Kierkegaard gondolkodása a szubjektív és az autentikusság felé való fordulással jellemezhető. A tanulmány bemutatja a dán filozófusnak a kanti tiszta észszel és a hegeli dialektikus rendszerrel való szembefordulását. Ennek eredményeként olyan témák kerültek előtérbe nála, mint az értelem válsága, egzisztenciális hangsúly, a kételkedés fontossága, a kollektivitás veszélye, az aggodalommal teli szabadság, az élet paradoxon volta, igaz és hamis vallás. A tanulmány középső része a Kierkegaard-i fogalmak értelmezésével foglalkozik. Mivel Kierkegaard az „Isten-kérdés” modern és posztmodern útkészítőjének is tekinthető, a tanulmány a rendszeres teológia posztmodern helyzetének felvázolásával zár.

KÖZLEMÉNY



