

Ethics in Søren Kierkegaard

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Abstract

In Either/ Or as well as in the *Stages on Life's Way*, Kierkegaard explained the various stages of moral reasoning, mainly the aesthetic stage, the ethical stage, and the religious stage. The aesthetic stage is concentrating on self-interest and thus on private morality. The ethical stage puts the emphasis on public morality such as universal ethical principles, social values and could give birth to moral universalism. The religious stage implies a deep relationship with the infinite (God), so that every ethical issue is interpreted out of the decision-maker's faith. In this short paper we will see Kierkegaard's notions of ethical / aesthetic / religious life. In this pursuit we will see how the notions of anxiety, sin and freedom are connected. The choice to obey God unconditionally is a true existential 'either/or' decision faced by the individual. Either one chooses to live in faith (the religious stage) or to live ethically (the ethical stage). In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard insists that the single individual has ethical responsibility of his life.

Key Words: *angst*, sin, freedom, aesthetic stage, the ethical stage, and the religious stage.

Introduction

Søren Kierkegaard was a Danish philosopher, theologian, poet, social critic and religious author who is widely considered to be the first existentialist philosopher. He wrote critical texts on organized religion, Christendom, morality, ethics, psychology and philosophy. He showed a special interest for metaphor, irony and parable. His philosophical work deals with the issues of how one lives as a '*single individual*', giving priority to concrete human reality over abstract thinking, and highlighting the importance of personal choice and commitment. We

shall see in this article the co-relation between self and ethics in Søren Kierkegaard. We cannot separate his philosophy from his life experience so let us see how the love affair affected his writings.

1.1 Regine Olsen

An important aspect of Kierkegaard's life generally considered to have had a major influence on his work was his broken engagement to Regine Olsen (1822–1904). Kierkegaard and Olsen met on 8 May 1837 and were instantly attracted to each other. But sometime around 11 August 1838 he had second thoughts and broke off the engagement on 11 August 1841, though it is generally believed that the two were deeply in love with each other. In his journals, Kierkegaard mentions his belief that his "melancholy" made him unsuitable for marriage, but his precise motive for ending the engagement remains unclear.¹

1.2 Sin and `Angst`

Kierkegaard tells the reader in the introduction *`A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin`* that psychological concerns will serve dogmatic. His main object is to understand the dogma and explain its coherence logically and psychologically. For this Kierkegaard makes several points. First, notwithstanding the doctrine of original sin, Kierkegaard wishes to emphasize that man was free not to sin as well as to sin. The fall was not necessitated by creation, by mere existence. Second, freedom itself causes anxiety, but this anxiety, once again, does not necessarily lead to sin, nor indeed is it itself sin. Third, Kierkegaard wants to ground each individual's sin in his own sinfulness. Just as Adam sinned which brought about sinfulness in him, so does each individual's sin while in a state of freedom and only then is sinfulness posited. Fourth, sin itself brings about anxiety, a compounding of the anxiety of freedom. This anxiety can lead the sinner back to the One who made him and gave him freedom, and thus anxiety can be saving through faith. Fifth, the first sin for Adam and for the individual is a qualitative leap. It is a leap out of

freedom into sinfulness. It is not necessitated by existence (much less freedom) and so can only be explained by a leap. So too is the soul's return to the One who created it—a leap back to God through faith.²

When sin is posited in the particular individual by the qualitative leap, the difference between good and evil is also posited. We have nowhere been guilty of the foolishness that holds that man must sin; on the contrary, we have always protested against all merely imaginatively constructed knowledge. We have said what we heard repeatedly that sin presupposes itself, just as freedom presupposes itself, and sin cannot be explained by anything antecedent to it, any more than can freedom. To maintain that freedom begins as *liberum arbitrium* [free will] ...that can choose good just as well as evil inevitably makes every explanation impossible. To speak of good and evil as the objects of freedom finitizes both freedom and the concepts of good and evil. Freedom is infinite and arises out of nothing. Therefore, to want to say that man sins by necessity makes the circle of the leap into a straight line. According to Søren, all existents makes him anxious, from the smallest fly to the mysteries of the incarnation. the whole thing is inexplicable to me, I myself most of all; to me all existence is infected, I myself most of all.... The most terrible punishment for sin is the new sin. This does not mean that the hardened, confident sinner will understand it this way. But if a man shudders at the thought of his sin, if he would gladly endure anything in order to avoid falling into the old sin in the future, then the new sin is the most terrible punishment for sin.³ We can say in nutshell that angst is constant struggle between choices.

1.3 `Angst` - The Possibility of Freedom

Kierkegaard does not wish to convey the idea that freedom or sin is arbitrary. Sin is not posited by necessity in the act of creation. It could not be a tendency of man, since man was created in sinlessness and in freedom. However, freedom is not arbitrary. Though Adam had a choice between good and evil, it was never a dispassionate choice, nor did deity

present two equally viable alternatives to him. One path led to further freedom, and one to loss of freedom by a leap. Hence Kierkegaard says, to speak of good and evil as the objects of freedom finitizes both freedom and the concepts of good and evil. Good and evil cannot be equal objects of choice, since they are radically different, and lead to radically different situations. Freedom is also finitized by this viewpoint since it is misconstrued as *free* will. Our will is capable of deciding, but it is not *free*, that is, we cannot weigh two diametrically opposed alternatives without passion or concern for the outcome. For Kierkegaard, freedom is never arbitrary; nevertheless, it is a state in which the cognitive-volitive faculty does exist.³

1.3.1 Freedom as an Important Factor in Kierkegaard's Works

The theme of freedom runs through the works of Kierkegaard. According to him freedom is not arbitrary. In this context, it is important to note that the issue of freedom is central, not only to *The Concept of Anxiety*, but to Kierkegaard's works as a whole, as the following two quotations demonstrates. In his work *The Sickness unto Death* Kierkegaard writes: The self is made up of infinitude and finitude. But this synthesis is a relation, and a relation which though derived, relates to itself, which is foredoom. The self is freedom. But freedom is the dialectical element in the categories of possibility and necessity. Further in *Either/Or* Kierkegaard says, "But what, then, is this self of mine? If it is to be a matter of first glance, a first shot at a definition, my answer is: it is the most abstract thing of all which yet, at the same time, is the most concrete thing of all – it is freedom"⁴.

1.3. 2 Anxiety as Freedom

The individual's fall into sin, and the subsequent experience of anxiety, ignorance and innocence are lost, and are replaced by an awareness of good and evil. The knowledge of good and evil places one in a position to exercise choice, which also allows the individual to be historical instead of merely eternal. Paradoxically, choice also tends to carry the

individual beyond the temporal and into the eternal. The making of a choice is as much an act of freedom as the necessity of the presence of freedom in order to employ the act of choice. A human being exists in choice. By freedom it is not intended to convey that the finite individual has now in some way achieved infinite freedom, but the freedom that the individual does achieve is true freedom and in its own manner, it is absolute, e.g., an individual has certain parameters within which he/she can exercise choice, but within those limitations he/she is infinitely free to choose. Another way of putting anxiety of possibility would be calling it anxiety of freedom.⁵

The self stands on the threshold of a qualitative break with its former state, and it is precisely this that reveals one's freedom and, by implication, one's anxiety. Freedom mentioned in this context is somewhat of a contentious issue. In the experience of anxiety, it is precisely our freedom, which provokes the feeling of powerlessness and paradoxically, *unfreedom*. Since anxiety is the possibility of the possibility of freedom, it is exactly with the renunciation of anxiety that freedom itself can be actualized. Freedom can only properly manifest itself when the individual is emancipated from the bondage of sin and the anxiety which issues forth from it.

1.3.3 Freedom and Dizziness

Primal anxiety is the dizzying state of freedom prior to sin. Realizing his freedom and desire to sin, he is anxious when the conflicting desires clash. While in this undecided state the self is in the dizzying state of anxiety. As McCarthy states: It is the anxiety experience which arises in ignorance and confronts the individual with the set of possibilities of either continuing in innocence and ignorance or else sinning. Dizziness is freedom allured by, yet at the same time repulsed by, a possibility which in effect is not known for it has not been willed into existence.⁶

1.3.4 Freedom and Self

Freedom is of the individual. As Kierkegaard said, the single individual is more than the species. In fact, he felt the only way to help mankind is by saving each particular individual of the human race. Kierkegaard 's freedom is not defined as it is in general usage as: personal or political independence; exception or immunity from controls, duties, etc. In fact, in many ways, freedom is opposite to the general usage. It is not the unrestricted ability to do; it is the ability to know one's limits, and at the same time to know that it is one 's self that is limiting. Freedom is not exempt from controls or duty. Instead, for Kierkegaard freedom is qualified by an ever-present responsibility. The central organizing concept of freedom, the self, is both dynamic and structural.⁷

Kierkegaard 's idea of the self is dialectic in nature. It is built upon dipolar opposite qualities. A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or are the relations relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but are the relations relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self... Such a relation that relates itself to itself, a self, must either have established itself or have been established by another... If the relation that relates itself to itself has been established by another, then the relation is indeed the third, but this relation, the third, is yet again a relation and relates itself to that which established the entire relation... The human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another.⁸

1.4 Three Stages of Life

Kierkegaard held that the individual need to pass through three stages, the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious, on the way to become a true self. Each of these "stages on life's way" represents competing views on

life and as such potentially conflicts with one another. Kierkegaard takes the unusual step of having each stage of life described and represented by a different pseudonymous character. Thus, it becomes too difficult to ascertain which propositions Kierkegaard himself upholds. This fits with Kierkegaard's characteristic tendency to avoid dictating answers. He preferred that readers reach their own conclusions.⁹

1.4.1 Aesthetic way of Life

The aesthetic is the realm of sensory experience and pleasures. The aesthetic life is defined by pleasures, and to live the aesthetic mode of life to the fullest one must seek to maximize pleasures. Increasing one's aesthetic pleasures is one way to combat boredom, and Kierkegaard described many methods of doing so. He proposes that the anticipation of an event often exceeds the pleasure of the event itself, and so he suggested ways of drawing out anticipation. One suggestion is to leave all of your mail for three days before opening it. Planned events can, at times, lead to pleasures as great as anticipation, but the pleasure of planned events is almost entirely in the anticipation.¹⁰

1.4.2 Ethical way of Life

Ethics are the social rules that govern how a person ought to act. Ethics are not always in opposition to aesthetics, but they must take precedence when the two conflict. The aesthetic life must be subordinated to the ethical life, as the ethical life is based on a consistent, coherent set of rules established for the good of society. A person can still experience pleasure while living the ethical life. The ethical life serves the purpose of allowing diverse people to coexist in harmony and causes individuals to act for the good of society. The ethical person considers the effect his or her actions will have on others and gives more weight to promoting social welfare than to achieving personal gain. The ethical life also affords pleasures that the aesthetic does not enjoy. Aesthetics steers one away from consistency, since repetition can lead to boredom. An ethical person doesn't simply enjoy things because they're novel but makes

ethical choices because those choices evoke a higher set of principles. Kierkegaard uses marriage as an example of an ethical life choice. In marriage, the excitement of passion can quickly fade, leading to boredom and a diminishing of aesthetic pleasure. However, by consistently acting for the good of one's spouse, one learns that there are enjoyments beyond excitement. Still, the ethical life does little to nurture one's spiritual self. The ethical life diverts one from self-exploration since it requires an individual to follow a set of socially accepted norms and regulations. According to Kierkegaard, self-exploration is necessary for faith, the key requirement for a properly religious life.¹¹

1.4.3 Religious Way of Life

Kierkegaard considers the religious life to be the highest plane of existence. He also believes that almost no one lives a truly religious life. He is concerned with how to be "a Christian in Christendom". In other words, how to lead an authentically religious life while surrounded by people who are falsely religious. For Kierkegaard, the relationship with God is exclusively personal, and he believed the large-scale religion of the church (i.e., Christendom) distracts people from that personal relationship. Kierkegaard passionately criticized the Christian Churches for what he saw as its interference in the personal spiritual quest each true Christian must undertake.¹²

In the aesthetic life, one is ruled by passion. In the ethical life, one is ruled by societal regulations. In the religious life, one is ruled by total faith in God. One can never be truly free, and this causes boredom, anxiety, and despair. True faith doesn't lead to freedom, but it relieves the psychological effects of human existence. Kierkegaard claims that the only way to make life worthwhile is to embrace faith in God, and that faith necessarily involves embracing the absurd. One has faith in God, but one cannot believe in God. We believe in things that we can be proved, but we can only have faith in things that are beyond our understanding. For example, we believe in gravity: we feel its effects

constantly, which we recognize as proof of gravity's existence. It makes no sense, though, to say we have faith in gravity, since that would require the possibility that, someday, gravity would fail to materialize. Faith requires uncertainty, and thus we can have faith in God because God is beyond logic, beyond proof, and beyond reason. There's no rational evidence for God, but this is exactly what allows people to have faith in him.¹³

1.5 Lose of Freedom

We shall see now that what the reasons for losing the freedom were. Since freedom is the means of self-realization, we will try to understand what he meant by lose of freedom? According to Kierkegaard, freedom is a person 's power or capacity to act, to become something, and to give directions to one 's life.

1.6 The Somatic-Psychic and the Spiritual Loss of Freedom

In The Concept of Anxiety, Haufniensis, one of Kierkegaard characters, deals with the form of demonism in which the loss of freedom occurs by virtue of a disruption of the proper relation of soul and body and also the loss of freedom deriving from a perversion of the third element of the self, the spirit. Kierkegaard describes this perversion as a reversal of the psychic-somatic relation in the self. Though Kierkegaard's view of the soul is different from that envisaged by some variants of Platonism, according to which the soul is eternal, uncreated and entirely separable from the body, he does adhere to the Platonic notion that a good order of the self implies a subordination of the irrational bodily element to the rational psychic element. In the somatic-psychic form of demonism the body rebels against its subordination to the soul. Kierkegaard states how the psychosomatic demoniac deviates from a healthy relation of the good: The body is the organ of the psyche [soul] and in turn the organ of the spirit. As soon as the serving relation comes to an end, as soon as the body revolts, and as soon as freedom conspires with the body against itself, unfreedom is present as the demonic.¹⁴

1.7 Kierkegaard's Moral Phenomenology and Critical Evaluation

Even though ethics is included as one of the fundamental life perspectives in his famous three-stage theory of human development aesthetic, ethical, religious. Kierkegaard never developed an ethical theory as such. In fact, in one of his journal entries, on account of his firm belief in either/or, Kierkegaard indicates that there are only two stages: the religious and the aesthetic. In other words, for Kierkegaard, what we take to be “the ethical” collapses into the aesthetic, a life perspective that has happiness and self-fulfilment as its god-terms, in contrast to faith and sin, the poles that mark out the religious standpoint.¹⁵

Still, though not a moral theorist, Kierkegaard made significant contributions to what might be termed “moral phenomenology”. In more than a dozen ways, the Danish Socrates offered refulgent insights into the challenges we face in trying to be righteous human beings. For example, depth psychologists, Arthur Schopenhauer, and later Sigmund Freud all contended that we should lower our moral goals to psychological reality. Kierkegaard, the moral phenomenologist, gainsays that such levelling strategies will put ethics to bed.

Kierkegaard reveals how profoundly difficult it is to live in and act upon the convictions we bandy about at the dinner table. He was more concerned with us learning how to express our ideals in the medium of action, than he was in ethical theories and abstruse analysis of such puzzles as the trolley dilemma.¹⁶

1.7 Beyond Philosophy

According to Kierkegaard, any philosophical investigation of the subject will lead one to the ethical and self-investigation. And any such investigation will in turn lead me to the realization that one's life presents oneself with a task one cannot refuse, a task that must take priority in one's life – even when compared to philosophy. What sound philosophy enables me to see is that my primary obligation is to live. That

Kierkegaard accepts this fundamental insight shows in the fact that a major part of his non-pseudonymous works are writings that finds their *raison d'être* outside philosophical questions, in something far more important for Kierkegaard, namely the task of edification. In his collected works, he thus subordinates philosophy in favour of another, strictly religious project. As an author, Kierkegaard is by no means the philosopher that he presents in the shape of *Climacus*, but this 'sound philosophy' still has a special position in Kierkegaard's writing, as it is able to state the problem even if it cannot solve it. So, we can conclude that his prime aim was to purify Christianity and help all people to become authentic Christians.¹⁷

Conclusion

We have seen that he was against the existing Church systems especially of Lutheran Church. When he noticed the hypocrisy of hierarchy and priests, he raised his voice against it. For Kierkegaard was destined by God to renew the church whereby an individual will be able to find out his own authentic existence. He is against the crowd who is always lazy and running away from the responsibilities of day-to-day life. Even today his teachings are relevant. He is still inspiring thousands of young minds, and many are engaged in researching his deep insights. He can be rightly called the father of existentialism. He was worried about each individual and his salvation. He suggests facing anxiety in a right way that will lead one to calmness and peace. I think that Kierkegaard is a figure who remains important for Christian ethics. I have noted above the value of Kierkegaard for virtue theory. However, Kierkegaard also has a firm grasp of the importance of divine authority for Christian ethics, and he thus is a major source for the revival of divine-command theories of moral obligation. Here Kierkegaard can help us see how an ethic of duty can be linked to an ethic of virtue. Christian ethics cannot do without either, for the Bible shows a concern for the kinds of people we are to become, not simply the kinds of actions permitted. The kinds of people we are to become, however, cannot be divorced from our relation to God.

The biblical picture of that relationship, in both the Old and New Testaments, gives a central place to divine commands that a loving God has given to his creatures. Yahweh tells his people that he is the Lord their God who has brought them out of Egypt, and thus they must keep his commandments. Jesus tells his disciples that if they love him, they will keep his commandments. Kierkegaard helps us to see the role that divine commands should play in a developed Christian ethic.

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