

KIERKEGAARD'S *FEAR AND TREMBLING* *

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Kierkegaard believed that life had three stages -- the esthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Each of these has a role to play in human development and contributes something positive to human life. However, the first two of these must be considered ultimately preparatory and subordinate to the leap of faith (Blanshard, 1969: 113). In general, however, each one is neatly integrated into the next, although, as we shall see, there can, according to Kierkegaard, occur a radical break between the ethical and the religious that emphasizes the latter's transcendent nature.

In this paper, I will first examine the nature of faith in Kierkegaard and then the nature of the ethical. Finally, I will examine

their ultimate potential conflict as described in *Fear and Trembling*.

Religion

For Kierkegaard true religious commitment, the leap of faith, is both a commitment to a way of life and a commitment to a lived belief in the personal nature of God and his incarnation in Christ. (Blanshard, 1969: 113) Through the leap of faith a human being finally comes into his own in relation to himself and to God.

Christian belief is seen as not merely one belief among others, not as a truth that might be accepted as one accepts the fact that the world is round. Christian belief has

* Translated by R. Payne. London, 1939. Also translated by W. Lowrie. Princeton, 1941.

the potential for utterly transforming one's view of oneself and the world, for giving one an eternal life that would be absent without such a belief. (Blanshard, 1969: 113) One cannot examine this belief through criteria developed for scientific or everyday knowledge. This knowledge, this belief, is so urgent that it demands a full commitment. One cannot hedge one's bets when there is the potential for infinite gain or infinite loss on the table. Kierkegaard writes in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* [CUP]:

... while objective knowledge rambles comfortably on by way of the long road of approximation without being impelled by urge of passion, subjective knowledge counts every delay a deadly peril, and the decision so infinitely important and so instantly pressing that it is as if the opportunity had already passed. (quoted in Blanshard, p. 113)

This is, in a way, the only decision that counts for a member of the Protestant tradition that counts faith above good works; if one truly believes, one will be saved.

The decision to believe is made even more tense by its blatantly irrational character. Kierkegaard stands within the Christian tradition of Tertullian that connected faith directly with the absurd. Here, again, faith differs dramatically from the objective knowledge represented by the sciences. Whereas science has as its goal the overcoming of the absurd and the implausible, religious faith has as its goal what cannot be rationally accepted: "the absurd is the object of faith." (CUP, quoted in Blanshard: 114)

It should not, however, be thought that Kierkegaard's Protestant emphasis upon faith means a lack of interest in the ethical dimension of life and religion. Indeed, Elrord notes that one of his major criticisms of the Danish religious establishment of his time was that it was a "religion of grace without law." (p.164) In Kierkegaard's stage theory of life and religion, the predominance of one stage does not necessarily mean the negation of the others. The ethical stage is thus of prime importance to spiritual development for Kierkegaard.

Ethics

The stage of the ethical is for Kierkegaard that of the universal. It is the stage where faith does not yet come into play and where each person is subject to an overriding obligation. Blanshard (pp. 114-115) notes that Kierkegaard does not adequately distinguish between two possible interpretations of this ethical universality, one of which has its origins in Kantian, the other in Hegelian philosophy. In the first, the universal norms develop out of general principles of what "everybody" should do while in the latter the community is the arbiter of good actions. Clearly, the former is the more thoroughly universal and the latter would be subject to the claims of ethical relativism -- of the doctrine that each community should be allowed its own ethical standards -- that might be proposed by an anthropologist who examines the great variety of ethical systems in the world.

In moving towards universality, how-

ever, man paradoxically also moves towards individuality. The person at the esthetic stage, according to Kierkegaard, is subject to the whims of arbitrary forces whereas the ethical man has at least acknowledged himself as responsible for his actions. This responsibility only comes when man sees himself under the sway of the universal. Collins writes of this element of Kierkegaard's thought:

The ethical ideal is to bring every aspect of an individual's being into conformity with universal law, so that what is essentially human may be expressed in the individual instance. (p. 74)

This brings up Kierkegaard's somewhat paradoxical formulation: "Every man is the universal-human, and at the same time the exception." (*Either/Or*, quoted in Thorpton, p. 52).

Thus, instead of a mere esthetic dreamer, Kierkegaard's ethical man has stopped being a dreamer and has become a man of will. (Collins, p. 75) To make the ethical choice is, for Kierkegaard, to choose oneself. Thorpton (p. 49) finds that the Kierkegaardian ethical precept to choose oneself is an existential equivalent of the Greek dictum to know oneself. A concrete personality has replaced pure thought.

In any event, both the Kantian and Hegelian systems seem to give a practical autonomy to ethical life. In Kant, ethical principles can be obtained through the force of reason and in Hegel through observation of the community. Collins (p. 68) notes that it was precisely such an autonomous view of ethics against which Kierkegaard was react-

ing. If faith was the central stage of human life, and ethics was a more provisional stage, ethics would have to be clearly subordinate to religion. As we will see, Kierkegaard supports this subordination in one of the most radical ways imaginable.

Before examining the potential contradictions between the ethical and the religious in Kierkegaard's thought, it should be noted that the ethical itself cannot gain fulfillment within the limits of this second of life's stages. Collins (p. 88) notes that in *The Concept of Dread* Kierkegaard emphasizes that while the ethical principles may give man a path of good conduct, they do not have the force to overcome the problems of original sin and man's dangerous freedom. An autonomous ethics might be devised, but it would be a powerless ethics. Only the man of faith can live in such a manner that it will be possible to realize the ethical life in a full manner.

Such an ethics would not, moreover, enable man to reach the eternal happiness that is granted through faith. The ethical revolves around the relations between men and in that it is necessarily limited. This is indicated in the following passage from the *Christian Discourses* quoted by Elrord:

... the art of power is precisely to make man free. But in the relationship between man and man this cannot be done; although it may need to be emphasized again and again that this is the highest thing, yet it is only omnipotence that can truly do it. (p. 168)

The ethical is of crucial importance in Kierkegaard but it pales in comparison with the infinite importance of faith.

Fear and Trembling

For Kant, the religious tended to merge into the ethical and God became a kind of formal principle that seemingly stood behind and gave unity to the ethical. In Kierkegaard, God is also the source of the ethical, but he is a much more contingent force. That is, for Kant God (as seen within the limits of reason alone) could not step into the world and arbitrarily suspend the ethical dictates that he had previously enforced. Kierkegaard's commitment to a personal God who did, in fact, enter the world as man makes this type of special intervention not only possible but, as Blanshard (p. 115) notes a crucial test case for determining the nature of faith and its relation to ethics. Such a test case is to be found in the Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac upon which Kierkegaard meditates in detail in *Fear and Trembling*.

In this story, of course, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son simply on his demand. There are no extenuating circumstances that can be used to ethically justify this demand and thus God is asking Abraham to suspend the ethical itself for the cause of the higher demands of faith. Thus, the ethical and the religious here meet a point where they can no longer be reconciled. Any concept of an autonomous or rational ethics must give way before God's irrational demand.

Collins (p. 91) emphasizes the singularity of Abraham's situation as a man who has given all to God. That is, in using this example Kierkegaard is not attacking the ethical as invalid. It seeks "not to abolish,

but to restrain and restore to just proportions . . . the ethical factor in human nature." (Collins, p. 96) This interpretation is supported by Kierkegaard's insistence upon Abraham's special nature as a man of absolute faith:

By faith Abraham went out from the land of his fathers and became a sojourner in the land of promise. He left one thing behind, took one thing with him: he left his earthly understanding behind and took faith with him -- otherwise he would have not wandered forth but would have thought this unreasonable. (FT, p. 31)

Abraham is not like other men in his faith -- there is nothing provisional about it and this sets the context to God's extreme demand upon him. As Outka notes, Kierkegaard's principle implies that "religious duty can but need not conflict with our antecedent judgments of right and wrong." (p. 250)

That God faced Abraham with a choice between living at two stages is clearly stated by Kierkegaard's observation of the linguistic distinction that must be made between the moral category of murder and the religious category of sacrifice (FT, p. 41). That distinction can only be made when the demands of religion absolutely transcend those of ethics. Under an ethical system, the obligations of Abraham as a father to Isaac were absolute and could not be subject to any external demand. Only through a leap of faith could Abraham at all even consider the sacrifice (in all senses of the word) that God was asking him to make.

This, then is an act which goes well beyond any possible religion that stands

within the limits of reason alone. Kantian morality asks that we engage in each act as if it would enforce a universal principle: this morality would radically exclude the murder of a son for no apparent reason. What Abraham embodies most of all is the transcendental nature of man's relationship with God, a relationship that goes infinitely beyond human reason:

He believed by virtue of the absurd; for there could be no question of human calculation, and it was indeed absurd that God who required it [the killing] of him should the next instant recall the requirement. (*FT*, p. 46)

The word of God here emerges as autonomous in a way that no ethical system could possibly be. In fact, it can be argued that Kierkegaard is making these distinctions precisely because he wishes to explore the "beyond" of Kant's religion within the limits of reason alone. (see Outka, p. 241)

It is only because the religious has such an autonomy is it possible, as the story of Abraham and Isaac demonstrates, for God at any moment to engage in a "teleological suspension of the ethical." (*FT*, p. 67) Here the universal principle of human conduct is suspended for a specific, individualistic, instance that paradoxically becomes higher than the universal (*FT*, p. 77). The impossibility of encompassing such a specific transcendence of rational morality is summarized in the following passage:

The story of Abraham contains therefore a teleological suspension of the ethical. As the individual he became higher than the universal. This is the paradox that does not permit of mediation. It is just as inexplica-

ble how he got into it as it is inexplicable how he remained in it. (*FT*, p. 77)

It can, however, be argued, as Outka (pp. 205-231) does that what Kierkegaard is doing here is not pointing to a suspension of the ethical as much as expanding it to include the dictate that God's word must be obeyed. In any case where a person was placed in the position of Abraham, it would have to be logically recognized, there would be an obligation to disobey the normal ethical rule and to obey the higher level ethical rule that places man's relationship to God above all lesser considerations. Faith, therefore, need not be in contradiction to the ethical, although its own ethical demands might be said to transcend the demands of normal ethical life.

The problem with this seems to be that if, as Kierkegaard seems determined to do, the ethical life is to be connected with a reasonable life, faith, as he defines it, cannot be included. Although morality for him can and does exist within the limits of reason, religion throws human beings into the absurd. This is why he insists on excluding the seemingly ethical dimension of Abraham's act from the ethical stage of life.

His resort to the concept of the absurd, however, makes Abraham's act highly problematic. Blanshard writes of Kierkegaard's impassioned exposition of the situation of Abraham and Isaac:

What are we to say of a rhapsody (in forty thousand words) in praise of pure and holy murder, of the defense of the humanly immoral on the ground that it is religious duty? Kierkegaard, in choosing such a ground,

believes that he has cut off the possibility of rational criticism. And clearly if an appeal is taken to the unintelligible and irrational, it is begging the question to protest against it on grounds of sense and reason. Sense and reason have been deliberately left behind. (p. 116)

Blanshard (p. 116), moreover, notes that Kierkegaard in making claims of a transrational truth ensures that he will not be able to invoke rationality, or any criteria, against the belief of anyone else. Any absurd claim under this criterion of faith becomes subjectively equal to any other absurd claim. He has, in a sense, become a moral nihilist. Outka, although arguing a different position, uses the example of Charles Manson to point out how Kierkegaard necessarily must face problems of deciding who is a knight of faith and who is simply a psychopath or a madman. From a logical perspective, it must be accepted, with Blanshard, that Kierkegaard in fact does not allow any rational means of differentiating between demands of a false and a true faith. From this point of view, Kierkegaard's attempt to develop a religion that is beyond the limits of reason alone must begin to seem rather dangerous: by invoking a positive view of the absurd, it is difficult to see how he can exclude less the

positive absurds of those who are without Abraham's sensibility. Without the universal norms, that is, how does one judge between individuals.

This, however, is not a major problem for a believer like Kierkegaard who holds that subjective faith has as strong a claim as an indicator of truth and reality as does objective knowledge. It is true, as Blanshard notes, that once we adopt this point of view rationality goes out the window, but that is, after all, precisely what Kierkegaard is after.

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