

Kierkegaard without “Leap of Faith”

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The most popular and even famous phrase attributed to the Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard is the so called “leap of faith”. It is meant to express the conviction, that knowledge cannot grasp the highest truth, but has to be superseded by radically underived religious commitment, namely the passion Kierkegaard calls faith.

It is striking, however, that the expression “leap of faith” (Danish: “Troens Spring”) does not occur even once in the published writings. It furthermore has to be conceded, that the terms ‘faith’ and ‘leap’ rarely appear in the same contexts, nor do variants of these words. The writings, in which the leap is discussed, do not address questions of faith and vice versa. For example in *The Concept of Anxiety* sin is described to be a leap, as no moral considerations, explanations or sufficient reasons ever justify evil deeds. Faith, by contrast, is the individual’s personal relationship to God, the best example is Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*. Surely the explicit wording is not decisive so that the expression “leap of faith” might be seen as an appropriate summary of Kierkegaardian thinking although it cannot be quoted. Therefore it is worth the effort to re-discuss the Kierkegaardian notion of faith provoked by this stunning tension between traditional scholarship and the results of statistical research.

This project has the consequence, that labels frequently attached to Kierkegaard’s approach have to be reconsidered as they are evoked by the fiction of a “leap of faith”: Charges like fideism, voluntarism, decisionism, misologism and irrationalism hinge on a radical disjunction of knowledge and faith which turns out to be a misleading interpretation.

I will argue that according to Kierkegaard faith and knowledge are not measured by the same epistemological standards so that they only differ in degrees of certainty. Rather, they turn out to be different kinds of attitude, involving different dimensions and capacities of human existence. This does not mean, however, that they are mutually exclusive modes, as the central figure of the paradox in Kierkegaardian thinking illuminates: The paradox takes shape, when the limits of reason are reached but it can only be apprehended as such, when reason is involved and understands why faith is the appropriate mode for the truth. At this intersection of knowledge and faith something like a leap would not make sense. Rather, reason is involved although arguments cannot legitimate faith: they can support it in retrospect and help to distinguish it from nonsense, discover mistakes and unmask religious fanaticism.

The framework for Kierkegaard’s notion of faith is constituted by his account of existence (SV VII, 300ff.) : The thinking subject is a fiction, ignorant of the fact that every single human being has a unique life with specific and changing aspects. Constitutive for someone’s personal conditions of existence are his particular circumstances, innate capacities, previous choices and the theoretical framework that prestructure his thinking. The individual’s place in the world is not of his own doing, he is born into it. The determining factors of an existence pre-exist reflection and decision, they have to be taken for granted. Existence does not only mean that all knowledge is perspectival, but that it is affected by factors it cannot control, it is embedded in a factual context.

Kierkegaard plays on the Latin term “inter-esse” (interest, SV VII, 270) to make his point: the existential conditions of human beings are the position between freedom and necessity, time and eternity, body and soul, general and particular etc. These oppositions are never synthesized but coexist in tension; human lives are built on contrary principles. Existing is the task to integrate these poles, Kierkegaard calls this “becoming a self”, which is never fulfilled, as the conditions of an individual life are changing. Man’s identity with himself remains fragile and vulnerable, it is never a stable and fixed entity as the person is unfinished and in process. Likewise, comprehensive knowledge is impossible, as no one knows the future. Finitude and temporality do not allow to see the whole, *sub specie aeternitatis*. “Interesse” means, that this situation cannot be mastered without interest, in the indifferent, distanced and neutral attitude of an observer. According to Kierkegaard, truth cannot be impartial, disinterested and a matter of objective investigation, described by a web of propositions, as it concerns the whole life. The scope of knowledge proves to be too restricted to come to terms with the complexity of the existential constellation. Human conditions do not allow for a indubitable, necessary and universal theory of truth. Thus the classical philosophical endeavour cannot provide the truth for an existing human being: A hypothesis that has been proved to be correct or a coherent intellectual inquiry do not satisfy our existential concern. The crucial term is appropriation (Danish: tilegnelse): the truth must not only be understood, but it has to be accepted including its existential consequences which inform the whole life. Once accepted, the truth provides guidelines for decisions and actions. Therefore, it is integrated into our world as it forms our lives and leads to personal excellence, it is not radically transcendent and beyond our world in a separate realm, like the supernatural.

The question why the existential conditions prevent to reach the truth by reason leads to the religious dimension: sinful individuals are no longer able to activate the truth by recollection, provoked by Sokrates’ maieutic activity. After the fall, the truth is no longer within us because our relationship to God is disturbed. As the story in the book of Genesis describes, sin is a consequence of individuals who insist on their autonomy, who distance themselves from God and disturb their relationship to him by their own fault. The attempt to find the truth in man made theory and doctrines betrays a fundamental self-deception as sin-consciousness is missing. As soon as there is an awareness of the corruption of a fallen individual, the next step would be the insight that only God’s grace can restore the original capacity for truth. Therefore, not knowledge but a religious attitude is appropriate. Kierkegaard claims indeed a radical difference between knowledge and faith: the former is validated by intersubjectively shared standards and must be based on objective evidence to legitimize the claim of correctness. It has to be based on strict demonstration and induced by arguments so that assent is compulsory. It is re-evaluated continually but can only approximate truth as the existential dimension, the conditions after the Fall, are ignored. Faith, by contrast, involves not only the cognitive, but also the volitional, emotional, moral, habitual and other aspects of human existence and must be accepted and lived by each

individual. Hence, it is not designed to compensate lacks of knowledge or solve intellectual riddles, it is no propositional attitude measured by the standards of common epistemology but on a lower level of evidence than knowledge. The requirements of faith are not completely in the power of the believer, but it is a dialogical event, an encounter with God and the gift of grace that transforms the sinner and restores his capacity for the truth. The solution is therefore no act of will on the part of the believer, no voluntary leap, no mere decision without warrant, which would be sinful as it results from human autonomy, like knowledge.

Yet I think Kierkegaard provoked misunderstandings like the "leap of faith", as his apparent distrust of reason is in the context of a polemic directed against Hegel's philosophical enterprise. The opposition of knowledge and faith seems to fit in a set of disjunctive relationships like objective-subjective; general-particular; cognitive-passionate; compelled-voluntary; possibility-necessity; reasonable-absurd; conclusion-resolution; logic-conviction; understanding-commitment etc. These pairs of contrary terms, that can be found throughout the Kierkegaardian authorship, remind of Hegelian dialectic, but they remain unresolved. The thrust of these polemical chapters is the refusal of Hegel's attempt to integrate religion into the system and subordinate it to knowledge as superior mode to deal with absolute truth. According to Kierkegaard, Hegel's philosophy of the absolute spirit with an ultimate conformity of thought and being extends the philosophical inquiry beyond the capacities of an existing human being. (SV VII, 99) Like Karl Marx, Kierkegaard insists, that the reconciliation of oppositions is by no means realized in our concrete historical situation although it is in thought. According to Kierkegaard, Hegel forgets that he himself is an existing individual and should commit suicide as a consequence from his philosophy. (SV VII, 164)

It is in this context that the crucial figure of the paradox takes shape: Kierkegaard agrees with Hegel when he appreciates Kant's antinomies, where both sides are equally well founded. Whereas Kant tries to eliminate them, Hegel integrates them by dialectical movement and subsumes them within a higher unity. Kierkegaard, by contrast, leaves the contradictions as they are, he even reinforces them to become paradox (SV VII, 182-196 + SV VII, 328). A negative, cut-off, two-term dialectic without mediation leaves ruptures without resolution in thought.

This type of paradox results from a careful and reasonable process of thinking, it is not nonsensical and unrelated to all types of arguments. Neither is the paradox generated by faith, but it prepares the question of a religious solution of intellectual failure. It signals the crisis of reason as an intellectual difficulty turns out to be an existential and religious problem so that a new mode, faith, has to take over. As religious commitment does not follow as a matter of course from intellectual considerations even if they fail, something like a paradigm shift takes place. The best and most radical example is the incarnation, Kierkegaard calls it the "absolute paradox" (SV IV, p. 204-216, *Philosophical Fragments*, Chapter 3). The eternal appears in a historical situation, under temporal conditions. This is not a formal or logical contradiction, as we do not know what it means to be God, neither do we know completely, what it means to be a human being. The concepts that form the paradox are not clear, as the paradox arises in the experience of a reality our concepts cannot deal with. It reveals that the thinking individual has been on the wrong track as it tried to find a solution by mediating concepts. When we cannot avoid contradictory descriptions of this event, this indicates our lack of

conceptual equipment. The reaction to paradox cannot be neutral and indifferent, it offers an alternative in dealing with the limits of human reasoning: Either stay within them (see the title of Kant's book *Religion within the limits of Reason alone*) so that human standards of cognition provide the framework. From this standpoint, the extraordinary event of incarnation provokes offence (SV VII, 510). The other possible reaction is faith: human intellectual resources fail and the believer allows to transcend them although he is not able to control this process. This is the point where no method is available and passion comes in as possible grounds are not compulsory. In this context of anti-Hegelian polemics the leap occurs to replace the impossible mediating third term of a dialectical movement (SV VII, 85). These polemic passages and chapters suggest labels like "fideism", which even can be justified by quotations; we find slogans like "sacrifice of reason" or "crucifixion of the understanding" in Kierkegaard's writings. Unfortunately they have been influential and concealed the rather complex epistemological implications of Kierkegaard's anthropology.

Unlike the fideists, who claim that faith does not need and should not seek the support of reason, Kierkegaard investigates how far philosophical efforts can reach. Not only the limits but also the achievements of reason are vital for the paradox. Although Kierkegaard agrees with fideists that faith cannot be justified by arguments and that natural theology cannot help to find God, he accepts arguments to support faith and distinguish it from other types of passion and insanity. In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard introduces the traditional formula of the absurdity of Christian faith when he discusses Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son while suspending all moral duties. Abraham is obedient to the commanding voice he believes to be God's and prepares the murder of his only son. The crucial question is, if the absurd quality of Christian faith can be distinguished from mere nonsense, from insanity. Every murderer could claim to be obedient to divine commandments when killing someone else. If religious truth gives its own authentication beyond any criteria, misuse cannot be avoided. If there are criteria upon which a justification can be based, however, faith is no longer radically underived and unsharable. When one of Kierkegaard's colleagues at Copenhagen university claimed to have experienced a revelation from God, Kierkegaard is eager to find criteria in order to unmask this as confusion and madness. Although he never judges someone else's relationship to God, as he insists that this is a matter of radically hidden inwardness, he diagnosed misled religious passion and fanaticism in one of his books. (*On Authority and Revelation/Das Buch über Adler*). Thus, he does not try to elaborate positive criteria for someone else's relationship to God, but he describes misguided religious attitudes.

There is no choice of faith over reason in Kierkegaard's authorship; rather the discovery of self-deception leads to recognize, that intellectual efforts do not suffice. Although Kierkegaard's fundamental anti-rational stance cannot be denied, faith is neither contrary to reason nor incompatible with it. Kierkegaard gives good reasons to mistrust man made ideas about God and helps to understand why the paradox cannot be understood. (SV VII, 505). The apprehension of paradox requires a good deal of understanding as it must be distinguished from nonsense. If human intellect would function properly, Socratic recollection and Hegelian dialectic could be appropriate ways to approach the truth. Kierkegaard emphasizes, that not the truth itself is paradox, but it seems to be paradox when viewed from sinful existence. (SV VII, 172). The passion of

faith has to be accompanied by philosophical inquiry, although it cannot be derived from it. Simone Weil explains why: "L'incompris cache l'incompréhensible, et pour ce motif doit être éliminé." (150, 1991; Vgl. SV VII, 495) "What is not understood hides what cannot be understood/is beyond understanding and therefore it has to be eliminated".

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