

KIERKEGAARD'S ONTOLOGY OF FAITH

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In Kierkegaard's thoughts faith indeed is one of the most significant and crucial themes. It is on faith that the entire edifice of his religious thought is founded. Hence, with its tenability or untenability the most attractive and interesting aspect of his philosophy is at stake. His own rhetorical and ironical style of expressing his ideas often leads to misunderstanding of his thought and misconstruing of his intention. He has freely used words like 'madness', 'paradox' or 'passion' to characterise faith which may lead not so sympathetic readers to conclude that faith is not only unintelligible or meaningless but sheer absurdity - in ordinary meaning of the term and not in the respectable existentialist sense.

In order to properly understand the concept of faith and its place in Kierkegaard's dialectics of religious experience or his dialectical theology we need to probe into his overall understanding of the nature of philosophical reflection. His conception of philosophy in general and religiosity in particular must be comprehended through proper interpretive understanding of religion, faith and other related issue.

I propose to limit my discussion of Kierkegaard's concept of faith mainly in the light of his views elucidated in *Fear and Trembling* (*Fear and Trembling, The sickness unto Death*, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954, hereafter *FT*), which has been generally accepted as his best work on religion and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (tr. Swenson and Lowrie, Princeton University Press, 1968, hereafter *CUP*). The former is a phenomenological account of religious experience, woven around his concept of faith which, according to the translator, involves 'the particularity of its relationship to God... the infinite resignation with respect to finite

goods... the teleological suspension of the ethical as exemplified in Abraham (*FT*, p. 15). The latter's canvas which was intended to be a sequel to the *Fragments* is wide enough to include his version of Hegel's philosophy and his critique, his concept of truth and subjectivity, the truth of Christianity, the conflict between faith and reason and the problem of becoming a Christian.

I

In an attempt to thematize the concept and our understanding of faith, it may be necessary to introduce his distinction between the objective and the subjective ways of thinking as well as the polarity of the universal and the individual which is manifest in his conceptions of the ethical and the religions. His best known identification of truth with subjectivity has not been discussed separately as it is the undercurrent in his entire gamut of philosophical reflection.

Kierkegaard formulates his understanding of philosophical thinking by categorising it as subjective and objective. The intellectual background against which his fundamental polemics concerning the nature of subjective and objective reflection are situated is Hegelian philosophy. In the latter objectivity and universality are the most important or rather, overarching theoretical constructs. It is interesting to note that almost in his entire bulk of writings he hardly speaks of 'reason', 'rational' or 'rationality' but of 'reflection', 'absolute thought' or 'pure thought'. His basic categories or frames of reference are those of objectivity and subjectivity and the universal and the individual (particular).

Kierkegaard's preoccupation with the subjective and the individual is rooted in his elucidation of the Being of the individual existence which he shares with other existentialist thinkers, Sartre's emphasis on subjectivity and Heidegger's on *Dasein* are clearly anticipated by Kierkegaard though the former two have undertaken these formulations in wider conceptual spaces. Before clarifying what is subject or subjectivity as against what is object or objectivity, it may be stated that for Kierkegaard the role of objective thought in logic (Non-Hegelian), mathematics or science is unquestionable but inconsequential for one whose main concern is to understand man's existence. What is important is his religiosity (for

Kierkegaard, Christianity) and truth as it relates to the concrete individual in his existence which is inalienable from his subjectivity. Therefore, we scarcely find any discussion of formal *a priori* disciplines or of natural sciences which concerns merely material or physical phenomena. Of course, if we understand 'logic' in Hegelian sense (which is based on the metaphysical view of identity of thought and being), Kierkegaard displays profound interest in it. As a matter of fact, Kierkegaard had first entitled his *CUP* as 'Logical Problems' ('logical' in the sense of conceptual or metaphysical, one is reminded here of the well known description of Hegel's logic as his metaphysics). But, lest anyone may feel tempted to think that Kierkegaard's *CUP* was anti-science, it may also be pointed out that the word 'unscientific' in the title of *CUP* was later mentioned replacing the word 'simple' which Kierkegaard himself had proposed as the correct (or nearest) translation of the original Danish word. Perhaps, he was thinking of it as non-scientific or non-technical since in this book his aim essentially was to problematize 'what it is to be a Christian?' In the light of the above, it should be clear as to what meaning or interpretation of truth he seeks to identify with subjectivity.

One may approach 'the heart of the matter' in Kierkegaardian discourse, which moves around a cluster of concepts, by starting with anyone of them since they all are interpenetrated and each one of them draws its significance and meaningfulness from the other. We, however, intend to explain and interpret his notion of 'subjective' or 'subjectivity' as our starting point. To this end, we may state what it is not and how it is contradistinguished from its opposite, i.e., 'objective' or 'objectivity'.

It may be instructive to see how Kierkegaard seeks to explain what objective reflection (i.e. Hegel's pure thought or Kant's pure reason) is in opposition to subjective reflection. In his own words,

For an objective reflection the truth becomes an object, something objective, and thought must be pointed away from the subject. For a subjective reflection the truth becomes a matter of appropriation, of inwardness, of subjectivity, and thought must probe more and more deeply into the subject and his subjectivity (*CUP*, p. 171).

For Kierkegaard, inwardness of the existing individual is subjectivity

and therefore the existing individual is the subject which objective reflection turns into something merely 'accidental and thereby transforms existence into something indifferent, and this indifference is precisely its objective validity'. In other words, for Kierkegaard objective reflection which is adequate for formal logic, mathematics and historical knowledge, makes the existence or non-existence of the subject completely irrelevant. Kierkegaard takes a lot of care to differentiate his idea of existence and subjectivity from Hegel's *Concept* of man which Kierkegaard considers to be a mere possibility of actual existence. Whenever a universal concept is applied to existing things it can not go beyond possibilities or operational-functional rules of meaning. In his own conceptual scheme, The living concrete individual or the living subject is rooted in his inwardness or subjectivity whose *sine qua non* is the necessity of commitment to particular mode of being. The human being exists as a 'passionate' individual-master of his own life and having the creativity of making his own values. His personal freedom with its consequent commitment and responsibility enables him to transcend his *mere* existence within his own subjectivity. This realization he always calls 'passionate' as it is the mode of Being within which he moves and breathes with the sincerity and authenticity of a 'lover'. It is this sort of inwardness with which he exists. Hence, as he says in *CUP*, 'It is impossible to exist without passion'. In this mode of existence the search and demand for objective validity or justification of our ultimate choices are as uncalled for as the demand of proof for Moore's intrinsic value (in *Principia Ethica*) or for Mill's questions of ultimate ends (in *Utilitarianism*). For Kierkegaard, absolute choices, specially in the spheres of morality and religion are paradoxical. They lack objective proof or justification because the categorical Either/or is decided by a choice about a future-oriented project or action which is as uncertain as future itself. Despite the lack of objective certainty, there is subjective certainty based on the inwardness which alone can give rise to the only sort of justification which one can offer to oneself born out of self-understanding. Hence, 'inwardness' or 'subjectivity' in Kierkegaard's thought is the total mental framework or 'horizon' (in Gadamar's sense) which essentially is the manifestation of the 'form of life' one has adopted out of his free choice-irrespective of the fact whether the choice is for the ethical or the religious

life.

Now, let us briefly look at his views concerning the individual and the universal which he has expounded in the general context of his concept of truth as subjectivity, his notion of existence and in the specific context of the ethical way of life.

In *Fear and Trembling* while discussing the possibility of a 'teleological suspension of the ethical' he observes:

The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone... conceived immediately as *physical* and *psychical*, the particular individual is the individual who has his *telos* in the universal, and his ethical task is to express himself constantly in it, to abolish his particularity in order to become the universal (*FT*, pp. 64-5, Italics mine).

Here Kierkegaard introduces a conception of the individual which may appear to go against what has been said above about the notion of the individual in his mode of subjective existence. But this apparent inconsistency can be explained in the light of what he has said in the passage just quoted. Here he speaks of the particular 'conceived as physical and psychical'. This is not his concept of the 'true' or whole individual. In *Sickness unto Death* he talks of man as a totality of body, mind and spirit which is the subject or individual in the religious state. Thus, man within the religious sphere transcends all the limitations and boundaries which operate at the aesthetic and ethical levels of existence. At the aesthetic stage it is the body which is predominantly the locus of his experiences. At the ethical stage his body and mind both are engaged in performance of duties prescribed by the ethical ideal he has chosen for himself. At this state he can transcend his self-love or his narrow conceptions of expediency but has to remain within some general and universal principles necessary for the ethical *telos*. It is not therefore surprising that in *Guilty/Not Guilty* or in *Stages on Life's Way* he almost concedes the objectively necessary duties or moral laws which by definition are universal. He seeks to combine the Socratic dictum 'know thyself' with Kantian prescription to do one's duty for the sake of duty. Once one has chosen the ethical and as long as one decides to remain within it, one cannot but continue to subscribe to its

rules. To violate this requirement would be self-betrayal. But he can nevertheless transcend the ethical if at all it is needed from a higher, i.e. religious, point of view. It is here that the dynamics of faith comes into full play and gains the prominence it deserves in Kierkegaardian conception of religiosity and spirituality. We will return to this point later. Within the ethical the particular is subservient to the universal (laws/principles) and the individual, as far as she finds her *telos* in it, would not give in to the temptation of violating it. In this respect, Kierkegaard's conception of the ethical as discussed in the second part of *Either/Or* comes closer to the Hegelian notion of the relation between the universal and the particular despite the persistent polemic that for Hegel the ethical marks the objective necessity in the dialectical movement of history. For Kierkegaard, on the other hand, it comes about as an act of the individual's free decision, guided by subjective choice, - in the language of Kant- an act of autonomous will. Hegel, Kierkegaard would say, in fact does not properly understand the nature of the ethical by denying the individual the inwardness of her choice as a concrete individual - living on her own terms. Kierkegaard indirectly admits the relatively narrower or wider realms of the ethical universals and there is always a possibility of movement from one to the other though the desirable movement is from the narrower to the higher. The ethical individual can thus accept a choice of the higher domain of 'ethicality' by transcending the narrower domain, but all the time remaining within the ethical mode of existence without ever marginalising her individuality. This happens in cases of conflicts between what Ross calls the *prima facie* duties. His own allusion to the decision of Brutus to kill Ceaser is a case in point. It was chosen by Brutus in order to save his country though Ceaser was his mentor and a friend. This too may be understood in the context of the subjectivity and inwardness involved in such a choice. At the ethical stage the individual and the universal both are real in a certain relation of the self to itself. But even here Kierkegaard would not admit the possibility of mediation between the two as all choices for him are in the mode of either/or-whether it concerns choices within the *telos* of the ethical or it is a choice between the ethical and the religious.

There is an interesting dimension of the problematic of relation between the subjective and the objective or between the individual and the

universal. This comes out in his understanding of the nature of communication which is scattered in a few pages of *CUP*. In sec. 1 of Chapter II, he says:

While objective thought is indifferent to the thinking subject and his existence, the subjective thinker is as an existing individual essentially interested in his own thinking, existing as he does in his thought. His thinking has therefore a different type of reflection, namely the reflection of inwardness, of possession, by virtue of which it belongs to the thinking subject and to no one else. While objective thought translates everything into results... subjective thought puts everything in process and emits the result... as an existing individual he is constantly in the process of coming to be, which holds true of every human being who has not permitted himself to be deceived into becoming objective ... (*CUP*, pp.67-8).

The significant point here is concerning the reflection of inwardness in subjective thought. He further observes :

The reflection of inwardness gives to the subjective thinker a double reflection. In thinking, he thinks the universal; but as existing in this thought and as assimilating in his inwardness, he becomes more and more subjectively isolated... The difference between subjective and objective must express itself also in the form of communication suitable to each (*CUP*, p. 68).

In a footnote to the last lines of the preceding passage Kierkegaard seeks to clarify his notion of communication with the help of what he means by double reflection. For Kierkegaard, it is 'implicit in the very idea of communication' in which the existing subject is in isolation of his inwardness, expressing the life of eternity *sans* sociality and thus making communication unthinkable. But the subject may still seek to communicate with others. He further explains it :

Ordinary communication between man and man is wholly immediate, because men in general exist immediately. When one man sets forth something and another acknowledges the same, word for word, it is taken for granted that they are in agreement and that they have understood one another. Precisely because the speaker has not

noticed the reduplication requisite to a thinking mode of existence, he also remains unaware of the double reflection involved in the process of communication. Hence he does not suspect that an agreement of this nature may be the grossest kind of misunderstanding (*CUP*, p. 69).

Thus for Kierkegaard understanding which is assumed in any proper act of communication can be arrived at only when the elements embedded therein are gone into over again in order to arrive at proper meaning and significance of what is communicated. It implies that the subjective initially is posited against the objective and the subjective is first expressed through objective meanings but after understanding it objectively one has to refer back to the subjective meaning which is couched in objectively meaningful words or expressions. Even the terms 'objective' and 'subjective' are so correlated that both have to be understood in relation to each other. The dominant tenor of Kierkegaard's espousal of the subjectivity rests on arguing how objectivity distorts the subject and his subjectivity. It is only after one understands the objective approach that the real significance and meaning of subjectivity comes to the fore. Hence, a circularity, which appears non-vicious, is involved in the understanding of subjectivity. This movement of reflection comes close to the view of understanding developed by Heidegger and Gadamer in and through their emphasis on the 'hermeneutic circle'. In one of its formulations it involves a method of interpretation which considers a whole in relation to its parts and parts in relation to a whole. We will adopt this minimal and simple version of 'hermeneutic circle' while interpreting the significance of faith in Kierkegaard.

II

Having said something about 'subject', 'subjectivity' and 'individual', it may be appropriate to locate 'faith' in Kierkegaard conceptual space.

A propos what we have said earlier about the particular and the universal and in the idiom of what has been called hermeneutic circle, Kierkegaard thus tries to formulate his view of faith :

Faith is thus paradox, that the particular is higher than the universal - yer in such a way... that the movement repeats itself, and that consequently the individual, after having been in the universal,

now as the particular isolates himself as higher than the universal (FT, p. 65).

What Kierkegaard wants to assert is that first the individual is subsumed under the universal but when she recognises the consequence of this subsumption, e.g. the loss of her individuality and subjectivity she reverts to the reaffirmation of subjectivity with the authentic understanding of her spirituality and accepting her relation to God which is anchored on faith. The return of understanding to the subjective as a result of second reflection can be said to be the self-understanding of understanding itself. In *Being and Time* (Oxford, 1962, hereafter *BT*) Heidegger talks of understanding as a mode of Being of Dasein itself and interpretation is grounded existentially in understanding (*BT*, p. 188). We will soon have occasion to see how faith for Kierkegaard is a mode of Being like Heidegger's understanding which attains the reflexivity of self-understanding within 'hermeneutic circle'. Faith is something surrounded by objective uncertainty, unprovability, highest subjectivity, inwardness or individuality which Kierkegaard calls it paradoxicality:

...faith is normally expressed in him whose life is not merely the most paradoxical that can be thought but so paradoxical that it cannot be thought at all. He acts by the virtue of the absurd, for it is precisely absurd that he as the particular is higher than the universal (FT, p. 67).

Illustrating his understanding of faith which prompted Abraham's will to sacrifice Isaac by teleologically suspending the ethical, he holds that Abraham's action is purely private and individual where objective proof or reason pales into absolute insignificance as it is irrelevant. However, Kierkegaard talks of suspending the *telos* of the ethical, not of its rejection. Nevertheless, the higher *telos* relegates the lower to a position of relative insignificance which is true of Kierkegaard's all the three stages on life's way the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. Each has its own *telos* and based on it we can talk of various frameworks or forms of life or, to use Kuhn's term, paradigms. It may be more instructive to use Kuhn's terminology (in *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Chicago 1962, second ed. 1970) and suggest that for Kierkegaard the movement from

one sphere to another is like 'paradigm shift' with the added qualification that there is incommensurability among them. Similarly the paradigms of the subjective and the objective, the individual and the universal, the instrumental rationality and 'heart's reasons' (Balzac) represent different and incompatible universes of discourse with their own 'logics'. In Abraham's case, he accepts his relation to God as absolute, irrevocable and final. God asks for the proof of his faith and Abraham immediately accepts to give it without any mediation of the ethical which for him is important but not as important as to overcome his religiosity whose only ground is faith. As Kierkegaard holds, the ethical becomes the temptation and his supreme duty is to abide by the expression of God's will. At the same time it may be noted that at the level of inwardness, subjectivity and faith the intersubjective awareness of the dynamics of faith can be effected only in the light of one's decisions, choices and actions which are located within the bounds of one's subjectivity though in faith ultimately he stands in complete isolation. Kierkegaard feels that it is extremely difficult though not impossible to have some sort of communication with others. As he says :

The knight of faith is obliged to rely upon himself alone, he feels the pain of not being able to make himself intelligible to others... The pain is his assurance that he is in the right way (*FT*, p. 90).

Abraham's faith and his acceptance of the supremacy of his commitment and relation to God brings about a tensionfree unity of God's will and his own. Here again emerges the paradox that an individual puts himself in an absolute relation to the absolute despite being finite. As opposed to any objective justification, he has only a justification as a particular individual. This is indeed absurd but, as Kierkegaard says, 'by virtue of the absurd faith enters upon the scene' (*FT*, p. 79), or 'the absurd is the object of faith, and the only object that can be believed' (*CUP*, p. 189).

In order to understand the true nature and place of faith in Kierkegaard's philosophy we should also note that faith is not an attribute or a mere disposition or an attitude of the individual. The man in his religiosity is an individual whose primordial mode of Being is faith. In scholastic (or

even Kantian) terminology faith is both the *ratio essendi* and *ratio cognoscendi* of man's *engagement* with God. Faith, primarily, is not the regulative but the constitutive principle of man as *Dasein-Being-in-the-world* (-of-religiosity). Kierkegaard once said that we may begin possessing faith but we end up being possessed by faith. It appears that Kierkegaard ontologises faith as a religious man's mode of Being. For Kierkegaard the individual man's essence lies in his inwardness or subjectivity which is identical with his *ontic* reality. It thus has the ontological dimension. Since faith is identified with passion and inwardness, it also becomes a mode of Being of the spiritual subjective man. For him 'faith is the highest passion in the sphere of human subjectivity' (*CUP*, p. 118). One should not call such a being a man of faith. Rather, he is a man in faith (i.e., faith-ful). Faith is essentially *ontical* (not mere *ontological*) as the essential dimension of an individual's existence at the religious stage. Inwardness, subjectivity, despair, dread, passion, individuality, commitment to God, surrender or resignation are all collateral characteristics of faith. Kierkegaard points out that faith is to be seen as a paradox, not a *temptation* which detracts a man *in* faith from his ethical duty. The characteristics I have just referred to can be called criteria (of application) not the meaning of faith. This view possibly can be seen in what Kierkegaard intends to say in the following:

...those who possess faith should take care to set up certain criteria so that one might distinguish the paradox from a temptation (*FT*, p.67).

To conclude, our attempted interpretation of Kierkegaard's faith bends towards the ontological hermeneutic but it may also be admitted that within traditional hermeneutics Kierkegaard's position is on the side of the subjective which has been fiercely criticised by social philosophers like Betti or Dilthey. Nevertheless, if Heidegger's (and even Gadamer's) concept of understanding, as admitted by Gadamer in *Truth and Method*, 'carries an *ontological* weight', faith has possibly stronger shoulders to carry it on.

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