

Soren Kierkegaard

Robert C. Soloman, *From Rationalism to Existentialism*. Rowman and Littlefield: 2001.

I. Introduction (Overview)

- a. Human beings are not living a passionate life (69)
 - i. “A human being ought to be passionate and committed, but no one now is willing to commit himself or allow himself to succumb to what Kant called the ‘pathology of passions.’”
 - ii. “This is an age of which men have given up the dangers of passionate commitment and assertive individuality and have turned to the comforts of ‘understanding’ and ‘reflection.’”
 - iii. “Men reflection on great happenings, but nothing ever happens.”
 - iv. “Men understand greatness, but no great deeds are performed.”
 - v. “Men have become superbly rational... but they have, in turn, forgotten ‘how to live.’”
- b. On Christianity (70)
 - i. “To be a Christian... is to suffer before God. The theologians know little of suffering, but a great deal of suffering.”
 - ii. “The Two Ways. One is to suffer; the other is to become a professor of the fact that another suffered.” (External Quote)
- c. Purpose of philosophy (70)
 - i. Philosophy should not be merely a quest for knowledge. Rather, it should be a quest to find out what to do; how to live.

- d. Focus on the individual (70)
 - i. Since his “concept of the individual self-realization is entirely ‘subjective,’ it carries with it no guarantee of objective truth, no criterion of general applicability or universality.”
- e. Attack on the systematic philosophy of Hegel and Western philosophy
- f. On philosophical truths and commitment to God (71)
 - i. “Rather, there are truths, ‘essential philosophical truths,’ which cannot be determined as valid for all men, or even for a group of men, but can only be determined by the ‘individual subjective thinker.’”
 - ii. “These truths, of which the ‘highest’ is the realization that the human soul is rooted in God, are expressions of individual commitment rather than of an objective detached truth which can be established by any rational impartial observer.”
 - iii. “Belief in God, in the peculiar Kierkegaardian sense which we shall discuss, is a matter of passion, not knowledge.”
 - iv. “...it is the manner and intensity of one’s belief, and not the object or objective necessity of belief, which determines truth.”

II. Kierkegaard's Life and Related to His Philosophy (72)

- a. Born in 1813 “into a devoutly Pietist family in which religious guilt was considered to be the definitive emotion in life.”
- b. He “became familiar with the world of scholarship at an early age.”
- c. “In the University, he confronted the philosophy of Hegel... and reacted strongly against the ‘reflective’ and impersonal attitude of systematic philosophy.”
- d. He “became progressively disillusioned with the philosophy at the University and the empty Christianity of the Lutheran church.”
- e. “He dropped out of the University and out of the church and indulged in a youthful spree of sensuousness that he never enjoyed before because of the guilt and despair which had never left him from his early home life.”
- f. He “returned to the University and entered the ministry as a Lutheran pastor.”
- g. “In the definitive acts of his life, Kierkegaard broke the engagement to marry, left the church, and withdrew himself from public life and began to write dozens of philosophic-religious treatises....”

III. On Christianity (73 - 77)

- a. “Philosophy or Reason and Christianity were absolute irreconcilable, for the very essence of Christianity was paradox and irrationality.”
- b. To be a Christian is to feel dread, guilt, and suffering.
- c. “...Christianity is not a body of knowledge, but it is a way of life.”
- d. “Because of the overwhelm demands of suffering, a Christian could be only the most spectacular of men.”
- e. “Since Christianity is not something that can be known at all, ‘acceptance’ is not appropriate to it. ‘Christianity is not a doctrine.’ What is required is passion – the passion of faith.”
- f. “...Kierkegaard relates faith to what is absurd, to what cannot be known not simply because of lack of warrant but because it is unintelligible... faith is passion, and so he is using the notion of ‘faith’ in a very special sense.”
- g. “The attempt to rationalize Christianity is nothing other than the attempt to make being a Christian emotionally empty. The many attempted proofs of the faith are nothing other than aids to digestion for the emotionally lazy and the passionless.
- h. “To be a Christian, is to isolate oneself and choose one’s own mode of life with a passionate commitment.”

IV. Attack on Hegel (77 – 84)

- a. "...philosophy under Hegel, had left no room for *wisdom*, for 'ethics'"
- b. Hegel did not know how to live.
- c. "Hegel's failure, as the failure of all the traditional rationalistic philosophy, was its avoidance of the 'subjective viewpoint', the 'existence of the individual.'"
- d. Subjectivity refers to the existence of the individual, which "can never be capture in logic for it is forever 'irreducible to a concept.'"
- e. "Logic, however, cannot capture the peculiarities of an individual person – his feelings, particular thoughts, emotions, dispositions – in short, all of those nonuniversal aspects of a persona to which we refer as his personality."
- f. Philosophy is to answer the question, "What can I do?"
- g. To answer this question, "one must bring into philosophy just those nonuniversal factor which logic cannot include – one's personal fears, desires, crises, neuroses, and personal commitments."
- h. He contrasts Hegel with the unsystematic philosophy of Socrates. "Wisdom, and not indifferent truths – practical guides for living and not reflective understanding - are the goals of Socratic inquiry" (80).
- i. "Philosophical inquiry for Socrates and Kierkegaard has its beginnings in an individual's confrontation with an ethical dilemma. Knowledge is knowledge only with reference to the demand of that individual to know what to do" (80).
- j. There is no room for the question, "What should I do?" in Hegel's philosophy.
- k. Hegel thought that freedom is an idea that belongs to the collective. Kierkegaard thought that freedom belongs only to the individual, rather than the group.

V. The Meaning of Existence

- a. Hegel fails to appreciate the seriousness of ethical dilemmas facing the individual, “that is, to appreciate that the concept of ‘individual existence’ involves the notion of ‘choice’, ‘individual freedom’, ‘responsibility’, and, with these, the concepts of ‘commitment’, ‘despair’, and ‘guilt’” (84).
- b. The definition of ‘existence’
 - i. Existence is spoken of in a special sense – “in a sense in which a man is not simply a biological, psychological, or social animal, but in which a man is a ‘human being’ and ‘existent’ which is something far more existing than the ‘mere’ existence of a particular organism” (85).
 - ii. “This notion of ‘existence’ is reserved for those who live as individuals, not biologically, but individually in their thought and their values. It is a term specially designed for those who are personally committed, who feel their freedom in despair, who recognize their responsibility for their actions...” (85).
 - iii. “The human being, who merits this special designation of his life as existence, is the passionate antisocial or at least asocial individual who is master of his own life, the author of his own values” (85).
- c. “...*existence* is something to be *striven* for” (85).
- d. “...a man *exists* only after a despairing struggle to separate himself from the ‘so-called’ existence of the collective idea” (85).
- e. “To achieve authentic individual existence is to commit oneself, deliberately and passionately, to a way of life” (88).
 - i. It is “a continuous confrontation with emergencies, competing desires, situations in which choices must be made.”
- f. On choice
 - i. Choice is irrational
 - ii. Ultimate choice is unjustifiable

- g. There is partial reason in the determination of individual choices
 - i. “These considerations are the personal desire, hopes, fears, eccentricities, and habits of the individual person. There is no ultimate justification for leading a moral life, that is no justification which would show that anyone at any time ought to be moral... (90).

VI. The Aesthetic Sphere (Life of Immediate Satisfaction and Gratification)

- a. The life of pure immediacy
- b. “The aesthetic life can be the life of whim, of immediate satisfaction and gratification” (93).
- c. “It has no moral principles, there is no good and no evil, there is satisfaction and dissatisfaction, fulfillment and frustration, pleasure and pain, happiness and suffering, ecstasy and despair” (Ibid.).
- d. The aesthetic life consists “in the enjoyment of the moment regardless of what that moment consists. One can enjoy good health or beauty, in himself or others, or riches and honor or talent in the arts as well a sensuous pleasure” (Ibid.).
- e. “The aesthetic life, although essentially unreflective, need not be unintelligent, for it may consist in the enjoyment or even creation of music (Mozart) or poetry, or even philosophy, as long as these are enjoyed purely for their immediate satisfaction” (Ibid.).
- f. The negative component
 - i. “...there is not only pleasure, but the constant threat of pain and suffering; not only satisfaction but frustration, and, what is worst of all, *boredom*” (Ibid.).

VII. The Ethical Sphere (The Rational and Ethical Life)

- a. “The basic feature of the Ethical would be expected to be the employment of universal rational principles that transcend and leave no exception for the individual but yet remain secular principles” (94).
- b. “The ethical life is the societal life, the life of a man who considers himself part of a community of men and lives according to principles which treat every man as an end in himself and subsume self-interest to moral duty” (Ibid.)
- c. “The ethical life, with its emphasis on universality, rationality, and duty, in short, *morality*, signified for Kierkegaard, as for Hegel, the ethics of Kant” (Ibid.).
- d. “Kant and Kierkegaard’s ethics are both Christian ethics, and the sanctions of Damnation and Paradise are implicit in them” (95).
- e. “Unlike the aesthetic life, the ethical life is characterized by reflection and self-appraisal, and with reflection one can appraise the meaningfulness of his life” (Ibid.).
- f. “The long-term significance and regard for principle rather than satisfaction, allows the ethical life to give a *meaning* (a coherence to (moral) principles) to existence that the Aesthetic cannot give...” (96).

VIII. The Relationship Between the Aesthetic and the Ethical

- a. Example of marriage: Psychic Love vs. Sensual Love
 - i. “Marriage (the culmination of ‘psychic love’) is contrasted with mere ‘sensual love or infatuation; it is not for the moment, but a commitment for the future; it is not aimed at personal gratification, but the interests of others” (97).
 - ii. “Sensual love requires only a given momentary feeling; psychic love and its culmination in marriage requires a decision to commit oneself” (Ibid.).

IX. Becoming a Christian – The Religious Way of Life

- a. The religious life is devotion to God
- b. To be religious is to be a Christian, but in a very strict sense; it is not the average Church attending Christian.
- c. “It is easier to be a Christian when I am not a Christian than to become a Christian when I am one” (External quote).
- d. “For Hegel, God is not transcendent as for Kant, but *immanent*. God for Hegel is that subject which is common to all men, and Christ is the symbol of ‘incarnation’, that is, the fact that god or Sprit is man, and man is God” (98).
- e. Kierkegaard is against the entire rationalist approach towards Christianity.
- f. God is transcendent
 - i. “God is not immanence – such a concept is ‘hypocritical atheism’ – but is transcendence, in Kant’s terms, *noumenon*, and essentially unknowable and incomprehensible” (98).
 - ii. “God is not only separated from man, but forever unknowable by man” (Ibid.).
 - iii. “God cannot be an object of knowledge, but simply an object of faith, and here Kierkegaard is agreement with Kant” (Ibid.).
- g. “The idea that God is at once eternal and temporal, is like a man but not at all like a man, is utterly and fundamentally absurd” (99).

h. Christianity is irrational

- i. It is irrational because “there are no external standards for choosing it, and the choice must be simple leap of faith” (99).
- ii. “However, in this sense, the religious way of life is no more irrational than the ethical way of life which is also autonomous and requires a leap of faith for its acceptance” (Ibid.).
- iii. “...Reason cannot comprehend the doctrines of Christianity” (99).
- iv. It cannot be understood, but “only to be accepted and lived by” (99).

i. The religious sphere is not based on Reason

- j. “The teachings of Christianity, therefore, cannot be based on Reason but must be based on *authority*” (100).

k. Revelation and experiencing God

- i. “...the Moment of revelation is required for religious faith” (100).
- ii. “It is only by feeling oneself in the actual presence of God that one can become a Christian” (Ibid.).
- iii. “At that Moment, the Eternal, which [until now] did not exist (for us), came into existence” (External quote).

l. Experiencing the eternal

- i. “It is this conception of the eternal which most clearly differentiates the religious sphere from the other two” (100).
- ii. “In the religious sphere, however, there is no concept of time; our recognition of God places us ‘beyond the this-worldly and the temporal’” (Ibid.).

m. Man is Sin

- i. “The central teaching of God, therefore, is that man is in Sin; acceptance of God is the acceptance that one is sinful” (100).

n. Teleological Suspension of the Ethical (101)

- i. “The breach between the religious and the ethical is best illustrated in the story of Abraham and Isaac.”
- ii. “In his choice between obeying the command of God and saving his son, Abraham was faced with an inevitable choice between the central precepts of the religious and the ethical.”
- iii. One’s first duty is to God, or the “teleological suspension of the ethical.”

X. Freedom and Subjectivity; Existential Value

- a. “It is the ‘existential value’ of freedom which determines the worth of one’s actions, that is, an action is of ‘existential value’ if it is the result of a freely chosen commitment” (102).
- b. “Free choice the mark of the ‘truly existent individual’, setting him off from the ‘crowd’” (Ibid.).