

“Kierkegaard’s Absolute Paradox and Offense as Means to an Understanding of Christianity”

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This paper has three parts. First, it defines and explicates Kierkegaard’s rendering of the absolute paradox, the assertion of God’s being simultaneously absolutely knowable in his similarity to man and absolutely unknowable in his difference. Next, it goes through a similar procedure with the interrelated concept of offense, the unhappy relationship of reasoned understanding and the absolute paradox. Finally, this paper argues that the two terms assist greatly in understanding the fundamental tenets of Christianity as exemplified in John 3:16.

Before venturing to explicate the paradox, a comment on the placement of the paradox within the larger work merits mention. Kierkegaard discusses his “absolute paradox” in the third chapter of his five-chapter *Philosophical Fragments*. This central placement underscores the importance of the term. The definitional exercise of the previous two chapters and the subsequent discussion of history in chapters four and five all find elucidation and context within this central argument.

To begin his explanation of the absolute paradox, Kierkegaard cleverly introduces the idea of paradox in general by giving the example that Socrates, the ultimate Western symbol for wisdom and human understanding, claimed to lack understanding about himself.¹ This playful introduction merits mention due its relevance to the specific line of thought delineated below and its relevance to overall work’s stated mission to offer a departure from Socratic thinking.² He

¹ *Philosophical Fragments* at 37

² See *id.* at 52, where Kierkegaard blatantly states “This project indisputably goes beyond the Socratic...”

then postulates that paradoxes must be the “passion of thought” since every passion inevitably wills its own downfall in its full realization.³

Next, Kierkegaard begins the train of thought leading directly to the explication of the absolute paradox. To get going, he asserts a critical given in contrast to Socrates’ statement above: Though man’s knowledge is limited, man knows full well what *man* is.⁴ This given combines with thought’s penchant for paradox in attempting to understand that which cannot be understood and leads to the renaming of the absolute unknown as “the god.”⁵ The discussion then turns to whether or not the god exists. This attempt seems ultimately futile from the beginning, as the unknown either does not exist (and is therefore most certainly unknowable) or the unknowable (i.e., the god) is definitionally unknowable through man’s capacity for reason. Likewise, an attempt to merely prove the correlation of “the unknown” with “the god” yields no proof of *existence* in the desired sense; such an activity would merely explicate a concept.⁶ These attempts to demonstrate *to* the existence of the god with reason alone (unaided by temporal evidence) prove unsatisfying, and Kierkegaard shifts to attempting to prove the god’s existence *from* his works. Kierkegaard notes that with any other individual besides God, this method might seem an inevitable failure before it starts; searching for an individual’s works would presuppose that the searcher has an adequate conception of the creator from the outset. With setting out to prove God’s existence from his works, the unique character of God’s essence “involving existence” ensures that this dilemma never arises.⁷

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.* at 38.

⁵ *Id.* at 39

⁶ *Id.* at 39-40.

⁷ *Id.* at 40-41

Continuing on, Kierkegaard demonstrates that attempting to prove the god's existence through his works⁸ leads one to look for his works in a perfect, or "ideal," state. Since even the slightest change in god's works as they *are* (ie: not in their *ideal* state) would force a reevaluation of the god's existence, any feasible attempt to prove the god's existence from his works necessitates the evaluation of the god's works only in the ideal. This logical leap ironically no longer involves the god's works, but the inquirer's ideal rendering of those works. Once the inquiry reaches this stage, it has proved itself because the presupposition of the god in the ideal comes from within the inquirer and implies a trust in the god that was present from the beginning.⁹ Kierkegaard then points out that this demonstration never actually could demonstrate what it set to i.e., the existence of the god; the leap to existence only occurs within one who already had an idealized conception of the god inside of himself, and such a person presumably obtained that view before the demonstration began.¹⁰ However, the demonstration does illustrate reason's inability to effectively understand the unknown despite its passionate drive to do so.¹¹ The demonstration up to this point effectively characterizes the god with polarized difference from the human being and the human understanding.

In genius fashion, Kierkegaard then uses the same point that demonstrates the god's totalizing difference (the human understanding's inability to prove the god exists) to prove the god's sameness. He asserts that the absolute difference outlined above is so different that man's

⁸ By "works" Kierkegaard seems to imply a traditional Thomistic definition where God instills a natural and unavoidable order to the universe. He speaks of God's presumed "wisdom in nature" (*id. at 42*) in a way reminiscent of Aquinas' eternal law as described in his *Summa Theologica*. I was reminded in particular of the section where Aquinas writes "God's wisdom, thought of as the plan by which he created everything, is a blueprint or model... The eternal law is indeed nothing else than God's wise plan for directing every movement and action in creation." *Summa at 284*.

⁹ *Fragments at 42*

¹⁰ *Id. at 43-4*

¹¹ *Id. at 44*

understanding cannot differentiate between himself and the god. Kierkegaard then theorizes, claiming ahistoricism, that the understanding's inability to distinguish itself from the god necessitates that the god appeared on Earth in the form of a human man with a normal¹² life.¹³

Lastly, a final component of the paradox emerges, the paradoxical nature of sin. Sin must come intrinsically from man since it is absolutely different from the god, but man's consciousness of sin (earlier defined as a person's self-imposed state of untruth)¹⁴ comes only with the god's teaching and might only be resolved through the total equality of the god with man.¹⁵

Kierkegaard has thus explicated his meaning of "absolute paradox," fleshing out both pieces, the god's absolute sameness and absolute difference.

The appendix to the chapter on the absolute paradox explicates the "offense." Offense occurs when the paradox and the understanding fail to find mutual agreement.¹⁶ The offended one always experiences offense as a sort of suffering.¹⁷ This suffering comes from the offense's collision with the paradox (Kierkegaard's rendering of the truth). Once Kierkegaard establishes this principal point, he goes on to explain the complicated relationship between the paradox and the offense. The crux of said explanation rests with the idea that the offense occurs outside the paradox (from within the offended person's own understanding), but the offended understanding thinks the opposite. The understanding mistakes the paradox itself for the origin point of the

¹² Here I refer to how the god "grows up as other human beings do, marries, has a job, takes tomorrow's livelihood into account as a man should" at *Id.* 44. I struggled with whether or not to put this adjective in scare quotes, but since I'm giving Kierkegaard's thoughts and not my own, I decided against it, since I think he was trying to characterize a "normal" life, even if that life was of course so radically different from his own.

¹³ *Id.* at 45

¹⁴ *Id.* at 15

¹⁵ *Id.* at 47

¹⁶ *Id.* at 49.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 49-50.

offense. This misunderstanding constitutes the “acoustical illusion” of this section’s subtitle.¹⁸

The illusion reverses the actual state of things, and the offended person believes the paradox as untrue while viewing his understanding as whole truth. The offense also insists that it discovered the paradox, while the opposite is true; the offense owes its existence to the paradox.¹⁹ Since Kierkegaard has demonstrated the paradox’s validity in the foregoing section, these confusions on the part of the offended understanding only assist in *verifying* the paradox’s truth. They can never logically challenge the paradox. Instead, the inability of man’s reason to reconcile the paradox with his understanding, offense, only *positively* demonstrates the paradox’s existence.²⁰

Now that Kierkegaard’s concepts have been explicated and outlined above, the question remains as to whether these concepts help in understanding Christianity. *Prima facie*, this question poses myriad definitional obstacles making it seem hydra headed to the point of impossibility.²¹ To limit the scope of this potentially gargantuan inquiry, this paper will take John 3:16 as a fair rendering of the fundamental summation of Christian doctrine. The famous verse reads, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”²² One might apply the principles of the absolute paradox with the corresponding components of the verse with considerable ease. “God” clearly corresponds with the unknown (the god) in its absolute difference. The verse highlights the God’s omnipotent ability to give immortality in order to establish the difference between him

¹⁸ *Id.* at 50-51.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 52-53.

²⁰ *Id.* at 51

²¹ I recognize that the prompt asked for analysis in light of *my* understanding of Christianity, but, having not been brought up in the Christian religion from birth, my understanding is multifaceted and self-contradicting in the manner described. That being said, a belief in the principles outlined in John 3:16 seems to be universal among virtually all Christian doctrines.

²² This is the translation from the King James Bible.

and man. The second component of the paradox, the god's absolute sameness, finds its parallel with the "Son" of the verse (Christ). Just as the learner must understand the paradox in both its seemingly conflicting statements in order to achieve the state of truth, a Christian must believe both in Christ's divinity *and* the ordainment of said divinity by God the father in order to achieve everlasting life. Kierkegaard's offense similarly finds a scriptural counterpart in the verse above, but it appears negatively rather than positively. The verse implies that belief in both the son and the father serves as the only way by which one might achieve eternal life.²³ Offense similarly occurs when the understanding cannot reconcile the two components of the paradox with mutual understanding. Anything other than accepting reason's inability to grasp the paradox and consequently accepting the paradox as true leaves the offense intact, so the offended person remains in a state of untruth.

Though Kierkegaard's rendering of his "absolute paradox" ultimately involves abandoning reason and accepting the fundamental tenets of Christianity on faith, it reaches this conclusion through strikingly well-reasoned and intricately precise argumentation. In doing so, it assists greatly in helping a contemporary reader find the reason in the unreasonable nature of Christian doctrine.

Works Cited

²³ It of course might also merit mention that this inference is positively established numerous times throughout the Canonical Gospels. One such occurrence is only two verses after the one discussed in this paper (John 3:18).

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