The Leap From Faith: Kierkegaard as Poet on the Teleological Suspension of the Ethical

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As a Christian Existentialist, Kierkegaard maintains that Christianity—the mediated relationship through which man must always engage with the divine—cannot be approached from a stance that is indifferent to existence. If existence precedes essence in accordance with his philosophy, the same can be said for Kierkegaard’s views on Christianity. Furthermore, the existential principle that the individual is in a constant state of tension with, while remaining isolated from, the universal: necessarily applies to Kierkegaard’s philosophy of the Christian faith (Purity of the Heart, 184) the significance for which is thereby derived from this world, this lifetime, and the individual’s engagement therewith. In so far as Kierkegaard stresses faith’s existential nature, posing the prospect of an afterlife as peripheral information, and more coincidental than essential to one’s decision to “take the leap”: any analyses of the subject must be performed in the light of the concerns of this present age. Which is where we begin our exploration: of the potentiality for a “leap of faith” that exists outside of the Christian context, but engenders the same, or similar features as that of the Christian leap—grounded in the fact that Kierkegaard’s philosophy, while presupposing its own eternal ramifications, is proximally and for the most part an existential endeavor.

In order to determine the possibility of a non-Christian existence that bears resemblance to Kierkegaard’s “knight of faith,” beginning with the assumption that the knight of faith alone inhabits an authentic, individual, existentially conscious mode of living: I’ll use the counterexample of the Poet-Philosopher—one who does not take the leap, and is thus prohibited, says the philosopher, from obtaining an authentic self. The Poet “type,” like the Knight of Faith, makes frequent appearances in Kierkegaard’s writings. Kierkegaard claims to exemplify the former, in that he is unable, or unwilling to take his own Leap—a fact which perpetually results in his spiritual despair. Among the “degrees of selfhood” he proposes: is “the aesthetic,” a life of immediacy and unconscious despair over “having a self” or over “not having a self.” The second mode, “the ethical,” consists of a progressively coherent and deliberate refusal to address one’s despair before God (Sickness, 72–105). Kierkegaard maintains that Christians and non-Christians alike can inhabit the aesthetic and the ethical modes of being; and that most Christians profess their beliefs in a relatively habitual way, refusing to face the ultimate spiritual challenge—the constant realization of one’s true selfhood through a direct, individual encounter with the divine. The “spirit,” to which he also refers as the “self” is that which sets the individual apart from the “simply human” nature, leaving one to acknowledge or construct another identity. That humanity has trended toward a vastly “aesthetic” existence indicates, for Kierkegaard, a fundamental fear of self consciousness which he terms “despair” as well as “sin”—the height of which takes the form of blatant defiance of Christianity (Sickness, 109).

The degree of selfhood Kierkegaard terms “the religious” surpasses both the aesthetic and the ethical modes, and is reserved specifically for those who possess a conception of God; an awareness of their own despair through sin; and a response to both factors which culminates in an absolutization of one’s individuality in relationship with the divine. Deciphering between the knight of faith, the self-proclaimed Christian, and the individual who has remained in a state of spiritual ambiguity, Kierkegaard reduces the definition of Christianity-per-se to a ready-made
belief system that can be adopted virtually “free of charge.” Due to the apparent ease and insincerity with which one can “technically” ascribe to Christianity, the knight of faith is an extraordinarily rare phenomenon. The few individuals who qualify for the title, thus, will inevitably suffer the loss of societal comforts, aesthetic pleasures, and the understanding of fellow believers. These consequences—derived from a degree of selfhood that presupposes individuality and a sense of urgency in regard to one’s own finitude—are the common thread connecting all conscious movements toward, and away from, the Christian faith. Any such act, as it necessarily defies some universal paradigm, results in the psychological state which Kierkegaard refers to as “dread.”

Due to the fact that individuals who continuously acknowledge, rather than conceal, their selfhood, are a rarity—the differentiation between Christians and non-Christians who may fit such a description is, for Kierkegaard, a non-issue in comparison to the vast majority who fall within the aesthetic and ethical categories, and whose fear of consciousness hinders existential development. Still, Kierkegaard does imply the existence of individuals who are simultaneously conscious of their selfhood and have not taken the leap of faith for reasons other than oblivion or fear. Kierkegaard, as I’ve noted, may be such an example of this phenomenon. Choosing an intensive writing career over his engagement to Regine Olsen; the prospect of a family; and a life of ministry. Kierkegaard forewent his religious inclinations in exchange for a life which, however successful, would not ensure for him the same sense of spiritual fulfillment as its alternative. His works expose a definite inner struggle in this regard, as is displayed in his many references to the melancholy of the Poet—a title which he claims; the knight of faith, a title which he longs to call his own, but cannot; and the distinction between recollection and inwardness (Either/Or 222–239). The former attitude he relates to an aging person’s fixation on the past (comparable to the “hope” of the child that gazes endlessly into the unforeseeable future)—and the latter, inwardness: to the passionate, revolutionary decisiveness which philosophy lacks. The presence of these regretful undertones in Kierkegaard’s work support the hypothesis that he, while not a knight of faith, has experienced the dread of someone who has sacrificed a wealth of supports, desires, and aspirations—all for a purpose which, to one who idealizes the religious, must seem absurd: a term he will use to describe the paradoxical/incomprehensible nature of the leap of faith (Fragments, 104).

Instances wherein sacrifice is made for the sake of some benefit—be it a Christian who surrenders his dream career to pursue a “spiritual calling” in order to gain the respect of his fellow believers; or, on the other hand, a person who denies himself spiritual significance and aspires toward secular achievements, have not exceeded the ethical degree of selfhood, if they have the aesthetic. Therefore, any Christian individual whose being is rooted in self-obscuring motives is no more spiritually aware than any non-Christian who has failed to transcend the ethical degree of selfhood. This is significant in that it deems “consciously equivalent” Christians and non-Christians who fall below the “religious.” Kierkegaard’s knight of faith, however, does not make sacrifices for the self-gratifying purposes that so often propel seemingly noble acts. Nor does, I will argue, the individual whose aversion to the faith is an embrace of his finitude as well as an acceptance of the despair to which most remain oblivious.

In Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard states that it is humanly impossible to recognize a knight of faith by his or her actions or outward appearance. It is, in fact, impossible to determine any
individual’s spiritual state—but the knight of faith especially so, due to a phenomenon that Kierkegaard describes as “a teleological suspension of the ethical.” Abraham sacrifices his son, Isaac, on the principle that his particular relationship with God holds precedence over “the universal.” Hegel’s account of ethics wherein “the state is by itself the ethical whole” poses three contradictions to Kierkegaard’s account of Abraham: that the individual’s moral actions are to be judged by its latent social intention; that there are no duties to God beyond those that are simultaneously bound to the universal; and that it is a moral requirement that one disclose his moral projects and/or reasons for failing to fulfill them. The individual “has his telos in the universal” and so a negation of the ethical paradigms therein inevitably results in “spiritual trial.”

Abraham’s duty to God required that he neglect his duties to the ethical universality—thereby replacing Hegel’s “universal” ethics with an ethics of a spiritual order. Thus, in accordance with Hegel’s account, Hegelians are without authority on the subject of faith, and the Knight of Faith—exempt from Hegelian authority.

If we consider the teleological suspension of the ethical with respect to its isolation from the universal, it becomes clear that if such a faith exists, then it is only God and the knight of faith himself that can know it with certainty. Similarly, because the “teleological suspension of the ethical” makes the knight of faith unrecognizable to the rest of society, it can also be assumed that one who would consciously forgo the leap would be equally illegible to the universal eye. It is therefore impossible to assess, now assuming that a “knight of existential faith” exists, whether Kierkegaard meets the description: one who has sacrificed his “leap” in good faith, or whether he simply falls into the category of the aesthetic.

In The Sickness Unto Death, there is no room for rejecting the Christian framework without this action being judged as sin, nor does the work allow any possibility of Christianity’s being false. However, Kierkegaard published this book under the pseudonym “Anti-Climacus”—a fact which deems questionable his commitment to the material as a whole. Of his own relation to Anti-Climacus and Johannes Climacus (the pseudonymous author of Philosophical Fragments and Concluding Unscientific Postscript) Kierkegaard wrote in his journal: “J. Climacus places himself so low that he even admits to not being a Christian, Anti-Climacus gives the impression of taking himself to be a Christian to an extraordinary degree…I put myself higher than J. Climacus, lower than Anti-Climacus (Sickness, 15).” This information is valuable in so far as it offers perspective on Kierkegaard’s philosophy of art, as well as his thoughts regarding the spiritual status of the poet-philosopher whose life takes a direction that may be best described as a leap from faith.

In Point of View, Kierkegaard describes himself as “a poet with a leaning toward the religious.” In Postscript, J. Climacus calls Fragments an “imaginary construction” that communicates ideas to the reader by “tricking something away from them (Fragments, xx, xxi).” In other words: rather than trying to expand the reader’s knowledge base, which Kierkegaard/Climacus believes to be disproportionately quantitative compared to quality of its content, he alters the form of some previously learned idea, so that the reader must grapple with what he already “knows.” Wherever J. Climacus stands in for Kierkegaard, the writing takes on an air of obscurity: sounding doubtful and melancholy, and in turns, tongue-in-cheek. In the first sixty pages of Philosophical Fragments, J. Climacus makes constant reference to the book’s main theme, heatedly expounding upon its significance to the scope of his ramblings; but dancing around the actual
word, he perpetually reminds the reader that “there’s no need to hurry”—until at long last, he announces: “that happy passion to which we shall now give a name, although for us it is not a matter of the name. We shall call it faith (Fragments, 59).” The fact that Kierkegaard assumes the identity of J. Climacus to address such a significant theme as faith—does not appear without consequence in Kierkegaard’s philosophy.

Nor does it go unaddressed in his work. Two Ages, which is written under Kierkegaard’s actual name, is a literary review for a novel by one of his contemporaries. Prefacing his critique with a description of the genres that are employed “in this present age,” Kierkegaard lets the poet, the theologian, and the philosopher, act as pillars for his overarching description of the author at hand:

“The ability to captivate and entertain is less his distinguishing mark since the same can be said of the poet and of many other novelists. He persuades, and this too is a difficult but also beneficent art. If one likes to say that the poet has only high or low notes, and so cannot talk with people as they are in real life, then the life-view of the author can be said to possess the middle note of persuasion, and the perfection of the enunciation of that life-view lies precisely in this (Two Ages, 16).”

Also in his introduction, Kierkegaard states that poetry’s function is not to achieve reconciliation with the actual, but with the ideal: in short, to enchant—a view he reiterates in Fragments, Either/Or, and Purity of the Heart. Devoid of heated emotion, cries of despair, excess of exertion, calls to fight, and resolute endings: the writing in Two Ages seems a stark contrast to the writing which commends it. Kierkegaard unleashes his apocalyptic interpretation of the present age, in which the public is “the cruel abstraction through which individuals will become religiously educated—or destroyed,” in which human speech will come to an end, “replaced by an atmospheric, abstract sound that will render speech redundant, just as machines make workers redundant,” in which “many may cry out in despair, but that will not help; it is now too late (Two Ages, 83–97).”

According to his claims regarding the limits, as well as the possibilities of the creative writer, Kierkegaard saw poetry as capable of effecting the mind and human experience in ways that strict persuasion, or philosophy, cannot—at least not without the sacrifice of clarity or persuasiveness. In Fragments, J. Climacus reprimands Hegel for taking the liberty of the poet, enchanting his reader with frivolity and historical tangents—a fascinating conceptual journey complete with detours and displaced tension that leaves the reader’s intellect drunk from the experience, but unclear as to what any of it has to do with him as a person. Yet The Edifying Addresses, which are considered Kierkegaard’s most direct explications of the religious mode of being, contain some of Kierkegaard the Poet’s finest literary moments as well. This is not a contradiction to his attack on the more “self indulgent” aspects of Hegel, who does not “possess authority” to speak on the subject of faith. Whereas he who has authority will necessarily employ such techniques—via, shall we say, a teleological suspension of the conventional.

Kierkegaard states that to create a “corrective for Christianity” requires “resignation”—of literary success, public approval, and myriad conventional goals. Resignation, as we’ve seen, is also the knight of faith’s supreme quality. And as we’re beginning to see, the personal standard which
isolates Kierkegaard from his literary contemporaries, such as Hegel, resembles a “teleological suspension of the ethical.” For if a religious corrective is to be heard, Kierkegaard held, it must communicate indirectly: through “exaggeration,” “deceit,” and “without corresponding to reality.” Or, one might add, through a pseudonym. Paradox, for Kierkegaard, remains a central theme: appearing in Fear and Trembling in the form of faith, in Sickness as despair, and fragments as salvation: all published under pseudonyms, and thus all indirect addresses of the Paradox. Insofar as Kierkegaard considers the author of the corrective exempt from universal literary standards, and approaches this task from an existential perspective: his philosophy sets up a proof for a leap from faith that can be described as necessarily poetic, existential in nature, and a teleological suspension of the ethical, at once.

The telos of Kierkegaard’s work is precisely as such that it does not allow for him, as the author, to take his own leap of faith, proper. The whole of his existence becomes a means to the end of an existential corrective for Christianity, therefore resulting in spiritual despair; as well as dread over his isolation from the aesthetic/ethical majority. Whether this is an accurate analysis of Kierkegaard, cannot be known—just as Abraham’s status as a knight of faith cannot ultimately be proven. But it would be an appeal to ignorance to deny that, on this basis, leaps from faith can occur—and to a religious degree.

Cited Works: