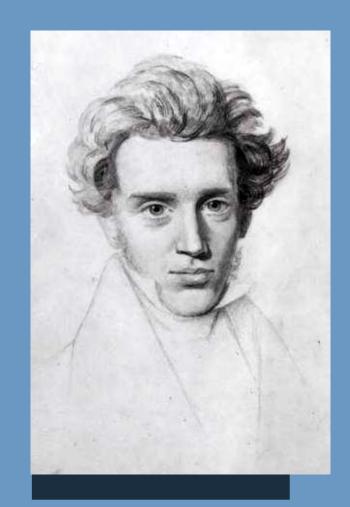


PHILOSOPHY FOR BEGINNERS

THE MEANINGS OF LIFE

Kierkegaard and faith Week 5. 23rd May 2018



What we'll cover today

- Introduce Kierkegaard
- Subjective freedom and faith
- Anxiety and despair!
- The three stages of existence...
- Abraham and the Leap of faith



Marry, and you will regret it; don't marry, you will also regret it; marry or don't marry, you will regret it either way. Laugh at the world's foolishness, you will regret it; weep over it, you will regret that too; laugh at the world's foolishness or weep over it, you will regret it either way ... Hang yourself, you will regret it; do not hang yourself, and you will regret that too; hang yourself or don't hang yourself, you'll regret it either way; whether you hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret both. This, gentlemen, is the essence of all philosophy.

- Either/Or



Søren Kierkegaard

- Danish Philosopher (1813 1855)
- Philosopher, poet, social critic, satirist, literary critic, journalist, religious writer
- The "Father of Existentialism"
- Prolific, often using pseudonyms and dialogue
- Famous slogan: "Truth is Subjectivity"
- Saw his task as "making life difficult"
- "What I really need to do is to get clear about "what am I to do" not "what I must know"



Truth is subjectivity...

- Truth is not just about cognition of facts...
- It has an inescapably personal dimension, in that it also raises the question of our own relationship to that truth
- He affirms 'the truth that is true for me'
- Kierkegaard emphasises subjective over objective truths, in that truths must be appropriated subjectively, inwardly, for us

Truth is subjectivity

- We must appropriate a truth subjectively for it to have an impact on us
- The problem with 'rational', abstract or objective thought (particularly religious) is it makes the subject indifferent, and diminishes our relationship with God
- The way of objective reflection leads to abstract thought, mathematics, historical knowledge, and leads away from the subject, whose existence or non-existence becomes infinitely indifferent
- For Kierkegaard, that is not enough...

The Meaning of God

- For Kierkegaard, to pose the question "does God exist" as if it were merely a factual question is to completely miss the point
- God's existence is not a factual state of affairs, to which one could choose to be interested or choose to be indifferent
- It is a question of meaning if God exists or does not, that is something which must make a meaningful difference to my life
- This is not something that can be decided "objectively" – it is a matter of our commitment to that truth, the subjective difference it makes to our lives



Over to you - three groups

Let's turn to the two excerpts, Inwardness and Faith

Group 1: Inwardness, first para What does Kierkegaard mean by inwardness? How does it relate to passion, and truth?

Group 2: Inwardness, second para How is truth related to subjectivity?

Group 3: Faith

What kind of argument for faith is he making?

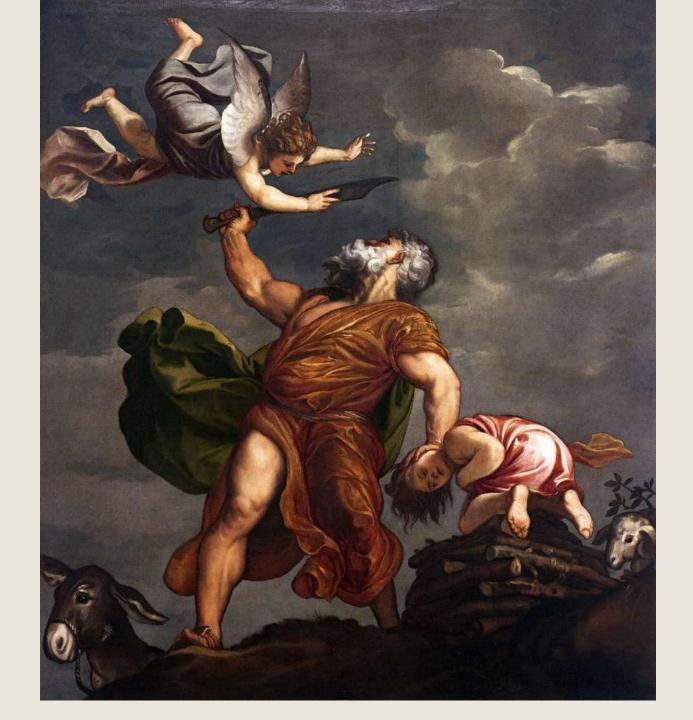
All groups – what makes Kierkegaard's approach distinctive?

Faith

- The point of Faith is that it is "infinite inwardness, it is passion"
- If approached objectively, we miss that inwardness – it is just a matter of fact
- But we also cannot attain the position of Faith from another kind of objectivity – that of our social situation
- Kierkegaard is strongly critical of the attitude that says that to be a Christian is to be part of a particular cultural community
- The question of faith is radically individualising and subjective

Faith

- "Christianity is spirit, spirit is inwardness, inwardness is subjectivity, subjectivity is essentially passion, and in its maximum an infinite, personal, passionate interest in one's eternal happiness"
- Kierkegaard will go on to say that this can only be attained on the basis of "the leap of faith" which precisely is done on the strength of "the absurd"



The Leap of Faith

- In Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard uses Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac to explore the demands of faith
- He is a "Knight of Faith" in that he commits himself to God "on the basis of the absurd"
- Why does Abraham choose to believe that the Voice talking to him is God?
- What is the leap of faith here?
- Take a look and discuss what you think Kierkegaard is trying to put across in the excerpt

The Leap of Faith

- "The Teleological suspension of the Ethical":
 Divine Command transcends ("suspends") the ethical order
- From the perspective of the Ethical, we cannot understand Abraham
- Act of sacrifice is un-ethical contrary to moral law, the family and the community
- It falls under the Religious: Abraham believes that he will sacrifice Isaac and get him back
- This depends on being able to believe that God would ask him to sacrifice Isaac in the first belief

The Leap of Faith

- More generally, Abraham represents the "absurdity" of commitment to Christianity
- The "paradoxes" that Christianity represents are what makes it possible for it to be the object of the highest form of subjective, passionate commitment
- But the absurdity means that the commitment can never spill over into objective certainty
- Faith is a leap, a choice we cannot reach God by way of reason

Infinite resignation

- In Fear and Trembling, the knight of faith must experience a 'double movement': infinite resignation, where he gives up everything he loves and reconciles himself with this...
- Like 'the tragic hero', e.g. Agamemnon, losing his daughter Iphigenia
- But the Knight of Faith then experiences the 'movement of faith', via the absurd, in which he fully regains what he has lost
- The knight can finally delight in the finitude of the world through experience of loss

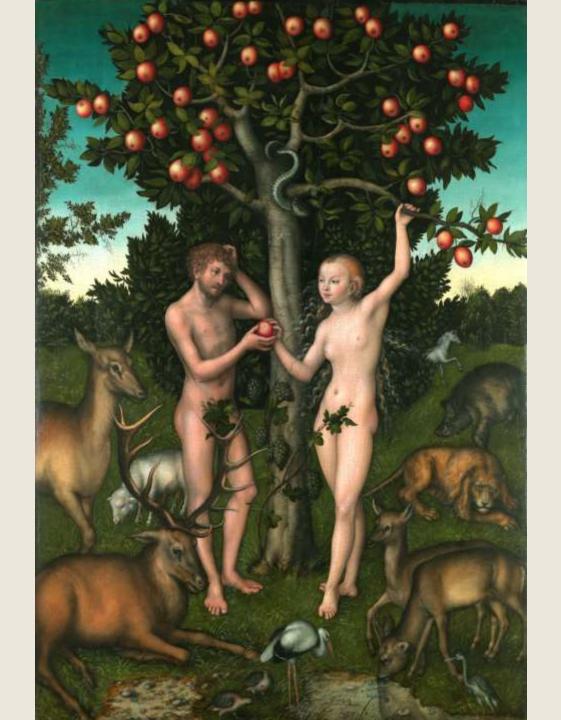
The dizziness of freedom

- Can you think of a situation where you've faced a difficult, potentially life-changing choice?
- Are there times where freedom might not be a source of happiness, but paralysing indecision?



Anxiety

- What do we experience in this situation?
- A desire to jump and a fear of this
- Anxiety is closer to the second of these, we experience our freedom in this moment – that we could choose to jump
- This experience of our freedom as a matter of fundamental choice is the basis of anxiety
- Anxiety is the reaction of the soul when faced with the terrifying abyss of freedom



Anxiety

- In the Bible, Adam experiences anxiety in the face of God's prohibition on eating the fruit
- Adam has no concept of good or evil (eating the fruit is the original sin, but Adam does not know this)
- The anxiety comes from the knowledge of God's prohibition because this implies that Adam is free to ignore God's prohibition
- Anxiety therefore precedes sin
- A major theme of Kierkegaard's work subjective freedom is prior to objective questions of morality

The burden of freedom?

- Anxiety is the realisation of our freedom our ungrounded capacity to make a choice of which kind of subject we wish to be
- Take a look at the excerpts and discuss:
- Why is anxiety the 'dizziness of freedom'?

Despair

- How would you define despair?
- Anxiety is the realisation that our being a self is a matter of our freedom to choose...
- Despair by contrast is our anxiety in the face of the eternal, our fleeing from this fundamental freedom
- Despair involves a loss of self, or the wrong conception of ourselves
- In *The Sickness Unto Death*, despair characterises and raises human beings over other animals

Despair

- Despair is over something ourselves, our wish to be something objective, that we fail to attain
- For example: we become "one of the crowd" and as a result lose our self
- In despair we flee from the freedom revealed in the experience of anxiety we displace it into objectivity
- But there are also forms of Despair where we do not do this and make the genuine choice in the face of Anxiety to choose to become a certain kind of person
- Kierkegaard presents a kind of typology of different selves in 'Stages on Life's Way' and 'Either/Or'

Stages of Existence

- Kierkegaard identifies three 'stages' of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious
- They are less periods, more states
- Aesthetic concerned with self-gratification, everyday matters, and is unreflective
- Ethical with a personal responsibility for one's choices and doing good, and a commitment to help others through a moral absolute
- The religious overlaps, but involves a commitment to a Christian God

Stages of Existence

- Religiousness A: the individual feels guilt before God; Religiousness B: a transcendental leap of faith
- Although the commitment to each of the stages does represent a genuine choice to be a particular kind of person, each has its own particular mode of despair in that it cannot be objectively successful
- Kierkegaard does not present the transition between the stages as a kind of rational, logical progression – the transition is made on the basis of a groundless subjective decision: "A Leap"

The Stages of Existence

Aesthetic:

- Hedonistic, live for momentary pleasures, satisfy one's desires
- Life of immediacy and reflection (finite ends)
- Acts without constraints or consideration for the future
- Boredom and pain are the enemy; despair

Ethical:

- Choice, commitment and responsibility
- Duty to universal rules
- Realization of not being able to live up to duty; guilt

Religious:

- Fulfillment, paradoxical inward movement of the individual which places the particular above the universal in a relationship to the Absolute (Infinite)
- "simultaneously to be out on 70,000 fathoms of water and yet to be joyful"

Rounding up

- Kierkegaard does not present faith as being a matter of claiming certainty, regardless of evidence
- It is a passionate commitment to uncertainty in the full realisation that what is being committed to is objectively absurd
- But he will also stress that all questions of Subjective commitment are like this
- Truth is something subjective, that one lives
- How would you summarise Kierkegaard?

Next week...

- We turn to Nietzsche!
- Look out for: the 'death of God', nihilism, master and slave morality, the Dionysian vs Apollonian aspects of Greek thought, and eternal recurrence.
- Any questions, do email me <u>Dan.taylor@marywardcentre.ac.uk</u>

