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Philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard

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The Search for Eternal Happiness – Can Individual Subjects Assist One Another?

I. Introduction

In his *Philosophical Crumbs* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard describes the pursuit of an “eternal happiness” as being an essentially individual enterprise rooted in ethical-religious development. Although some readers may be inclined to interpret Kierkegaard as claiming that individual subjects can do nothing to assist one another in making ethical-religious progress, such a view is incommensurate with several other positions Kierkegaard takes throughout these works. Specifically, this paper will show this viewpoint to be incongruous with the many remarks Kierkegaard makes concerning a subject’s decision-making and relationship with God, an understanding of how interpersonal communication works, and his commentary pertaining to religious addresses. It will thereafter be clear that Kierkegaard believes that subjects can indirectly assist others by inducing them to act and forge *their own way* toward ethical-religious development, but cannot themselves *guide them* along a pre-charted path to ethical-religious development.

II. Background

A thorough evaluation of the argument against ethical-religious assistance from other subjects entails a comprehensive understanding of what Kierkegaard means by an “eternal happiness”.

For Kierkegaard, the attainment of an eternal happiness is the ultimate end of “absolute telos” of human existence. It is something to be procured in time—that is, not after life, as several religious doctrines suggest, but *during life*. It is a more complete understanding of oneself in existence—a sense of clarity, of purpose. It is a consciousness of one’s own unique set of beliefs and values, as well as an understanding of where he stands in relation to the external world around him.

Kierkegaard posits that eternal happiness is necessarily subjective, that it cannot be shared by any two subjects. To the extent that two subjects are essentially distinct, the way they view themselves in relation to the surrounding world cannot be identical—they must have some difference in perspective. By virtue of the fact that different subjects have different perspectives, they must also have different sets of beliefs and values. That is not to say that there can be no coincidence of a particular belief or value among two or more people; rather, it is merely inconceivable that the *total set* of one’s beliefs and values map perfectly onto that of another.

One might impugn the notion that eternal happiness is necessarily subjective by claiming, for example, that one can easily conceive of an objective “group happiness”. However, given that groups are formed in the first place to facilitate the pursuit of a goal or value shared by all group members, and taking this in conjunction with the fact that no two individuals can share the same totality of beliefs and values, it follows that, for each individual group member, the finite set of goals that constitutes the ultimate end of the collective accounts for only a subset of their own. That is, the happiness of the group is always what Kierkegaard calls a mere “relative end”, strictly subordinate to absolute telos, which is concerned with the totality of his beliefs and values, and unprecedented self-understanding.

For Kierkegaard, one approaches eternal happiness when he makes sure to “relate absolutely to the absolute telos and at the same time relatively to the relative ends, or always to have the absolute telos with one” (*Postscript* 348). This requires that he make sure not to place a disproportionate amount of importance on—i.e. show “infinite and passionate interest” (47) toward—the relative ends instead of the absolute telos, that he be honest with himself and acknowledge that such finite, worldly interests and endeavors cannot themselves represent life’s ultimate purpose. Only the absolute telos warrants such a high investment of passion and energy. And it is by virtue of one’s infinite passionate interest in the absolute telos that he derives *eternal* happiness from pursuing it. From the foregoing considerations we see that Kierkegaard deems the concepts of happiness and consciousness, or self-awareness, to be intimately related and that eternal happiness—which is associated with “infinite passionate interest” and the absolute end of human existence—can only be subjective; after all, when people speak of the absolute end of human existence, what they have in mind is the existence of the individual human subject.

From the foregoing it is apparent that one’s eternal happiness is contingent on his having a sense of self. For Kierkegaard, the only channel by which this sense of self can be cultivated is via ethical-religious development. He describes ethical-religious development as being the very process by which the human subject is actualized in existence—by which he “comes to be” his own person.

According to Kierkegaard, a Kantian, one comes to develop himself through ethical reflection to the extent that all ethical reflection requires that the subject consider his relation to the moral law. Through this process of questioning and deciding whether he could, without contradiction, *will* such and such a maxim to be a universal law, he comes to better understand what he does and does not value, what he deems to be right and wrong, and why.

Religious development, on the other hand, is concerned with the maintenance of faith. Faith takes as its object that which is paradoxical—i.e. that which comes into conflict with the understanding and cannot be, or has yet to be reconciled by way of logical arguments or with empirical evidence. Faith, for Kierkegaard, is something practiced. It is an active and recursive process by which a subject reminds himself that a certain belief he holds is paradoxical and resolves, or *wills*, to continuing believing it nonetheless. Kierkegaard describes this as a process by which the individual wills himself to live in a perpetual state of “objective uncertainty” (171-172), of doubting that there exists such a thing as “objective truth”. One may come to will objective uncertainty by considering, for example, that a great deal of human knowledge has been demonstrated via empirical methodology and thus is founded upon mere approximation, upon what appears to be the most rational method of operationalizing, testing, and measuring. Of course, such empirical processes do not eliminate “noise”—they are never free of error. In that sense, what appears to be “true” still has the potential to be “false”. And thus, conversely, that which is paradoxical need not be altogether “false”. Consider the following proposition: “God...appeared in the lowly form of a servant, lived and taught among us, and then died” (*Crumbs* 177). That this actually happened cannot be irrefutably demonstrated to the individual. If he is to believe it, he must do so in spite of the fact that it offends his understanding. In the process of coming to accept a proposition as a belief, the will intervenes in a case such as this, where the understanding is faced with a proposition that does not fit into the greater body of logic with which it is familiar. One wills to “take a leap”, to believe something even if it cannot be definitively proven or made certain¹.

One can see here that both ethical and religious reflection require some intervention of the individual subject’s will. Thus, Kierkegaard deems ethical-religious development to be an

¹ Note that this does *not* mean the subject stops acknowledging that the belief is paradoxical. See Section III.

active process, wherein the subject “acts” by grounding his thought in his own existence, by becoming more self-aware.

So ultimately, the connection between ethical-religious development and eternal happiness is as follows: If in life the individual subject does not sufficiently cultivate a sense of self, and instead winds up distracting himself by pursuing relative ends—i.e. more tangible and specific worldly interests—as though they were life’s absolute end, he will altogether fail to find eternal happiness.

Kierkegaard thus demonstrates that the pursuit of an eternal happiness is an individual enterprise rooted in ethical-religious development. But we are left with the following question: If the individual is responsible for advancing his own ethical-religious development, does it necessarily follow that subjects can do nothing to *assist one another* in making ethical-religious progress? Some readers of the *Philosophical Crumbs* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* might subscribe to this view. They may be inclined to refer to various passages in which Kierkegaard ostensibly denounces one subject’s trying to advise another and declares man to be powerless. As stated earlier, this paper will show why this view is too simplistic and overall inconsistent with Kierkegaard’s greater philosophy.

III. The Role of the Individual Will

Toward the end of the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard impresses upon the reader on several occasions the notion that “a human being is capable of absolutely nothing” (396). An observant reader would find this idea to be inconsistent with what Kierkegaard says about how decision-making is necessary for ethical-religious progress. Later in this paper, I will argue that Kierkegaard was himself fully aware of this inconsistency and that it directly serves his

motivation for writing. In other words, I assert that he did not actually mean for his readers to think that he believes human beings to be powerless. Here I will inspect more closely the role the individual will plays in furthering ethical-religious growth, as this must be fully understood before we can evaluate the extent to which people can assist one another.

In the previous section, we discussed how the maintenance of faith is required for ethical-religious development and how belief is volitional rather than epistemic. The idea that faith is “maintained” is key here. This means that one does not on just one occasion acknowledge that some belief is paradoxical and will to go on believing it. Keeping faith means willing to endure the constant strain the particular paradox exerts on the understanding, to persist in the “suffering” it causes. The individual subject is *at every moment* forced to look inside himself and ask whether he could will to cling to a paradox that offends his understanding; as long as he decides to hold onto the paradox, he is confronted with the same decision time and time again. The individual must look deeper within himself—i.e. further ground his thought and decision in his awareness of his own existence—with each iteration of this recursive decision process. The more an individual contextualizes his thought in his understanding of his own existence, the more he moves further toward the absolute telos and away from relative ends. In summary, what ultimately matters for an individual’s own religious development is that *he and he alone* understands why a certain belief is paradoxical and *wills* to hold onto it. This paradox functions as an occasion for heightened inwardness of thought, which impels the individual toward the absolute telos.

IV. The Role of God

At this juncture one might object to the notion that the ethical-religious progress a subject makes is ultimately left up to him and him alone by referencing the role God plays in the individual's ethical-religious development. It is true, Kierkegaard states that "properly it is the God-relationship [i.e. the individual subject's relationship with God] that makes a human into a human being" (*Postscript* 205). This, however, cannot be taken at face value.

In the *Philosophical Crumbs*, Kierkegaard defines God abstractly, as being "the unknown", that which is altogether inconceivable. In one's relationship with God, a subject relates to Him by thinking about the difference between himself and God. Kierkegaard refers to this as an "absolute difference", since it is the difference between that with which the subject *is* acquainted and that with which *it can never be* acquainted. But naturally the human subject cannot conceive of the inconceivable. So here we have yet another paradox. In trying to compare himself to the "unknown" God, one can ultimately only really think about himself. That is, the mere conception of God—the mere contemplation of the unknown—is a sufficient occasion for the heightened inwardness of thought. The way Kierkegaard describes it makes acknowledging the "absolute difference" between oneself and God seem like a fully internal process that the individual subject could initiate even if we were to assume that God did not exist². Kierkegaard would likely agree that one's willingness to ponder the absolute difference is key to increased inwardness of thought. However, he would also likely claim that God does in fact play some role here to the extent that he always makes himself available to the individual, waiting to be "seen" by the individual³. In this sense, God, taken to be an external entity, can indirectly assist the

² Kierkegaard believes that insofar as everyone is born with some intuition that there is some way they should conduct themselves in life so that they may reach eternal happiness, they are also born with some conception of God. So as long as an individual has a conception of God, he can increase his inwardness of thought by pondering the "absolute difference" between himself and God.

³ See *The Philosophical Crumbs*.

individual in making ethical-religious progress by inducing him to become more inward in thought.

In the *Philosophical Crumbs*, Kierkegaard further shows that God assists the individual subject by functioning as a teacher who helps to restore the “condition for truth—which he later calls faith—back to the human subject who has willfully forfeited it by relating absolutely to relative ends. Kierkegaard asserts that those who lack faith forfeited it themselves, for it would be a contradiction if God—who only wills what is essential—would endow something only to take it away at a later time. Here, Kierkegaard explicitly describes God as a teacher, as an occasion for the restoration of “the condition”. He signals to the human subject that he is focusing too much on life’s relative ends and is thus “in error”—i.e. *moving away* from eternal happiness—by providing for the “absolute paradox”. This paradox is concerned with the very conception of God and has two facets: the first is the idea that God, an eternal being, came into existence in time. The other is that God loves us and forgives us of our sins. These both offend the understanding and induce the individual to look inward and decide whether he will believe them nonetheless. This, for Kierkegaard, and in the context of Christianity, is the decisive “moment” for faith, and thus, for eternal happiness.

We see here, then, that even God, regarded as an existing entity outside of the individual subject, cannot *cause* the subject to progress further down the path to ethical-religious development. Instead, God insinuates Himself, giving the individual subject to multiple paradoxes. He does not force the individual subject to realize that these are paradoxes. It is up to the subject to realize that the ideas of the absolute difference between oneself and God, of God living and dying on Earth, and of God forgiving mankind of its sins are all paradoxical ideas. It is

up to the individual subject to comprehend the opportunity for growth the paradoxes represent and take action by seizing them and holding onto them. God assists, but is merely an occasion.

IV. The Role of Other Human Subjects

Perhaps it is the case that ethical-religious assistance among human subjects is also possible and takes on an analogous form. Indeed, Kierkegaard seems to imply that this is possible throughout his discussion in the *Crumbs* and the *Postscript*.

Although Kierkegaard tells us that we should focus on improving ourselves and that it is presumptuous for us to assume that we can even know what will affirmatively benefit others⁴, human beings do demonstrate genuine interest and concern for the ethical-religious growth of others. He asserts in the *Postscript* that “[one’s] efforts are to mean nothing at all to any other human being” (114). This is not altogether inconsistent with Kierkegaard’s greater philosophy. For one, it follows from the idea that eternal happiness cannot be shared that one cannot attempt to lead another along the same path to ethical-religious development that has forged for himself⁵. The statement also seems imply that one can impart no direct change in another insofar as the intervention of the individual will has been shown to be crucial for one’s own ethical-religious development—that is, the will must intercede and become the driving force for repetition, renewing the fundamental change in one’s life from moment to moment.

However, this does not preclude *indirect means* of assistance analogous to those outlined in the previous section. Kierkegaard does, in fact, appear to imply that subjects can assist one another by such means.

⁴ Indeed, he suggests that it would be actually be antithetical to ethical-religious growth to try to assist another by guiding them, for inducing another subject to appeal to one’s own subjectivity actually leads him toward objectivity by taking the object of his focus outside himself (*Postscript* 54). This is why he complains that there is “too much teaching in the modern age” (234).

⁵ This idea would be more consistent with the acceptance of the Hegelian “system”. Also see Footnote 4.

For example, he speaks of indirect communication, whereby the speaker encrypts his speech by using figurative language, humor, and generalities to convey a message that the listener may only come to understand if he grounds the thought in the context of his own existence (*Postscript* 65). The speaker preserves his own inwardness of thought, as he does not directly instruct or try to force another subject to do exactly what he thinks would be most beneficial to him or otherwise try to copy his own path ethical development. Perhaps the clearest example of indirect communication Kierkegaard gives is in the *Philosophical Crumbs* when he argues that there can be no “disciple at second hand”⁶. He states that the most one can do for another subject is to say “I believe and have believed, that [such and such an event] has happened, despite the fact that it is foolishness to the understanding and an offense to the human heart” (*Crumbs* 165-166). In saying this, the speaker is not instructing the listener to do anything. He is speaking in earnest of a paradoxical belief he holds and informing the listener of its existence. Whether the listener truly comes to understand that it is paradoxical, that he must make a decision of whether or not to hold onto it, and whether or not he does is beyond the control of the speaker and entirely up to the listener. So, in real terms, the speaker “does” absolutely nothing for the listener. All he has done is present the other with an opportunity to further embrace inwardness. For him, this represents an opportunity by which he might be able to help another help themselves. In summary, he has done “everything possible to inhibit [the other] from determining their own views in immediate continuity with [his own]”. This provides compelling evidence in support of the thesis *for* ethical-religious assistance among fellow men.

Further, if Kierkegaard did not believe that human subjects cannot assist one another in some way he likely would not have dedicated so many pages of the *Postscript* to the criticism of

⁶ By this he means that a disciple of God who has received the “condition” in the manner described above cannot then directly impart the condition to another subject.

the religious speakers of his age. The job of a religious orator, he asserts, is not to comfort the masses, for that implies that the root cause of their life suffering is “misfortune” instead of the product of their being oriented away from the absolute telos. The very idea that misfortune is the cause implies that their suffering is ephemeral. It lulls the masses into a false sense of security, signaling to them that no paradoxes must be confronted, no decisions made, that their eternal happiness will come to them as a matter of course, and worse, that they rightfully deserve it. He instead argues that the task of the religious orator is to get people to stop and think, to turn inward, for “the main thing is that the individual goes home from church with the passion and fervor to carry the fight to the living-room” (390). He describes this as being a battle because it is painful for us to look within, to separate ourselves from the external world of relative ends that constantly beckons to us and exerts such a forceful pull because we exist in immediacy. So what must the religious orator do? Exactly what Kierkegaard does in writing the *Crumbs* and the *Postscript*: problematize, make things more difficult for the individual subject than they initially seem. And this brings us back to our assertion that Kierkegaard declaring man to be absolutely powerless.

Kierkegaard posits that one’s ethical-religious progress does not begin until he becomes willing to persist in the suffering that is generated by his realization that “in his immediacy [he] is inside relative ends absolutely” (386). In other words, because the human subject exists in the immediate, physical world, he cannot simply forego relative ends⁷—he lacks the agency to concern himself solely with the absolute telos. For Kierkegaard, the goal of saying all this is *not* to have his readers concede to their powerlessness and resolve to lead lives of passivity. The opposite is true. He states that declaring men to be powerless is actually an optimal practice for

⁷ For example, one cannot be wholly indifferent to the prospect of earning a living, to the degree that he must be capable of affording basic necessities integral to his survival.

religious orators: Explaining that a human being is absolutely incapable of anything...gives the listener occasion to look deeply into his own innermost being, helps him to disperse delusions and illusions, to lay aside for at least a moment the bourgeois small-town sugar-coating in which he otherwise finds himself⁸” (404-405). That is, this notion is offensive to the understanding of the listener; it is paradoxical because, over the course of one’s life, he comes to accept the idea that individuals do have at least some degree of agency. The listener who comes to recognize this discordancy is thereby confronted with a decision—what does *he* believe? Will he concede to the “fact” that humans are altogether powerless and henceforth avoid the decision-making that is so crucial to his development? Or will he hold fast to the notion that the human will is efficacious? In any case, by saying on so many occasions that man is powerless, Kierkegaard is engaging in indirect communication to challenge his readers, presenting them with an opportunity to turn inward and help themselves. This is a salient representation of what he is trying to achieve in writing these texts, and is a prime example of how people can assist one another in making ethical-religious progress, at least indirectly.

VI. Conclusion

Overall, this paper has demonstrated that just because Søren Kierkegaard emphasizes in his *Philosophical Crumbs* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that the individual human subject ought to be concerned first and foremost with his own ethical-religious development and being properly oriented toward the absolute telos, that does not mean that he cannot at the same time be concerned about the eternal happiness of another, provided that he relates to the latter as a mere relative end. He can have a positive influence without sacrificing his inwardness of thought by communicating *indirectly* with others. The individual subject can challenge others to

⁸ This “sugar-coating” of course being what has been described in the previous paragraph.

be more introspective and think differently rather than mindlessly following in the footsteps of the generations that came before. Whether the listener realizes the contradiction inhering between his own beliefs and the one newly presented by the speaker is outside the speaker's purview. Indeed, one can lead a horse to water but cannot make him drink.