

Kierkegaard & Postmodernism: The Possibility of the Im/possible

Søren Kierkegaard, as the father of modern existentialism, stands alongside Friedrich Nietzsche and G.W.F. Hegel as one of the most influential and foremost 19th century philosophers apropos to contemporary Christian theology. He is a bit of an eccentric and unconventional figure and various interpretations, affirmations, and critiques of him vary wildly, suggesting that he is not only an interesting and idiosyncratic figure, but one of which opinions and judgments are immediately drawn. What is interesting here is that most of these opinions are drawn from deeply modern vantage points all be they of two different kinds. One the one hand, there are those who immediately commend Kierkegaard — his concept of the “knight of faith” as one who relies *solely* (and they would emphasize the word “solely”), taking a “leap of faith” toward the unknown — for returning to the true core of Christianity; that is, choosing revelation over *and against* reason to guide one’s religious life. One the other hand, there are those who would reject a blind — and they would stress the word “blind” here — leap of faith via the absurd and abhor Kierkegaard’s easy dismissal of a story that seems to condone murder and human sacrifice — if this is where revelation leads, then they will glad choose reason *against* it. It seems that these two typical views of Kierkegaard are beholden to modern rationalism and the hegemony of the Enlightenment. Rather than simply acquiescing to either of these poles perhaps there is a way to transcend both, an approach that views Kierkegaard as a “progenitor” of postmodernism.¹ In this view Kierkegaard does not force a choice between reason and revelation, rationalism and faith. Rather, he provides the groundwork for a type of post-rational faith, a faith that still relies on the absurd — not a *blissfully* ignorant absurd, but a *learned* ignorant absurd — and a faith that hopes against hope, that hopes, to borrow from John Caputo borrowing Jacques Derrida, in *the possibility of the impossible*. It is here that we find not a *via media*, for that would be play by the rules of modernism, but a *supra media*, a way that cuts beyond the reductionisms of the modernist critique not to roll back the clock to a stage of pre-

¹ John D. Caputo, *On Religion*, (New York, New York: Routledge, 2001), 51.

Enlightenment, but to become enlightened about the Enlightenment itself, and to find a faith beyond Faith. This is what Paul Ricœur speaks to when he writes, “Beyond the desert of [modern] criticism we yearn to be called again.”²

One important caveat needs exploring before continuing. Many modern examinations of Kierkegaard and his thought tend to focus almost solely on upon his handling of the Abrahamic narrative in Genesis, particularly the implication of his appropriation for modern ethics. Indeed, Kierkegaard’s famed “teleological suspension of the ethical” can seem quite farcical to many ethicists, especially those to whom Kant’s categorical imperative might provide a more normative approach to moral action. That Kierkegaard is reacting against and levying due critique to such a universal ethical project is hardly deniable as his existentialism precludes him from doing so. *Fear and Trembling (FT)* is rife with statements suggesting that “the single individual...sets himself apart as the particular above the universal,”³ that is, above the ethical System as it has been codified up to Kierkegaard’s time. It is therefore no surprise, given this radical departure from normative ethics, indeed a departure which suggests that ethics be ‘suspended’ for the sake of the religious, coupled with a biblical narrative which seems to, in light of this departure, condone not only murder but child sacrifice, that most commentaries on *FT* are fixated upon Kierkegaard’s use of scripture and conception of ethics.⁴ However, in light of our current postmodern condition, it is worth exploring whether these modern critiques miss a higher movement in Kierkegaard’s thought. That is not to say these critiques lack any significance or importance; on the contrary, they raise very important ethical concerns that most definitely deserve attention. Nevertheless, precisely because these issues are not

² Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan, (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1967), 349.

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay, (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 63.

⁴ Cf. *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, eds. Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain, (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), passim.

new and have received ample consideration from various thinkers both past and present,⁵ let us bracket out or suspend those very complex issues in order to approach Kierkegaard anew and perhaps (re)read him in a more oblique manner.

A central premise of Kierkegaard's argument in *FT* is his notion that one must, by virtue of the absurd, take a leap into the unknown, placing all of one's hope and faith in the impossible. "Faith is therefore no aesthetic emotion, but something far higher...it is not the immediate inclination of the heart but the *paradox of existence*."⁶ This is the highest and most noble religious movement denoting the difference between the admirable "knight faith," of whom Abraham is the quintessential example, and the odious "knight of infinite resignation," that is, the one who stops just short of taking the full leap of faith, of relying on the strength of the absurd that renounces human calculation.⁷ Faith, for Kierkegaard, resists any rational explication or sensible account, forcing a decisive choice: faith *or* reason, as the two simply cannot be reconciled or rejoined because faith cuts against the very heart of the rationalist project. Faith relies solely on the strength of the absurd, that the impossible will be made possible in — and beyond — the leap. This is the ultimate paradox of existence for Kierkegaard, that the individual is higher than the universal (the ethical) and the single individual determines her relation to the universal through her relation to the absolute (God).⁸ This relationship, this existential paradox, denounces any mediation, indeed it stringently resists mediation by its very nature, a posture of which Kierkegaard's infamous "teleological suspension of the ethical" is illustrative vis-à-vis Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, his only son. True faith for Kierkegaard does not involve reliance on a transcendental System, an ethical Universal, by which one's relation to God, the Absolute, is mediate. On the contrary, genuine paradoxical faith involves

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kierkegaard, 53. Emphasis mine.

⁷ Ibid., 38-39.

⁸ Ibid., 82.

rejecting such a universal mediation for the sake of the impossible, the singular existential decision to leap into the absurd, which escapes rationalism.

Small wonder then that Kierkegaard's existentialism, his knight of faith, is often described as being *irrational*; that is, decidedly against the rationalism of Kant and other 18th century Enlightenment thinkers. Such a label is surely indicative of Kierkegaard *in his time* as he was firmly reacting against the Hegelianism and rationalism of his immediate context. However, such a category is problematic today as it suggests a return pre-Enlightenment consciousness (if that is even possible) or a suspension of reason for sake of blissful ignorance and failure to think critically about important problems.⁹ It is here that we make an important shift toward the postmodern by suggesting that perhaps Kierkegaard could be, in retrospect, appropriated as *post-rational* rather than *irrational* as a forebear, not necessarily an antecedent, of postmodernism.¹⁰ Instead of turning back the clock on rationalism and the Enlightenment to a sort of pre-modern mode of thinking it is necessary, as the Ricœur quote above indicates, to go *through* the Enlightenment and *through* modern criticism, emerging on the other side with suspicions of both the Enlightenment *and* its preceding epoch, as universal arbiters of Truth (note the capital). As John Caputo has suggested apropos to Jacques Derrida it is important to become "enlightened about the Enlightenment resist[ing] letting the spirit of the Enlightenment freeze over into dogma."¹¹ Perhaps then the old slogan of the Reformation ("reformed and always reforming") might be applicable here when paraphrased: Enlightened and always enlightening. It is with this is mind that we can proceed in our (re)reading of Kierkegaard with the aid of a postmodern optic.

⁹ I understand that such a charge could be levied against my suspending of the very important ethical problems inherent in Kierkegaard's endorsement of Abraham's willingness to commit murder. Again, I do not suggest that these are to simply be jettisoned altogether, that would be irresponsible, not to mention dangerous. My point is only that unilateral fixation upon such modernist critiques may miss a deeper movement in Kierkegaard, a point at which we can turn toward the postmodern.

¹⁰ Elsebet Jegstrup, ed. *The New Kierkegaard*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004), 6-7.

¹¹ John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999), 2.

What might a leap of faith into the impossible by virtue of the absurd mean in this view? More specifically, what are the absurd and the impossible? The absurd is simply this: the reliance upon a hope and a faith that escapes human calculation and evades logical explanation, or, as Kierkegaard puts it, that movement which “begins precisely where thinking leaves off.”¹² Again, in a post-rational, postmodern view, this is not a movement against thinking, but an aporetic movement beyond thinking that recognizes the hegemonic limits of *sola cogito*. The impossible here is a bit more intricate and Derridean. Indeed, for our purposes it might be best to speak not of the impossible, but of the im/possible where the slash is representative of the coalescence of possibility and impossibility, that point at which the predictable or the knowable future is ruptured by an absolute future that is totally unexpected and completely unforeseen.¹³ It is indicative of a face-to-face encounter with the Levinasian Other, the wholly Other, who “stands before us and lays claim to us,”¹⁴ completely evading our subjectivity with alterity and rendering us *tout autre est tout autre* (“every other (one) is every (bit) other”).¹⁵ In this reading a truly Kierkegaardian leap of faith is one that opens up to the absurdity of an unpredictable and unknowable future, one that brings impossibility down into the realm of possibility, a “hoping against hope,” as St. Paul writes, for the incoming of that which is Beyond, that which is Other, and that which is beyond the human capacity of reasoning and systemization. It is through such an event, a *facere veritatem* (doing of the truth),

¹² Kierkegaard, 61.

¹³ Working with the later writings of Derrida, John Caputo has done extensive work on the notion of the possibility of the impossible and religion as that movement which makes a “pact with the impossible.” For a few examples see *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1997) and *On Religion*, (New York, New York: Routledge, 2001). For specific reference to Kierkegaard see “Either-Or, Undecidability, and Two Concepts of Irony,” *The New Kierkegaard*, ed. Elsebet Jegstrup, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004), 14-39, “Looking the Impossible in the Eye: Kierkegaard, Derrida, and the Repetition of Religion,” *Kierkegaard Studies: Yearbook 2002*, ed. Niels Jørgen et al., (New York, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 1-25 and “Kierkegaard and Derrida,” *Kierkegaard in Post/Moderernity*, eds. Martin J. Matušík and Merold Westphal, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), 216-237.

¹⁴ John D. Caputo, “Either-Or, Undecidability, and Two Concepts of Irony,” *The New Kierkegaard*, ed. Elsebet Jegstrup, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004), 22.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Willis, (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1995), *passim*. See especially 82-115.

that true faith, faith beyond rationalism and transcendental reason, and faith without certitude is realized.

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