

Phil 181 - Lecture #2: Kierkegaard part 1

Lecture and Discussion Notes

Summary of Lecture

Biographical Remarks

Kierkegaard did not live what we would call a "charmed life." He was very odd-looking physically, being spindly and humpbacked, resembling a scarecrow. His appearance was distinctive enough for him to be well-known in Copenhagen (although he was not well-regarded). He was even chased by young street urchins, who yelled "Either/or! Either/or!" at him, Either/or being the name of one his books.

His personal life was also troubled. Besides issues with his family life growing up, a formative part of his life was breaking off his engagement to Regina Olsen. This has been a matter of both psychoanalytic and historic controversy as to the reasons behind Kierkegaard's actions. Perhaps the mystery is somewhat overrated: like many people have, he ended the relationship to dedicate himself completely to religious life.

There is a lesson of crucial importance here. While for many philosophers, writers and intellectuals, such an occurrence would be a bit of biographical trivia. These kinds of personal details are not normally so important and subject to such intense scholarly debate. Kierkegaard is an exception because his personality is very important in his works, and it shows both in content and in style. It is because *personal* and *individual* play such a deep role in his philosophy that the details of his own personal life become so important.

Due to these conditions of his life, his writings are melancholy, as one might expect. But they are also biting funny, ironic, passionate, and poetic.

Tension of Finite and Infinite

The tension between the finite and the infinite is an important issue in Kierkegaard, and in taking his position on it he is responding to its treatment in history of philosophy, most notably in Hegel. Plato believed in a dialectical process by which people with opposing opinions could arrive at a position of rational agreement, which preserved the true insights in each of the original positions. Hegel believed that this same process took place on the stage of history, with principles such as subject and object, immanence and transcendence. In the world, a thesis meets with its antithesis, and the result of the conflict is a new synthesis, which meets yet another antithesis, and so on until at last the World Idea finally realizes itself.

Kierkegaard rejected this rationalist optimism that such clashes can always be reconciled, or that the world could be so understood. Such a conflict for Kierkegaard takes place at the the level of individual existence. To him human existence is an irresolvable tension between the finite and temporal aspects of our lives and the infinite and eternal aspects of our lives. The temporal and finite aspects are the events in our

lives taken individually and immediately, as shared with animals and the rest of nature. It is the eternal and infinite aspects that separate us from animals, where we have the ability to give unity to these events and invest them with meaning, as well as the demand to achieve something of enduring significance. It should be noted that Kierkegaard thinks that eternal and infinite can never become the exclusive concern of our lives, as our desires and physical and temporal needs will always bring us back to that level. So the tension and struggle remains irresolvable, except perhaps finally through faith.

Critique of Abstraction

Philosophy since Plato at least has focused on the general, universal, and the essential. For example, if discussing chairs, the essential parts may be that it has a place for sitting, and an object lacking such a place could not be considered a chair. Other aspects of the chair like its exact shape or color are inessential and accidental, irrelevant to whether it is a chair or not. Kierkegaard felt that adopting this focus, especially for matters concerning human existence, resulted in ignoring the most important and crucial parts.

Kierkegaard wanted to bring the focus to the personal, concrete, and the finite. In the chair example, Kierkegaard would ask what makes that chair an individual. Philosophy needed to go beyond the objective, observable, and impersonal features of things to the individual existence of the thing in question. To categorize and conceptualize is to universalize and generalize, to make understandable. But this takes one away from the features of individual existence. For these reasons, Kierkegaard thought that individual existence was something that could not be captured by concepts.

One basis for this focus was in Kierkegaard's interpretation of Christianity as a personal religion. Every person has a personal relationship with God, and the relationship is different for every individual. This is in opposition to Descartes, who held that every person relates to God in exactly the same way, as the creator and underlying substance of all mind and matter. Revelation in Christianity, as Kierkegaard understood it, was historical, revealed in time in the Incarnation of Christ. Its truth cannot be gotten by rational deduction or natural theology, but it is rather a personal and individual moment.

Critique of "The Present Age"

Kierkegaard's critique of the age in which he lived appears at first glance to be a rather curious and odd one. He criticized people for being too reflective, abstract, and objective, while being a very thoughtful philosopher and intellectual himself. Currently one thinks of intellectual critiques of our culture claiming that it is not thoughtful enough, but Kierkegaard had the opposite opinion. He saw that modern society had a debilitating need for deliberation (This can also be seen as a reaction to the influence of

Hegel). In class, the examples used were picking out a breakfast cereal or figuring out arcane recycling rules. What should be simple activities become more time-intensive and thought-intensive than they should be. Kierkegaard saw similar things in his society, making the wry comment that even when people commit suicide they are very reflective, to the point one could say that they were "killed by thought." Life was simply full of trivial requirements on one's understanding that Kierkegaard found distracting and harmful to the general population.

Kierkegaard also saw the present age as losing some of the good qualities it had during a more passionate previous age, and was becoming more unheroic and cynical. The ideals of courage and bravery were becoming replaced by skillful circumspection. Instead of praising the heroic individual who undertook great risk, the action was analyzed until it no longer was very special. Every action was undertaken cynically and with no actual risk involved, they were no longer acts of courage but practiced skills. He found this way of living to be deeply unfulfilling and thought the ideals of the previous, more passionate age should be returned to.

The subject that receives the most contempt from Kierkegaard in this chapter is that of "the public." He saw it as an abstract totality, unable to make take responsibility for its actions and beliefs like a concrete individual or group. In fact, it cannot even make concrete actions or decisions because it is an abstract entity, it is only used as a reason for actions or decisions by concrete people. Kierkegaard found that the individual became lost inside this abstract collective. Agreeing with the public to blend in with the crowd was something Kierkegaard found to be cynical and unfulfilling because it did not amount to taking a stand on anything, while you were really agreeing with anyone concrete. Taking the side of a majority or minority in a group at least means a decision was made to stand with a group of concrete people. Instead of agreeing with any group, especially an abstract one like the idea of "the public," Kierkegaard wanted each person to embrace one's particularity and individuality.

The Subjective Thinker

A main theme highlighted in this chapter are Kierkegaard's views on subjective and objective truth. Objective truths for Kierkegaard were impersonal, detached, and theoretical truths, like those of science where thoughts were supposed to "agree" with external objects. While he did think of such truths as unimportant for the reasons above, he did not deny the existence of them; Kierkegaard was not denying that $2+2=4$. He merely found them to be limited in scope and of no use in the most important subjects concerning individual existence.

Instead of having objective truth as the governing value and standard used by people, Kierkegaard favored a notion that he called "subjective truth." By saying, "Truth is subjectivity," he meant that when meaningful issues are at stake, one's attitude takes precedence over objective correctness. This attitude should not just be a mental one, but should be reflected in one's presence, behavior, and way of life. It is a passionate commitment to a belief or idea in the face of objective uncertainty, and it is this kind of truth which is the *highest* truth.

It is this kind of truth which must be considered when dealing with faith and God. Since reason cannot reveal the truth about God, the truth of God is a subjective one, about a commitment to belief in God despite objective uncertainty. This is a commitment that must be constantly renewed by a choice to continue having faith and acting on it, not by a single choice. Basically, having the truth in this sense means having the right relationship to the object (God); not about God's specific existence but about your individual attitude.

An informative comparison can be made to Kant on this issue. Kant also believed that reason could not prove God's existence or tell us anything about it. It was said that his epistemology's purpose was to "limit knowledge to make room for faith." But this is as far as the similarity between Kant and Kierkegaard goes, as while Kant agrees that God cannot be known objectively, belief comes back as God, for Kant, becomes a moral and practical necessity for human beings to act meaningfully in the world. Kierkegaard rather thought of it as about the individual, who made a passionate commitment in the face of uncertainty.

This does lead to some questions to think about. Why is a commitment of this kind necessary than some other? In other words, why must one commit to the Christian God? If it is more about the attitude taken and the individual, should it be contingent on one's own character/choice? What is Kierkegaard's answer here as a Christian apologist?

The last topic covered for this chapter is Kierkegaard's conceptions of freedom and necessity. The most important thing to note here is that Kierkegaard's concept of freedom is not an abstract free will that is about abstract possibilities of choices. He thought concentrating on the latter actually led to despair and a loss of freedom. People burdened with too many possibilities (which cereal should I buy?) leads them to despair. A good example is the famous philosophical one of Buridan's ass. A donkey is midway between two perfectly lush fields, but since it has no reason to prefer one field to the other, it cannot choose and starves to death. Freedom was rather an inward, personal state that has more to do with how you react to the world, it is not about what you do so much as how you do it. Freedom was essentially for Kierkegaard about surrendering our autonomy to God, which he then gave back to us. This allows a liberation of guilt and an escape from despair. But this last topic will be covered much more fully in the next lecture.

Close Textual Discussion

Passages and main points noted

Page 7: "The crowd is composed of individuals ... by becoming individuals."

- This quote is about choice, and framed by Kierkegaard in a provocative way. He makes it seem like to choose being an individual is the natural choice, while it is normally thought that joining the crowd is the natural choice.

- this holds both for joining or rejecting the crowd because it is the crowd, as neither of these actions is dictated by individual concerns.

- this quote led to discussion over whether Christianity, as a type of crowd with many of the same beliefs, can be a completely individual choice.

Page 15-16: "If the jewel which everyone desired ... and reality becomes a play."

- This story emphasizes how things that used to be meaningful and significant goals in a more passionate age have become meaningless, simply feats to be done.
- the jewel is no longer even the goal, but rather the skill of seeming to be in danger. They have lost focus on what is really important, abstracting from what the point of the action originally was.

Page 115: "Absolute passion cannot be understood ... but cannot understand him in the absoluteness of his passion."

- this passage ties into the subjectivity of truth, as true passion cannot be understood because it is completely subjective and personal. It is not rational or subject to objective categorization or conceptualization, if a passion is, then it is not absolute.
- The lack of understanding another's absolute passion is not because another's mental states are closed to us, but rather because it is historical and unique to an individual person. Absolute passion is not unique, but the character of it for each person is

Page 117-119: "The objective truth as such is by no means... accept that the earth is flat." (as well as rest of that passage)

- the person who is mad is still recognized as such not because of the belief that the earth is round, but because he places such an emphasis on objective truth that has no subjective significance.
- a point was made that it makes a similar point as to what was later made by Foucault, by stating that what characterizes madness changes from age to age

General Discussion Notes

Individuality and Christianity continued from page 7 quote:

- doesn't Christianity require certain rules and norms to be followed to assimilate to the group?
- just because people are going the same direction does not mean that the people are not making individual choices to go that direction
- Kierkegaard is not concerned with being an individual in the sense of being different but following your unique existence and not the crowd or some general propositions.
- faith is about your relationship to God, not about the exact content of your beliefs; it's not as much about what you do as how you do it

- This led to a discussion concerning if the emphasis is on you and how you believe, why does Kierkegaard emphasize Christianity and not allowing passionate belief in something else

- It is mentioned that Kierkegaard feels that Christianity, with its emphasis on a leap of faith over the seemingly absurd, its liberation of guilt, and other features make it uniquely suited to help human beings overcome their existential despair

Kierkegaard's Notion of Freedom

- this mainly concerns the passage that goes from page 129-132.
- it appears that the choice to believe in God is compelled by despair, which seems inimical to free choice
- it needs to be remembered that Kierkegaard's notion of freedom does not concern abstract possibilities from which to choose
- it does seem odd that those who do not choose faith, even if they don't obsess over their abstract possibilities, also lose freedom of choice, it seems that the only possibility to be free is to choose faith in God, and that choice again seems compelled
- perhaps this is true for Kierkegaard's notion of freedom