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KIERKEGAARD'S CHRISTIAN JUDGEMENT ON ETHICS

Jeremy WALKER

IN this paper I want to ask what ethics means in Kierkegaard's thought. The range, and poetic subtlety, of his writings makes this peculiarly hard to answer. And in a broad sense ethics is the central theme of all his thought. My question is: Can we say anything that is sharper and clearer than that?

I

We must begin by accepting the division of his published writings into two groups, the pseudonymous and the acknowledged. None of the pseudonyms (except Anti-Climacus) is a Christian; all the acknowledged works are expositions of Christian doctrine by a Christian, even if a soi-disant bad one. Some of the pseudonyms claim to be religious, but their religion is not the Christianity expounded by Kierkegaard. Nor is their understanding of religion the same of Kierkegaard's. Even "religiousness B" is very far indeed from Christianity as Kierkegaard himself understands and expounds it. From his point of view all the pseudonyms, again excepting Anti-Climacus, *necessarily* misunderstand Christianity. If so, it is implied, they must *necessarily* misunderstand everything important about human existence.

Now many of the pseudonyms talk about ethics. This idea takes the characteristic form in their writings of a particular stage, or mode of existence: the "ethical". Can we, then, at least begin by establishing a clear meaning for the idea of the ethical as a form of life?

Let us turn to the theory of the stages. I want to make a series of points about this theory. The first is that, strictly speaking, there is no one "theory of stages" in Kierkegaard. We have rather a number of different accounts of the stages by pseudonyms who are themselves represented as being at one stage or another. Admittedly these accounts show certain resemblances. They tend to agree in counting the aesthetic as the lowest stage, the ethical as the next stage, and the religious as the highest stage. They tend also to agree on the placing of intermediate activities. Metaphysics goes between aesthetics and ethics in several books: the group consisting of poetry, psychology, and dialectics is placed between the ethical and the religious. The pseudonyms tend to connect irony with ethics and humour with religion, as also melancholy with aesthetics and resignation with ethics. But these resemblances are only formal — not necessarily structural —, and do not warrant identification of

one and the same theory in all pseudonyms. This question cannot be decided before we have carried out minute rhetorical analyses of each and every text. For formal and superficial likenesses of doctrine may well mask real differences which are embodied in Kierkegaard's literary techniques. As an example, the word "repetition" is often used in connection with the idea of the ethical. But, I claim, by itself this is insufficient to prove doctrinal overlap. For perhaps the word is being used in significantly different ways, and only linguistic analysis can tell us whether this is so or not.

The second point about the "theory of stages" is that such a theory is nowhere presented *objectively*. Since each pseudonym is himself at some stage, they can do no more than represent the stages as they appear from their own standpoints. Again, some appear to occupy roughly similar standpoints. For example, *Repetition, Fear and Trembling, The Concept of Dread, the Fragments*, and the *Postscript* are all (whatever their differences) written from the complex standpoint of the poet-psychologist-dialectician. Now it is central to the theory of stages that, put crudely, things look different to individuals at different stages. So too for the stages themselves. So the idea of the ethical, for example, will take different forms for the aesthete, the metaphysician, the ethical man, the psychologist, and the Christian. So too will specific ethical ideas, like duty or marriage. (In fact the idea of the ethical is plainly described in two quite different ways in the pseudonymous books. One group uses concepts like "universal", "repetition", "duty"; the other uses concepts like "individual", "subjective", and "passion". And although there are verbal overlaps, it is plain that we have to do with specimens respectively of Hegelian and Kantian ethics.)

The idea of a theory of stages came to Kierkegaard from Hegel's *Phenomenology*. It is axiomatic in Hegel that things look systematically different according to the thinker's mode of consciousness. But in Hegel there is also, beyond all particular and so distorting standpoints, an objective standpoint. To the philosopher everything appears as it truly is. Kierkegaard forecloses on this method of achieving objectivity, at least as regards forms of human practice, including ethics. He does not merely think that no human being can occupy the standpoint of conscious eternity. It is rather that some aspects of human existence cannot be fully understood if understood as objective phenomena. Hegel's modes of consciousness and Kierkegaard's stages are simultaneously forms of theoretical reason and forms of practical reason. (Admittedly, we find in the *Phenomenology* what look like forms of pure theoretical reason, e.g., sense-certainty or scientific reason, and forms of pure practical reason, e.g., family life or romantic morality. But as Kojève has shown these are not actually separable modes of thought or activity. For Hegel, the ideas of theory and practice are abstractions from a totality which is always necessarily both thought and practice). Now, according to Hegel forms of practice can be objectively understood, i.e., grasped theoretically, because they are implicitly themselves forms of theory — or conversely because philosophical theory is itself the ultimate form of practice. Kierkegaard rejects any such assimilation. For him, modes of practice can be exhibited only in a human existence, not in a theory, and similarly can be grasped only through living and not merely through thinking.

Contrasting Kierkegaard with Hegel, we might say that the stages can be presented "for themselves" and "for each other", but not "in themselves" and "for us"; and not "in and for themselves", that is, Phenomenologically. Yet there is still an analogue in Kierkegaard for the Phenomenological standpoint, and it is the complex standpoint I mentioned earlier, which we might call "poetic psychology" or "psychological poetry". This is unique in relation to the stages, since one who occupies it is able to grasp the stages as they appear to themselves while seeing them from outside, even though he can grasp them only imaginatively and not practically.

Kierkegaard's poet-psychologist, like Hegel's philosopher, is essentially a dialectician. His dialectic resembles Hegel's in one crucial feature. In the *Phenomenology* we are shown how each mode of consciousness embodies a finally incoherent set of concepts — an inconsistent piece of theory and meta-theory. And we are also shown how the incoherence of any conceptual scheme can be demonstrated from within itself. This is also true of the stages. The pseudonyms use their dialectic to create characters (often themselves) who represent their stages so fully that they are on the edge of awareness of their own pending incoherence. Judge William's account of the ethical existence, for example, is so lucid that finally he runs up against the idea of the *extraordinarius* — an idea which is wholly inconsistent with the Judge's definition of ethics, and signals to the reader that this definition must be inadequate or incoherent. If Kierkegaard's dialectic resembles Hegel's in this important way, it also differs in three no less crucial ways. It is not objective, but psychological; it is not systematic, since it is not theoretical; and, for the same reason, it is not historical. Hence there could not be a Kierkegaardian Phenomenology.

It is crucial that poetry, psychology, and dialectics are not autonomous standpoints in the way Hegel's "philosophy" is. Anyone can have all or any of these powers. They do not form a stage by themselves; rather, we should see them as techniques of understanding and representation available at all stages. So, where the *Phenomenology* contrasts particular modes of consciousness with the philosophical consciousness, Kierkegaard contrasts modes of consciousness with their own poeticized-psychologized forms. So we still do not find in Kierkegaard a phenomenology which is, like Hegel's, external and thus objective.

II

We might argue here that, although there is no externally objective standpoint in the pseudonymous works, still there is one in Kierkegaard's total corpus: namely the Christian standpoint. But there is a difficulty with this claim. In the acknowledged writings there is no discussion of the theory of stages or any important part of it. But if Kierkegaard had thought that Christianity provided a standpoint from which the theory of stages could be objectively analysed and refuted, he would surely have done so in his acknowledged texts. So on the surface it looks as if Kierkegaard himself did not see Christianity as dialectically related to the stages in the way speculative philosophy in Hegel is dialectically related to the earlier parts of the *Phenomenology*. I say more about this below. In any case, although there is a sense in which for

Kierkegaard only Christianity possesses “the truth”, this is not a sense of truth which is in any way objective except in that it is authoritative.

Let us here consider the third point about the theory of stages; that it contains no kind of deduction of Christianity. Here again Kierkegaard’s writings, even if phenomenological, are very un-Hegelian. For in Hegel the final stage of philosophy can offer an objective analysis of preceding stages only in virtue of the fact that it derives itself dialectically from those earlier stages.

In the pseudonymous books we find certain typical distinctions between the ethical and the religious, and certain typical ways of connecting them. Let us identify some of the distinctions. In *Fear and Trembling* Johannes de Silentio argues that faith is a paradox. He does not mean that what the believer believes is paradoxical, except in the weak sense of “contrary to common sense”; he means that the condition, or ground, of faith is a paradox. For, from his quasi-Hegelian standpoint, it is self-contradictory that any individual should be related immediately to God, and that this relationship should impose duties contrary to the duties of ethics. In the *Fragments* and *Postscript* Johannes Climacus argues that certain elements in what the Christian believes are paradoxical — in a rather different sense of paradox. This judgement, too, issues from an ethical standpoint, although one that is quasi-Socratic. In *The Concept of Dread* Vigilius distinguishes two kinds of ethics, one based on metaphysics and the other on dogmatics and concerned with the concept of sin. Non-Christian ethics, according to Vigilius, cannot take account of this concept. To this list of distinctions we might add Anti-Climacus’ argument that Christ constitutes an “offence”. Now what does such evidence show? It does *not* show that Kierkegaard himself thought Christian faith or ethics involved a “leap”. It does *not* show that he thought Christian doctrine was self-contradictory. It does not show that the pseudonyms think Christianity as faith to be self-contradictory or as existence to be self-defeating. It shows only that, if one makes certain prior logical and ethical assumptions, one is debarred from adopting the Christian faith and embracing the Christian ethics.

If these distinctions suggest that there is no deduction of Christianity from the ethical in the pseudonymous texts, whether the deduction is modelled on Hegel or on Kant, there are also certain connections between ethics and religion which the pseudonyms make in ways suggesting that some deduction of Christianity might be possible after all. For example, in the second volume of *Either/Or* Judge William argues that the aesthetic existence unfolds into an inevitable despair which can be overcome only by an act of “absolute choice”. This defines an ethical existence which is, however, in the Judge’s eyes at the same time essentially religious and indeed Christian. In the *Fragments* Johannes argues that there is a natural dialectic within human reason which leads reason to a point where it collides with something essentially beyond reason. I use the expression “natural dialectic” to bring out the Kantian ancestry of this argument. Again, in *The Sickness Unto Death* Anti-Climacus constructs a concept of the self one of whose implications is that true selfhood is gained and known only in faith.

Taking these typical pseudonymous positions together, the most we can say in favour of a phenomenological deduction of Christianity from the ethical is this. If a

man is poet, psychologist and dialectician, his reflections on aesthetic and ethical existence may lead him to a point where he finds himself forced to create a "poem" about human existence that, at the same time, he finds both incredible and impracticable. This poem is recognisable as a version of parts of the Christian faith. But it is clear how far this is from a deduction of Christianity, if we remember that these pseudonymous presentations of "Christianity" are (1) poetic, (2) paradoxical, and (3) hypothetical. For the believer, of course, Christianity is not poetic, not paradoxical, and not hypothetical. It might be replied that, even if Kierkegaard's "phenomenology" contains no deduction of Christianity, at least it offers a kind of deduction of an image of Christianity. But this reply is no use. For what is it that is supposed to occupy the final stage? A poem which even as a hypothesis is a paradox. But this is no more genuine Christianity, or even religion, than a poetic image of the ethical life is a kind of ethical existence. Genuine Christianity is a way of life; a faith, and moreover one which understands; and a commitment. So what is "deduced" in the pseudonymous works is not and cannot be Christianity.

III

These arguments show that Christianity does not function in the pseudonymous corpus as the philosophical standpoint functions in Hegel; as a standpoint which is both internal to the dialectic and objective in relation to the preceding stages. But it might still be the case that the Christian standpoint functions in Kierkegaard's total corpus as a standard by which the stages, including the ethical life, can be assessed. This brings me to my fourth point about the stages: there is indeed an implicit Christian judgement on the stages, and this includes the judgements that these forms of existence are essentially *sinful* and accompanied by essentially corrupt modes of consciousness. And these judgements apply equally to the ethical stage.

Now there is no single definition of the ethical in the pseudonymous corpus. There are a number of different partial indicators. These direct us towards three familiar kinds of ethical system: the Hegelian, the Kantian, and the Platonic-Socratic. These are all ethics of will and the will's law, although each offers a peculiar analysis of these concepts. For Kierkegaard, the Christian judgement too must be based on a Christian concept of will and moral law. This concept necessarily refers us to the concept of divine grace. It is here that all "ethical" standpoints stumble and fall. For, from Kierkegaard's Christian standpoint, the natural will is essentially corrupt. Kierkegaard remarks that this possibility never occurred to Socrates, and that it is indeed something that cannot be handled within a Socratic framework. However a historian might reply that it certainly occurred to both Kant and Hegel, and that each tried to handle it within his own ethical and metaphysical system. This raises extremely complex problems, and what I now say merely scratches their surface.

For both ethical systems, the crucial fact is that the operation of grace in human existence cannot be adequately acknowledged in either ethical system *as an empirical reality*. Consider Kant. In his *Religion*, we find a concept of radical evil. Kant uses this concept, inter alia, to distinguish two axes for the will: a weak-strong axis and a

corrupt-holy axis. Since these are distinct, we have a typology of four modes of will: weak and corrupt (everyday), weak and holy (the saint), strong and corrupt (the demonic), and strong and holy (the angelic). Kant recognises that the problem of ethics cannot be solved by moving from weakness to strength of will. It requires movement also from corruption towards holiness. Yet in Kant's own terms this movement can be represented only as a postulate of reason, and one which must always remain unintelligible to our understanding and unachievable by our own unaided will-power. The very terms of his metaphysics make it meaningless to speak of grace as empirically real.

Again, in Hegel's system the corruption of the will is identified primarily as isolation of the particular will (spirit) from the Absolute Spirit. The will, perhaps, becomes holy insofar as it coincides with this Absolute Spirit. And it is Hegel's main objection to Kantianism that the latter made impossible this unification of the finite and infinite, a unification which is the heart of Hegel's whole philosophy. Now the finite will is reconciled practically with the infinite in finding its own substance in the objective forms of social existence; and it is reconciled theoretically with the infinite in finding its own creative subjectivity universalised in the successive absolute forms of art, religion, and philosophy. There is even an analogue in Hegel for the idea of grace. It is the idea that Absolute Spirit is implicitly operative within all finite modes of spirit, so that what a Christian calls the Divine Will is already implicitly at work in each human will. However, in Hegel all these essential truths of Christian doctrine are re-presented in rational (dialectical) form; and for this reason alone the Hegelian ethics is no less unsatisfactory to Kierkegaard than the Socratic and Kantian ethics. For Kierkegaard, the operation of divine grace, like everything characteristic of Christianity, is a matter of faith; experience, certainly, but the experience of the believer alone. No dialectical argument for the operative reality of grace can reproduce the Christian's experience of its reality through his faith. Just as Kierkegaard says that God "exists" only for the believer, so grace can be experienced only by the believer.

Now the experience of grace goes with another characteristic mark of Christianity: the experience of sin. Sin, too, cannot be experienced as real except by the Christian. That is, the essential corruption of the human will cannot exist as an ethical reality except within the Christian framework. So, Kierkegaard might have argued, a non-Christian ethics is not only unable to resolve the problem of the will's corruption, it is unable to present this as a real problem. Therefore the fact that both Kant and Hegel tried to solve this problem, however laudable, shows only that their basic metaphysical assumptions must be radically inconsistent with their ethical beliefs. A Christian ethics can no more be presented within a critical or speculative framework than it can be stated within the limits of Greek metaphysics.

Now according to Kierkegaard corruption of the will implies corruption of the entire consciousness. This means that, from a Christian standpoint, the pseudonyms have a corrupt and false moral understanding. But they must also have a corrupt and false understanding of the ethical — of what ethics is, and what it means in the total universe of human existence. In the modern jargon, their meta-ethics too must be confused and inadequate. Among such confused meta-ethical beliefs we might list the

following familiar pseudonymous claims: (1) Judge William's claim that the "either/or" in human existence is a choice between the aesthetic and ethical existences; (2) his belief that the ethical is the highest stage of human existence, and includes a religious existence in itself; (3) the common belief that the ethical life is inconsistent with the practical demands of Christian faith; and (4) the common belief that the ethical existence is solely or mainly a function of inwardness. I would say that these specimen pseudonymous beliefs are, from Kierkegaard's own standpoint, not only false but *conceptually corrupt* in ways following from corresponding forms of the will's moral corruption.

We must remember here that the ethical is presented by pseudonyms. Now these pseudonyms are creatures of poetry. This means that, unlike ordinary people, they can themselves be presented as consistent. Hence their meta-ethical theories, their ethical reflections, and their actual existence can be, unlike ours, a consistent whole. So their understanding of the ethical may correspond perfectly on the level of theory with their existence in practice. This is why corruption of consciousness can be exhibited in the pseudonymous works as a consequence of corruption of will.

However, even if there is a Christian judgement on the ethical existence, it is in no sense "objective". There are at least three reasons for this. First, according to Kierkegaard Christianity is essentially a matter of faith and, I would add, a gift of grace. Now the pseudonyms too sometimes say that Christianity is a matter of faith. But they mean that it is a paradox that cannot possibly be understood, but must be believed. For Kierkegaard himself, on the other hand, it means that although Christian doctrine can be understood, it can be understood only by one who believes it. This is not, however, "objective", since it lies beyond the limits of all possible philosophical systems. Second, if the Christian standpoint were objective, it would be capable of being set beside the other standpoints in such a way as to permit comparative judgements of conceptual and existential adequacy. But this is impossible; the pre-Christian and Christian positions are incommensurable. And third, although Kierkegaard insists with Anselm that Christian faith can be understood, it can be understood only from within. So the Christian judgement on existence can be intelligibly made only by one who is himself a Christian.

Here we can ask again: Why is Kierkegaard silent in his religious works about the ethical life and all that goes with it? It is because the Christian judgement is that the ethical is corrupt. But this judgement can be *uttered* only from a position of authority such as Kierkegaard never pretended to. He claimed only the kind of authority which allowed him, as an individual, to speak out against Establishment Christianity. So, lacking the required form of religious authority, he could not say in public what he believed about public forms of life. And it is precisely part of his attack that those possessing such authority were not using it to speak out against the un-Christianness of Danish Christendom.

IV

Besides the idea of the ethical presented in the pseudonymous works, Kierkegaard also gives us under his own name a series of analyses of elements of a Christian ethics.

I do not want to discuss this here, only to point out that it is totally distinct from any concept of the ethical we find in the pseudonyms. The two fundamental "ethical" duties we find stressed in the religious works are obedience to authority and charity. The Christian life itself is summarized in the categories of following, imitating, and witnessing. These ideas have no analogues in the ethical life; nor is any of them original to Kierkegaard.

From the Christian standpoint the ethical existence has nothing "ethical" about it. I do not mean that Kierkegaard thought it impossible for an unbeliever to lead a life which is recognisably Christian. I am sure he allowed for grace and true virtue outside — or even inside — Christendom. Equally we should allow that an individual who is and who thinks of himself as leading an ethical life may in fact be living a Christian life. A man can be a "knight of faith" without knowing it. I mean, rather, that the truly ethical life is grounded in the consciousness of sin and grace, and the reality of grace and faith, nothing of which can be present except *per accidens* in a non-Christian ethics.

We find, then, two absolutely different notions of ethics in Kierkegaard's corpus. One is a Christian ethics, upon which he reflects and discourses for a Christian audience. The other is a set of modern pagan ethical systems, presented by imaginary characters for an audience which, whether or not it believes itself to be Christian, is mistaken in its idea of Christianity. Kierkegaard himself assigns ethics to the category of edification. This is easy to apply to his religious writings, not so easy for the pseudonymous ones. About his acknowledged writings we can say the following. They are not meant to be edifying just in the sense of upbuilding their audience's understanding of Christian doctrine. They are aimed rather at the will, or conscience. Kierkegaard assumes that his audience understands more or less clearly what is required; and indeed it is not hard to understand. The difficulty, as Saint Paul said, is in the doing. However, we must add that where will or conscience is divided and unclear, there intellect will be unclear as well. So to some extent reflection may indirectly help to clarify the will. Nonetheless, the theoretical aim of these discourses is subordinate to their practical aim.

How precisely did Kierkegaard, writing as a Christian, mean his pseudonymous works to be edifying? His own answer was that he wanted to show his contemporaries how to become true Christians, instead of aesthetes or philosophers; and that he also wanted to show them how difficult this was. But this explanation is not really satisfactory. For by hypothesis the intended audience for the pseudonymous works is not Christian. So the realities of the Christian experience and life could not be intelligible, and could not be made intelligible, to them. Then the idea of becoming a Christian could not be intelligible either; and there is no dialectical path from natural reason to faith. Further, there is nothing theoretical about becoming a Christian; there is no way (for Kierkegaard) of becoming a Christian except by the gift of faith. And that is free, not the reward of the individual's works. Shall we say, then, that Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works are a massive negative elenchus of the modern consciousness and existence? If so, its audience might learn three things: first, that if they think they are Christians they are in all likelihood mistaken; second, that if they want to become Christians they cannot do so merely by leading lives which are

ethical according to contemporary social and philosophical standards; and third, that in any case these modes of ethical existence make demands which cannot be naturally fulfilled.

Even so, it is still not clear what Kierkegaard thought his pseudonymous works could achieve. Remember that his most consistent judgement on his contemporaries was that they had lost passion and substituted for it a self-deceiving reflection. "Edification" in this context must mean primarily the restoration of *passion* to human existence. But how can this be done? The pseudonymous works, highly reflective themselves, are aimed at their audience's powers of reflection. But, as Kierkegaard should have realised, they would merely feed into this universal reflectivity. They would give people more to chatter about, more interesting ways of avoiding action and commitment. And surely this is precisely what has happened to Kierkegaard? I suggest, moreover, that one reason why it has happened is that the pseudonyms themselves are not merely reflective personae, but chatterers. Kierkegaard's whole procedure, then, was highly risky, since if writing for an audience which tends to chatter, it must be risky to try to get them to see this and stop it by offering them a series of portraits of virtuoso chatterers. The risk is that the audience may be fascinated, not edified.

Suppose, speculatively, that passion is a constant element of human being, present whether or not it is acknowledged. And suppose that despair is a natural concomitant of certain forms of human existence, and is itself in fact one expression of passion. Then we may interpret the reflectivity which issues in illusion and self-deceit as a natural human response to the pressure of despair, and so a distorted but still intelligible way in which passion is expressing itself. Now *if* an individual in this condition can be got to reflect still more profoundly and acutely, he may be brought to awareness of his own despair. At the same time, he will become partially aware of the reasons why he has suppressed this despair, and aware that his reflectivity was a response to this suppression. All the while he is also becoming aware of the deep reasons why he has been in despair. But this process must affect not only his understanding but also his passion. For up to this point his passion has been, so to speak, thrown into the project of suppressing his despair in a substituted self-delusion. And now it is partially freed from this project. Hence it can be utilised by the individual himself in a mode of existence which is not wholly and essentially despairing.

Now that paragraph contains a crude account, I think, of the psychiatric process; it also gives a crude account of something central to Kierkegaard's thought and literary activity. And it is the only scheme of ideas which I can at present conceive to give sense to the ethical drive of his pseudonymous writings. Notice that in saying this I am assuming something about the idea of the ethical: namely, that self-understanding is central to any ethical life, that no way of life can be counted ethical unless self-understanding constitutes a central and conscious aim for the individual. However, such a theory does not of course guarantee the success of Kierkegaard's religious enterprise, any more than it guarantees the success of any particular psychiatric process. In each case, success depends on a factor external to what is offered the individual; the individual's own will to be cured.