

PHIL 181 - Kierkegaard Lecture #2

Kierkegaard's Rhetoric

Before topics in the two chapters today are covered, it is important to say a few words about Kierkegaard's rhetorical method. First of all, he viewed his task as a Socratic one; Kierkegaard felt it was his task to shake up people's beliefs and awake them from their comfortable ignorance. Although he wrote instead of speaking directly with people like Socrates did, his writings performed the same function: Kierkegaard attempts to shake his reader from contemporary "common wisdom" and popular opinions, so they might come to decisions on their own.

In order to further this project, Kierkegaard used unconventional stylistic devices that make his works more complicated. First of all he used many different pseudonyms when publishing his writings, as well as publishing under his actual name (Described at <http://sorenkierkegaard.org/method.htm> (part III)). While some of these pseudonyms were only used once, others were used multiple times, each time espousing views consistent with those published under the same pseudonym. He surrounded the main text in many of his works with prefaces, forewords, interludes, postscripts, and appendices in order to create further distance between author and text, sometimes using different pseudonyms within the same, as well as pseudonymous editors and compilers. Kierkegaard even went so far as to publish two books under different names on the same day. Usually, the more philosophical works were written under pseudonyms, while theological works were not.

The complication did serve a purpose for Kierkegaard. It allowed him to engage the reader indirectly and follow a kind of Socratic method. While Plato did this through dialogues, Kierkegaard did this with the use of different authorial voices. Kierkegaard felt that his method had several advantages over directly engaging the reader: it allowed him to indirectly communicate the paradoxical which cannot be communicated directly, it encouraged personal reflection and evaluation of the different positions and arguments rather than rote-learning of dogma, it severed the reliance on authority of the author and the community, and it positioned the reader to relate to truth with absolute passion.

Because of all of this complication involved in Kierkegaard's works, trying to provide a coherent and consistent of Kierkegaard's extant works becomes much harder. This situation is reason enough to take anyone's opinion or interpretation of Kierkegaard with a grain of salt. These problems should also be kept in mind if one chooses to write a paper on Kierkegaard.

Three Stages on Life's Way

The three stages of life according to Kierkegaard are the Aesthetic, the Ethical, and the Religious. The Religious life is kind of a quasi-Hegelian synthesis, as it annuls the problems of the Aesthetic and Ethical lives while preserving the positive aspects of each. Each stage is a necessary one in the development of a person, starting with the Aesthetic and ending with the Religious; an individual cannot “skip” stages.

Each of these three lives will be covered in more depth, but first the topic of despair will be covered, as the fact that the Aesthetic and Ethical lead to despair is the reason that they ultimately fail according to Kierkegaard.

Despair

While Kierkegaard details many different types of despair, he thinks that all types are the result of unsuccessful ways of managing the tension between one's eternal and temporal aspects. At root, the source of despair is not over external objects but over oneself.

The first of the three types of despair Kierkegaard explains in Sickness Unto Death is “Despair Improperly So-Called.” It is the despair of one who lives in immediate experience, where they are not even conscious of having a self as well as unaware of the fundamental tension in one's being and perhaps even that they are in despair. This is the worst form of despair for Kierkegaard, for like Socrates said about ignorance, the worst ignorance is the ignorance one is unaware (ignorant) of. Someone in this state of despair is so far from expressing their own nature that they're not even aware of the eternal aspect of themselves, and so they might not even be aware of their despair.

The second type is called “Despair at Not Willing to Be Oneself,” and characterizes the reflective aesthete. This person realizes the essential tension, but proceeds to repudiate the eternal, the part of oneself that cries out for attachment to the universal and infinite, in favor of embracing the purely temporal. They bury themselves in the immediate and reject the eternal aspect of their self.

The third type is referred to as “Despair at Willing to Be Oneself.” A person with this type of despair tries to express the fundamental tension through his/her own power and attempts to detach the self from a relation to a higher Power. Unlike the case of despair improperly so-called, they are aware of their eternal side, and unlike those who despair at *not* willing to be oneself, they attempt to express the infinite through their own power. Such a person stands in *defiance* against God and refuses to embrace any dependence on or relation to a higher Power. This does strike a resemblance with the highest level of *authenticity* espoused by the later secular existentialists like Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus, a theme we will return to later in the course.

A related condition to Despair for Kierkegaard is Anxiety or Dread. Dread is caused by some awareness (could be subconscious or inchoate) of the terrible freedom and

responsibility of existential choice. It is two-sided, both found in the burden of choosing for eternity and in the exhilaration of freedom. This feeling is already present in innocents (like children) that live in immediate experience. It is necessary for this Dread to exist and be recognized by the individual before a leap to a qualitatively different higher sphere (from Aesthetic to Ethical or Ethical to Religious).

The Aesthetic

One of the main characteristics of a person in the Aesthetic Life is an immersion in sensuous experience, focusing on the satisfaction of desires, momentary short-term fulfillments, and both lower and higher pleasures. A young child who lives in immediate experience is the example of the perfect aesthete. Other characteristics include an emphasis on abstract possibilities of choice over actuality, egotism, a disunified subjectivity where one lives from one moment to the next without a unifying overall purpose or project in life (like Don Juan), and the main object of life becoming avoiding boredom and repetition.

A metaphor suggested by an aesthetic essayist in part 1 of *Either/Or* for the flight from boredom is that of crop rotation, and that essay provides a method for conducting that flight. The aesthete must always be changing focus and finding new experiences lest boredom set in. In this effort the aesthete has to start cultivating arbitrary interests because eventually natural interests would become old hat. Another way is to find delight in accidental occurrences, so that random, everyday experiences become a source of interest. An example from provided by Kierkegaard is of taking interest on the pattern and profuseness of the sweating on a boring man's forehead while he lectured him. This way what would have been boring becomes fascinating.

Two interesting examples of the aesthetic life are the intellectual aesthete and the seducer. The former views the events of the world with speculative detachment, standing outside of and viewing life from afar. The two categories with which the intellectual aesthete views the world are the interesting and the boring. The seducer is another kind of reflective aesthete, described in detail in "The Seducer's Diary" at the end of *Either/Or* part 1. The seducer is not really delighted by the actual act of seduction, but from creating the possibility of it. The seduction is turned into a game of skill, where the seducer coldly and calculatingly manipulates people and situations to make them more interesting to him.

There are many problems that Kierkegaard finds with the Aesthetic Life. He sees as a self-serving and escapist life where the aesthete avoids commitment and responsibility because they are in *despair*. It is weak and unfulfilling, and ultimately fails, because it depends on external factors that are outside the control of the individual. An aesthete will eventually realize this and come to despair. The individual will look for a life that satisfies the eternal needs of human beings and not just the temporal, and so are driven to the Ethical Life.

The Ethical

The Ethical Life follows universal and eternal norms that always apply to any person at any time. The best example is the ethical system of Kant with his categorical imperative. The rules made in Kant's system are rational and impersonal and do not allow for exceptions.

For Kierkegaard this decision to live in accord with the ethical laws must be constantly renewed, with a good example being that of marriage. In marriage there is a constant commitment to fidelity and to the care and support of the spouse which must be renewed continuously. It expresses one's eternal nature in the sense that it provides an overall unity to one's life through that eternally renewed commitment.

A different example that shows the universal and exceptionless nature of the ethical is the story of Agamemnon and his daughter Iphigenia. Agamemnon is called upon to sacrifice his daughter so that the armies of Greece can benefit. Although he is her father and a king, he does not make an exception of himself and does his duty as a king and follows the ethical rule to promote the common good.

The problems of the Ethical Life for Kierkegaard have to do with both the unstable and impersonal nature of the rules. One large problem is that ethical rules can conflict, as for Agamemnon with his duty as a king conflicting with his duties as a father. Both rules demand obedience, but reason cannot declare which one to follow and which to break. It also leads to a form of *defiance*, where mankind thinks that it can do without God, and create universal self-governing rules with their own power. This focus on the eternal, without submitting to and humbling oneself before God, is bound to lead to despair according to Kierkegaard. Ultimately, one cannot successfully integrate the finite and infinite aspects of one's nature without recourse to a relationship with God, that ultimately paradoxical unity of the two.

The Religious

There are many characteristics of the Religious Life that Kierkegaard emphasizes. First of all, faith is the most important task in one's life, and one should commit to have individual and absolute subjective passion to God unmediated but the Church or ritual. This faith should be constantly renewed and the commitment constantly repeated. Other parts of the Religious Life include recognition of a higher Power and recognition that the self is one's life-work which God judges for eternity. The religious life demands a teleological suspension of the ethical, which acknowledges that God's individual commands constitute a higher duty than that of traditional ethical rules.

The Religious Life also preserves the positive traits of the Aesthetic and the Ethical while avoiding their problems. Along with the Aesthetic it preserves infinite possibility of imagination and an enjoyment of the temporal without excluding the actual. It is also not egoistic like the Aesthetic, nor is misfortune a source of despair. As for the ethical, it keeps the link to the universal and eternal aspect of humanity and the distinction

between good and evil while avoiding the possibility of conflicting norms because the rules are no longer dependent upon reason or social norms but upon God. One cannot by reason alone balance the conflict of ethical duties, but one can, through the leap of faith, find a way through difficult situations.

As for those who lead lives in the Religious category, Kierkegaard details two different types of such people: one referred to as either the Knight of Infinite Resignation (or Religiousness A), and the other as the Knight of Faith (also called Religiousness B or True Christianity).

The Knight of Infinite Resignation renounces temporal and finite things for the sake of one's relation to the eternal and infinite. There is a *psychological* detachment, where the temporal is not relied on for fulfillment. This should not be confused with *indifference*. The Knight must intensify one's desire for the finite, if possible concentrating it into the desire for one thing. When the desire for this one finite thing is greatest, one must *maintain this desire* and yet resign that thing to God. The process of renunciation involves *suffering*, as the one is denying oneself in the present life in favor of the next. This type of Knight is also characterized by *religious guilt*, a constant awareness of one's inability to properly express infinitude by merely denying the finite.

One example is that of the knight and the princess. The knight falls in love with a princess, but cannot marry her for social or other reasons. Although the princess is what he desires most, he resigns her without hoping to get her back and instead focusing on the more eternal. He transforms his love for her into a spiritual ideal, and through devotion to that ideal, he may pursue all sorts of chivalrous acts. (It is up for debate whether Kierkegaard thought his renunciation of Regina Olsen was of this type or the of the next type, the Knight of Faith.)

Knights of Faith, unlike Knights of Infinite Resignation, do not rely only on their own power, but submit themselves to a higher Power. While the Knight of Infinite Resignation operates to some degree within reason, the Knight of Faith embraces the deep paradox of Christianity, and takes a *leap* of faith into the absurd. The Knight of Faith goes through the same movement as the Knight of Infinite Resignation in intensifying desire and resigning the object of desire in order to express the infinite but the Knight of Faith makes an additional move, by receiving and accepting back the finite, "by virtue of the absurd, in virtue of the fact that with God all things are possible." By completely embracing God and the absurd, the Knight of Faith gets back the temporal, and paradoxically, the very thing that was renounced. And by not resting his happiness upon the temporal, he does not suffer upon not getting what is renounced back like the Knight of Infinite Resignation, and is able to enjoy whatever the temporal brings.

A key concept here is the Absurd, one taken up by later Existentialists as well. The central absurd tenet, the central paradox, of Christianity is the Incarnation of the infinite in the finite. It defies reason to have an infinite and eternal God exist in a temporal and

finite form. By embracing such absurdity, by having passionate belief despite the fact that reason or traditional norms object, one truly shows oneself to have true faith.

Examples of Knights of Faith include both Job and Abraham. Job was harshly mistreated, losing his house, wealth, and family, and yet never lost his belief and faith in God although he had every reason to do so. In the end, Job receives back all he had lost and more. Abraham is the example covered most by Kierkegaard, in that he fully plans to carry out God's demand that he sacrifice his son Isaac, even though rational ethical demands cry out that this is wrong and irrational. By renouncing his son with full faith in God, he gets his son back, as God calls for the sacrifice. As mentioned before, it is not known whether Kierkegaard saw his own broken engagement in this way.

Close Textual Discussion-passages and points made

Passage: p104-110: concerning the differences between the Knight of Infinite Resignation vs. the Knight of Faith

Q: why does the knight of faith fit and blend in while the other knight does not?

- The knight of faith does not wear his religion on his sleeve, and unlike the knight of infinite resignation he still enjoys temporal things while he has faith that what is renounced will come back to him.
- The knight of faith submits to a path completely, while the knight of infinite resignation chooses the path and has not completely embraced the absurd, as he does not feel like he can get what he renounced back, and so suffers and sticks out
- While the knight of infinite resignation has renounced the temporal to focus on the eternal, he does not fit in with the majority of people, while the knight of faith, while not resting his fulfillment on the temporal, can still enjoy what comes to him
- It should be noted that the truly religious and faithful lives were thought by many to be very tough and full of sacrificing, and making it possible to be both truly religious and live an ordinary life was a goal of a Christian apologist like Kierkegaard. He made it seem like it could be achieved by anyone

Passage: Concept of Dread - page 168-9 "In this state there is peace and repose ... but this nothing constantly sees innocence outside of it."

Q: what is meant by the idea of nothing, what purpose is it playing?

- There is nothing to rely on, nothing to compel one's choices. Even the completely aesthetic and innocent have the feeling that they are free, and this absence of something to rely on other than oneself produces a feeling of anxiety or dread.
- When one looks at oneself and one's actions in order to understand them, one is confronted by nothing because, ultimately, each person is responsible for the kind of

person they are, for the life they freely choose to lead. The confrontation with this freedom is the root of dread.

General Discussion

Abraham and the God's Command

- Kant and others accuse Abraham of following something that could not possibly be a command of God, as it violates the universal ethical demands that God enforces
- Why does Kierkegaard believe that God is really talking to Abraham? It was mentioned that in the Bible, Abraham has been hearing the same voice all his life and all it has said is come to pass, so the command to kill Isaac was not the first time he had heard such a voice.
- Q: What is the meaning of the 4 passages on pages 97-101 and Kierkegaard's discussion of them?
- Each case portrays a different kind of hero. One shows the ideal of an aesthetic hero, another the tragic or ethical hero, another the knight of infinite resignation.
- It seems questionable whether any one of the examples portrays Abraham as a knight of faith, perhaps Auden purposely left out that particular example. On that note, could Abraham be a knight of faith? He seems to not portray the ordinary, unexceptional man that Kierkegaard describes, although nowhere does he say that an exceptional man cannot be a knight of faith.
- Kierkegaard feels that Abraham exemplifies the knight of faith precisely because he goes against what Kant felt right: Abraham goes against what is traditionally moral and suspends his ethical demands to prove his faith in God. If Abraham did what was morally normal for him, how could one tell that he was truly faithful?

Another related topic: Kierkegaard is commenting on a long-running debate in Christianity that dates back to Augustine and Pelagius. Pelagius emphasizes that good works are the most important thing, while Augustine emphasizes faith and grace independent of good works and ethics. By citing Abraham's behavior as truly faithful and Christian, he is siding with Augustine in this debate.

There was also brief discussion concerning whether the true aesthete could live a life without conflict and despair. If they are not aware if they have a self and live moment to moment, could they really have any existential despair? Would the perfectly aesthete ever really worry about freedom and the goals of a unified self?