



1-1-1999

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Recommended Citation

Matz, L. (1999). The Ethical and Religious in Kierkegaard. *Kierkegaardiana*, 20, 255–259.
<https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/cop-facarticles/563>

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The Ethical and Religious in Kierkegaard

Lou Matz

I

In his "Hegel's View of Moral Conscience and Kierkegaard's Interpretation of Abraham," Jon Stewart attempts to clarify the meaning and implications of Kierkegaard's reference in *Fear and Trembling* to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Stewart's thesis is that either Kierkegaard's reference to Hegel is entirely irrelevant for the analysis of faith in *Fear and Trembling* since the *Philosophy of Right* concerns the issue of social ethics and not religious faith, or that if the reference to Hegel is relevant, then Kierkegaard has unwittingly invited a *reductio ad absurdum* to his own position on ethics or political philosophy.¹ It appears, however, that Stewart wants to press further the Hegelian argument against Kierkegaard. He suggests that Hegel's critique of the moral point of view or subjective moralities can be applied to Kierkegaard's conception of religious faith *per se* since the same philosophical difficulty exists for religious faith as for morality if justificatory appeal is made solely in terms of the particularity or subjectivity of one's own conscience. The philosophical difficulty is how one knows that what one's conscience judges as moral or what one interprets as a divine revelation is really the case. Stewart says, "It is clear that Kierkegaard in the final analysis wants to make room for the legitimate place of direct revelation. This is an issue which he wrestles with not only here but also elsewhere in the *corpus*. For Hegel, by contrast, individual self-certainty about a divine revelation or a voice of conscience is not truth" (p. 72). So it is Kierkegaard's ethical position which is implied by his view of faith and his conception of religious faith *per se* which are subject to Hegel's *reductio*. Accordingly, the result for Kierkegaard is that he is forced into a two-horned dilemma: Abraham's action is defensible by appealing to a self-justifying conscience or Abraham must appeal to rea-

sons which are publicly accessible and amenable to criticism. But both consequences are troublesome for Kierkegaard since the former leads to Hegel's devastating critique of the moral point of view and the latter is simply inconsistent with Kierkegaard's fideism.

II

In their reply to Stewart's essay, Marino/Rudd charge Stewart with begging the question against Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's challenge to Hegel is to entertain the possibility that an action which is unjustifiable from the standpoint of the ethical or "universal" can be justified at a higher, religious standpoint. Is there a higher standpoint than the ethical which is not amenable to rational justification? Marino/Rudd argue that Stewart mistakenly assumes that Kierkegaard is justifying religious faith, either explicitly or implicitly, by appealing to passionate convictions or some subjective principle of conscience. Kierkegaard is not; rather, the religious standpoint is to be understood – and not *justified* – through the category of the absurd.² So Stewart's first horn of the dilemma is mistakenly presented since Kierkegaard does not attempt to justify the religious standpoint at all, let alone by appealing to self-justifying, passionate convictions.

With respect to the second horn of the dilemma, Marino/Rudd claim that Stewart is wrong to suppose that justification always requires reasons which are publicly accessible. It is at this point that Marino/Rudd claim that Stewart has begged the relevant question against Kierkegaard since the task of *Fear and Trembling* is to explore the intelligibility of Abraham's teleological suspension of the ethical. As Marino/Rudd say, "Kierkegaard is asking us to consider the possibility that someone may be justified before God, despite his inability to give an account of his actions to other people" (p. 249). They admit that Kierkegaard's view might be wrong, but Stewart begs the question by relying "on an equation of justification with rationally articulated ethical justification as if this were uncontentious, whereas this is in fact the whole point at issue" (p. 249). One could put their point in other terms. Stewart was mistaken to assume that Hegel's critique of subjective moralities in the last moment of the realm of *Moralität* necessarily has relevance for a subjective view of religious faith such as Kierkegaard's. Why think that the critique of the moral point of view has any bearing on a possibly altogether different

point of view, i.e., the religious? The religious might ultimately be a higher standpoint than the ethical and not reducible to it, as Hegel argued.

III

With respect to the first horn of the dilemma, though, it is difficult to see how Kierkegaard can escape the substance of Hegel's critique. While Marino/Rudd are right that Kierkegaard does not justify Abraham's conduct by an appeal to passionate conviction, it does not help Kierkegaard to invent a new category, the absurd, and attempt to understand or perhaps "justify" Abraham's faith by means of it. The notion of the absurd must, in some way, carry justificatory force. Why? Because Abraham must believe it is God rather than his own derangement which is speaking to him and which leads him to act against the ethical. By relying solely on his own particular experience, Abraham can have no assurance *whatsoever* that it is God or the infinite at work and not his own finitude.³ To be sure, Kierkegaard's analysis of the entire ordeal highlights just this point, which is why Abraham is anxious and is unfathomable to the outside observer, but for Kierkegaard to imply that Abraham is justified by means of the absurd does not solve the difficulty. It seems that any attempt to address the problem of a true revelation must rely on some rational criteria, which must necessarily mediate between the particular Abraham and the universal God and which ultimately invites the Hegelian critique. On this point, Stewart is right to defend Hegel's *reductio* against the ethical implications of Kierkegaard's view of the religious, a *reductio* that Kierkegaard brings upon himself.

With respect to the second horn of the dilemma, is it the case that Stewart begs the question against Kierkegaard regarding the necessity of discursive justification regarding religious faith *per se*? Marino/Rudd have a point here since Stewart suggests, but does not develop, an argument. I take it that Stewart assumes that the issue regarding the ethical implications of Kierkegaard's view of faith naturally leads to a different, but related, issue: how compelling of a religious view is Kierkegaard's which has such ethical implications? How defensible is a religious view *per se* which can, in principle, separate the ethical from the religious? On this point it seems to Stewart and to me that Kierkegaard's view is deeply problematic and perhaps indefensible. There is a long history of philo-

sophical argument beginning with Plato's *Euthyphro* about the independence of the good from the gods and running through various thinkers such as Locke, Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach, and J.S. Mill who criticize the attempt to separate ethics and religion, reason and revelation, since the latter must be compatible with the former. For example, Kant argues that the only basis to think there is a God in the first place is through man's moral experience, i.e., from the standpoint of pure practical reason. To suppose that a religious believer can be justified before God in any way other than through morally virtuous conduct is a religious illusion whose consequences are pseudo-worship and fanaticism.⁴ Ludwig Feuerbach makes a similar argument. He contends that the idea of a transcendent God divorced from the human experience of love and morality is a transcendental illusion since the human powers of love and morality, and not a transcendent Being, have objective, independent reality.⁵ So while Marino/Rudd are correct to question the legitimacy of Stewart's application of Hegel's critique of subjective moralities to "subjective religiosities" – if I may use this term for Kierkegaard's subjective religious view – they fail to consider how the ethical implications of a subjective religiosity immediately raise serious questions about the legitimacy of such a conception of the religious itself. Both philosophers and the major religious traditions (e.g., Christianity and Buddhism) oppose Kierkegaard's separation of the ethical and religious categories, and the burden of proof is on Kierkegaard to demonstrate the contrary.

I have one final observation. In their penultimate sentence, Marino/Rudd claim, "If, on reflection, we find that we cannot abandon the natural Hegelian assumptions, we will at least have had things clarified, since we will now see that we cannot consistently maintain a Biblical faith as well" (p. 249). This conclusion appears to be a *non sequitur*. The fact that religious beliefs, like scientific, legal, moral, and other practical beliefs, might require reasons which can be publicly defensible does not imply that a Biblical faith cannot be "consistently maintained." This seems to assume that a fideistic or Kierkegaardian view is the only possible basis for a Biblical faith. But this is false. There are other ways to defend the Biblical faith, like Kant's, which defends the central tenets of the Biblical faith by means of a rational faith. Stewart's aim in his essay, which has spawned this debate, was not to examine the relevance of Kierkegaard for Biblical faith but simply to follow out the ethical implications of Kierkegaard's conception of the religious and to suggest how Hegel's critique of the moral point of view raises questions about the acceptability

of Kierkegaard's conception of the religious itself. To be sure, Stewart does not always clearly distinguish between these two points and does not develop the latter argument enough. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's separation of the ethical and religious raises serious problems for his conception of the religious, and in this sense, the animating intuition of Stewart's essay, i.e., that Hegel's critique of subjective morality is also relevant for assessing Kierkegaard's conception of the religious *per se*, is insightful.

Notes

1. Stewart, *Kierkegaardiana* 19 pp. 58-59. I believe that Stewart's argument would have been better served by using the term "morality" rather than "political philosophy" since his analysis focusses on the moral implications of Kierkegaard's conception of the religious. Stewart's word choice, though, is understandable since for Hegel morality is dependent on the principles and institutions of a rational political order (*Sittlichkeit*).
2. Marino and Rudd, "Abraham and Hegel: A Reply to Stewart," the last two sentences of the last paragraph of section II.
3. Kierkegaard recognizes this problem in his *Postscript*. He says, "In a solely subjective definition of truth, lunacy and truth are ultimately indistinguishable, because they may both have inwardness" (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, Volume I, trans. Hong & Hong. Princeton University Press, 1992, p.194). Kierkegaard says, though, that the difference between the two depends on the object of inwardness; the content of madness is a fixed, finite object, whereas the content of religious truth is the infinite. Of course, this qualification simply raises the problem anew – how does one know it is the infinite?
4. See Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Greene & Hudson (Harper Torchbooks, 1960), pp. 156 ff.
5. See Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Eliot (Prometheus Books, 1989), p. 16.