

Overview of Kierkegaard's Philosophy

Kierkegaard's Situation

Lived in Denmark (1813-1855).

Two important contemporary situations:

1. The influence on the academic community of the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), who believed that by his own reasoning abilities he had formulated a system of beliefs that provided an *almost* complete and certain understanding of the whole of reality, including an explanation of the history of the world, i.e., of the human race.

For Kierkegaard, on the one hand, Socrates was the model philosopher because he never claimed to have arrived at a complete understanding of the truth of reality. On the other hand, Plato was the model anti-philosopher because he engaged in speculative philosophy that led him to believe he had arrived at a complete understanding of truth.

2. Christianity in Denmark was dominated by the Danish state church, the so-called **People's Church of Denmark** or **Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark**. Thus all the ministers and workers within the state church were (and are still today) paid by the Danish government from tax revenue.

Kierkegaard called the state church "Christendom", criticizing it for having turned Christianity into a spiritual system of traditional doctrines and recurring practices, what he called "empty externalities", that basically permitted people to avoid coming to grips with the inwardness of authentic Christianity whereby each individual stands alone before God and must deal honestly with his own sin in the light of God's grace.

Important Definitions

Existence = the *created* state of being of a particular, individual human being because God, the only *uncreated* being, has created him

"exist" – from the Latin *ex* = out of, and *ist* = be

Existing = participating in the *created* reality as a human being who cannot *directly* see the transcendent God and who is being created on an ongoing basis

E.g., "existing individual human being"

Existential = concerned with created existence, especially of a created individual human being

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Earle Craig

The existential question = What do I understand about my own existence as a human being, and how will I define my own particular, individual existence? What does it mean to be a human being? Who am I? What kind of human being will I be? How will I make my human existence meaningful and purposeful?

For Kierkegaard, the question boils down to, will I *decide* to be a human being who defines his life and choices completely and only by the truth of Christianity, or not?

Existential crisis = a critical event in a person's life that faces him into the question of how he will define his own particular, individual existence

Existential decision = the decision a particular, individual human being makes to define what he wants his existence to be

Kierkegaard's Project

NOT (like most other philosophers) to explore the nature of truth and the rationality of belief as a Christian. In other words, he was not pursuing the task of deriving a theory of *knowledge* (epistemology).

Not asking if Christianity is objectively true. He assumed it is.

Not asking if a person is rationally justified in believing in Christianity. He assumed a person is (in spite of his saying that Christianity is "absurd" and a "paradox").

Not asking if there is objective evidence for the truth of Christianity. He assumed there is AND that it matters that there is objective evidence for the truth of Christianity because how can one embrace something as true if he has no reason to think it is true?

BUT to explore the spiritual realities and dynamics of Christian faith. Instead of epistemology, Kierkegaard was pursuing the task of deriving a theory of *existential faith in Christ*. Thus he is typically called the Father of Existentialism even though some philosophers overlook his Christian faith.

Asking who is the person who has genuine, biblical, authentic Christian faith?

Asking who is the person who embraces the truth of Christianity in such a way that he will surely be saved?

Asking what does true, authentic, saving faith look like?

Kierkegaard, the Father of Existentialism

Definition of Existentialism as a philosophy

NOT any one school of thought, worldview, or shared beliefs about the nature of reality

Because existentialists have held widely different beliefs. For example:

Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) and Kierkegaard (1813-1855) were Christian believers who embraced a Christian worldview based upon biblical theism (=belief in God). Thus they were *theistic existentialists* or *Christian existentialists*.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was a German existentialist who embraced a worldview based upon his own individual synthesis of Darwinism and Stoicism. He made the famous statement, "God is dead!", resulting in a nihilism that actually promoted the elimination of unwanted human beings. Thus he was an *atheistic existentialist*.

Nihilism = a belief that there is no objective basis for truth resulting in there being no meaning, purpose, or value to life

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Albert Camus (1913-1960) were French existentialists who embraced an atheistic worldview along with their own brand of nihilism. Thus they too were *atheistic existentialists*.

BUT a shared perspective on three things:

1. The nature of the philosophical task—to pursue an understanding of HUMAN EXISTENCE
2. The questions that are most worth asking and answering, such as,

Who am I as an existing human being?
How am I to live my life as an existing human being?
In what should I invest my time, energy, thought, decisions in the midst of my existence as a human being?
Etc., i.e., any question that concerns the nature and meaning of my *individual* human existence
3. A minimal set of foundational assumptions:

The human individual is in some sense self-defining, i.e., he defines himself by his choices.

The human individual is free from other human beings with respect to these self-defining choices.

The human individual is responsible for the self-defining choices he makes.

The human individual cannot and must not try to shift responsibility for his self-defining choices on to someone else. He must remain separate from all other individuals when making these self-defining choices.

Kierkegaard's Three Questions That He Addressed

1. If a person calls himself a Christian because he believes that Christianity is true, attends church and Bible studies because he believes that they are important for being a Christian, participates in church sponsored functions and programs,

performs spiritual acts such as modern spiritual disciplines, does he then have genuine, biblical faith?

Kierkegaard's answer: No, not necessarily.

Kierkegaard would say that if Christianity is this easy, then how is it true that Jesus taught, "The way to eternal life is exceedingly narrow, and there are few who find it." (cf. story in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*)

Instead genuine, biblical faith must be a faith that believes in Jesus from the standpoint of the "situation of contemporaneousness" (or "contemporaneity" depending upon the translation)—where the individual interacts with the lowly, unattractive, despised, and rejected Jesus of his earthly existence 2000 years ago, not the high, powerful, majestic, and glorious Jesus of his second coming. This is in order to share in the lowliness, unattractiveness, derision, and rejection of the earthly Jesus (exactly what he told his disciples would happen) so as to face into all the problems, inward and outward, of this earthly and temporal existence. (cf. *Practice in Christianity*)

2. Can a person come to saving faith simply by being intellectually convinced of the truth of Christianity through objective evidence?

Kierkegaard's answer: No, not at all.

Kierkegaard would say that the problem with people when they reject Christianity is not that they do not have enough objective evidence to convince them intellectually, but that they are *unwilling* to be committed to the things of God.

Kierkegaard refers in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* to Lessing's (1729-1781) "ugly great ditch" where Lessing claimed that because he lacked proof for the miracles of the Jesus of history that he could not make the "leap of faith" over the chasm separating his belief in the Jesus of history from his faith in Jesus as the Christ. (cf. Jesus Seminar)

But the unbeliever instead should admit, "I know God is there and that I am morally accountable to him, even eternally condemnable by him, even though I am following the Bible, but I do not *want* to worship Him" (cf. Romans 1,2).

So Kierkegaard would say that the ditch/chasm between unbelief and true belief exists, but lack of evidence is not the problem. Unwillingness is. Lack of evidence does not produce the chasm. Hostility towards God does.

This does not mean that all the apologetics classes in seminaries and Bible colleges are irrelevant. It is good to know one's "faith" from the Bible, i.e., who God is and who we are as sinful, existing, individual human beings. But professors and students are misguided if they think that cogent arguments and evidence is what ultimately brings people to faith in the truth of Christianity.

3. What does genuine, biblical faith require? What are the nature and character of true, saving faith?

a. Kierkegaard would answer that true faith is a way of life, i.e. the “religious” life:

Three different ways of life according to Kierkegaard:

1. The *aesthetic* way of life—hedonistic and sensual in order to stave off boredom; constantly looking for new and unusual things to do in order to fulfill my need for pleasure.
2. The *ethical* way of life—pursuing morality and even obedience to God and His commandments in order to satisfy my conscience and the urge to do what is good and avoid evil because God has designed us humans to be moral beings; but if the *ethical* way of life is all that I pursue, then I do not have true, saving faith. This is the way of life of the Pharisees and other legalists.

At the same time Kierkegaard would say that it impossible to be too concerned about ethics and morality. The legalist is not the person who is overly concerned about morality, which is what we sometimes here within modern evangelicalism, but who is concerned about ethics/morality without the “religious.”

3. The *religious* way of life—where I am an ethical person, but my way of life and understanding of my relationship with God transcend ethics, which are universal, because I have come to grips with the depth of my moral depravity and my inability to obtain God’s grace and mercy in and of myself so that, like Abraham, I am willing to obey God even if he were to command me to do something that contradicts universal ethics—such as sacrifice my son.

b. Kierkegaard would also answer that genuine, biblical faith is an inward commitment to the infinite, to eternity, and to my “eternal happiness” in the face of my continually being offended by the truth of the gospel and hostile towards it—“to be infinitely concerned about [myself]” (cf. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*).

That “purity of heart is to will one thing”—to have an infinite passion in the midst of my continued sinfulness for God, for goodness as defined by God, and for eternal life that God has promised us through Jesus Christ.

The fact that sinful human beings are offended by the truth and hostile towards it means that any attempt by Bible teachers to make the message of the Bible more attractive and easier to embrace in order to sustain the “church” and preserve their own jobs is itself an act of rebellion against God. (cf. *The Moment*—“a 1,000 livings”; 1 Corinthians 9)

c. Kierkegaard would also answer that true, saving faith is an inward commitment that defines one’s very existence. It is an “existential commitment” to eternity

and “God” and the things of God even if I do not understand God very well at all.

For example, the pagan who is closer to God than the person who claims to be a Christian and performs Christian spiritual practices.

“If someone who lives in the midst of Christianity enters, with knowledge of the true idea of God, the house of God, the house of the true God, and prays, but prays in untruth, and if someone lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all the passion of infinity, although his eyes are resting upon the image of an idol—where, then, is there more truth? The one prays in truth to God, although he is worshipping an idol; the other prays in untruth to the true God and is therefore worshipping an idol” (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pg. 201).

Therefore true, saving faith is an inward commitment in the midst of incomplete and uncertain objective knowledge because human beings are always in the “process of becoming” (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pg. 86)

“Objectively the emphasis is on **what** is [known]; subjectively the emphasis is on **how** it is [known].” (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pg. 202)

“An objective uncertainty held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person.” (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pg. 203)

Therefore true, saving faith is a commitment that defines one’s very self and makes life meaningful and purposeful for the sake of the eternal.

- d. Kierkegaard would also answer that authentic, biblical faith as an infinite concern for myself is thus a commitment that I make for myself (and for God), NOT for other people (parents, church, social group, et al.) in order to gain their approval (which is not as easy to identify as we think). If I make the commitment of faith for other people, it is not true, saving faith.
- e. Kierkegaard would also answer that true, saving faith as inwardness is an unmediated commitment to God. In other words, it does not need anything or anyone external as a go-between in my relationship with God. If it is mediated by something or someone else, it is not authentic, biblical faith.

For example, true, saving faith needs no outward spiritual expression or practices as go-betweens in my relationship with God. (cf. Romans 5:1-2)

Even good, moral actions are not necessary to mediate my commitment to God—

Because of the teleological suspension of the ethical which demonstrates that there is something more important than morality, i.e., obedience

that comes from true inwardness regardless of what God commands me to do.

For example, Abraham was willing to transgress the moral/ethical in order to be rightly related to God, the infinite, when he offered up his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice in obedience to God.

Because the ethical is “taken up” into the religious way of life, which means that the religious cannot be reduced to the ethical.

The true believer does not define his existence in terms of his relationship to righteousness and morality, even though God himself has defined righteousness and morality as the universal ethic. Rather, he defines his existence in terms of his relationship to God, the infinite, transcendent creator who is gracious and merciful towards him.

True, saving faith is also not mediated by a person’s church, the Christian culture, or any other people.

Kierkegaard labeled the institution of Christianity that claimed to help people be rightly related to God as “Christendom” which denied the Christianity of the New Testament while preaching the New Testament—not because its doctrinal statements contained heresy per se but because it emphasized the correctness of doctrine and the outward practice of the spiritual aspects of what it believed Christianity required instead of authentic inwardness.

- f. Kierkegaard would also answer that authentic, biblical faith is inextricably bound together with an ongoing inner brokenness in the face of my own personal sinfulness and a consciousness of my need for God’s grace whereby I make an ongoing appeal to God for his eternal mercy. In other words, where there is no true contrition and brokenness in the midst of my sin and guilt, there is no saving faith.

“Guilt is the most concrete expression of [human] existence” (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pg. 528).

- g. Kierkegaard would also answer that true, saving faith is a matter of “inwardness”, of “subjectivity”—it is a matter of what is happening in the inner depths of my being, not of what is happening on the outside of my being because it is easy to make what is happening on the outside incommensurate with the inside.

True, saving faith is a matter of *being* a believer, not a matter of *doing* what a believer does.

Kierkegaard compares “being a dancer” with “making the motions of a dancer,” i.e., the difference between being infinitely and eternally committed to being a dancer vs. dancing without this infinite, eternal commitment. (cf. *Fear and Trembling*)

He compares the “knight of infinite resignation” who gives up everything in this life, thinking that by this God is pleased with him, with the “knight of faith” who takes it all back “by virtue of the absurd” and responds to God as though he never gave it up—even if he does not get it back in this realm because whatever he receives in eternity will be like receiving whatever he gave up in this realm, plus an infinite amount more. (cf. *Fear and Trembling*)

So true, saving faith is a matter of “subjectivity,” of my inner fundamental commitments and desires, that is forged in the crucible of existential crises.

Thus Kierkegaard’s famous statement, “Truth is subjectivity” regarding the “subjective existing thinker” and the “existing individual human being” (cf. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pgs. 87, 189, 190 respectively).

- h. And yet Kierkegaard would answer that the person of authentic, biblical faith manifests his authentic, hidden inwardness through recognizing the biblical duty to love his neighbor and *doing* concrete actions of love towards his neighbor (cf. *Works of Love*).
- i. Kierkegaard would also answer that authentic, biblical faith involves embracing what is “absurd.”

True, saving faith is, in an important sense, “irrational” in that it must face what *feels* like the absurd because Christianity is not natural even though it is rational. What is natural is to rebel against God. Therefore what is absurd is to believe all the truth about God that we can know in this realm, especially that God has embodied himself in Jesus of Nazareth as the Jewish messiah whose role demanded that he die on a cross.

“The absurd is that the eternal truth has come into existence in time, that God has come into existence, has been born, has grown up, etc., has come into existence exactly as an individual human being, indistinguishable from any other human being...” (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pg. 210; cf. Isaiah 53).

Therefore, the “leap of faith” that we hear attributed to Kierkegaard was not a leap from the rational to the irrational, but a leap from a hostile unwillingness to worship God to a friendly willingness to submit to God’s grace and mercy—and actually caused by God’s grace.

So true, saving faith involves embracing various existential paradoxes (apparent contradictions about how to exist as a human being who is rightly related to God)—

1. He who wishes to save his life must lose it.
2. He who wishes to live must die.
3. He who wishes to be first must be last.

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Earle Craig

4. He who humbles himself shall be exalted.

The paradoxical nature of faith arises from the fact that true wisdom flies in the face of that which seems wise, i.e., that which comes so naturally to us in the midst of our rebellion and hostility towards God. So, in a sense, true wisdom is unnatural because it is supernatural, i.e., provided through the grace of God as the individual existing human being relates to God with an infinite, inward passion for the infinite and his own "eternal happiness."