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The Incisive Lightning Strike of Genius

An Introduction to Søren Kierkegaard

“Geniuses are like thunderstorms: they go against the wind, terrify people, and clean the air” declares Kierkegaard in a journal entry from 1849. For he considered himself a genius and employed his genius in exploring what it was like to be “in the minority”. He, too, always went against the wind, against society’s controlling powers and its systematizing education, and he did this because he felt that “truth can only be found in the minority”. And, in opposition to the majority, that mere abstraction, he supported the concrete, the “particular individual”.

Søren Kierkegaard, Danish writer, theologian, and philosopher, was born on May 5th, 1813, the youngest of a family of 7 children. His peculiar upbringing in the house on Nytorv Square in Copenhagen was especially marked by his father’s heavy pietism and psychological melancholy. He finished his preliminary education in 1830 and immediately thereafter matriculated at the University of Copenhagen in theology. But theology quickly gave way to literature, theater, politics, and philosophy – and dissolute living, which was in part a rebellion against his childhood home’s stark, dark conception of Christian-ity. But after a religious awakening in May of 1838, and his father’s death in August of the same year, Kierkegaard turned once again to theology, finishing his theological qualifying exams in July of 1840 with highest marks.

Two months later, Kierkegaard was betrothed to Regine Olsen, nine years his junior. But then he came “to understand religiously, that already as a child he had been – be-trothed” to God and thus could not marry Regine. After thirteen intense, stormy months, he broke his engagement in October of 1841. This unhappy love affair left a lasting and deep impression on Kierkegaard, but it also set him on his course as an author with the release of two books in 1843: *Either/Or* and *Two Edifying Discourses*.

Yet Kierkegaard had already published his first book in 1838, entitled *From the Papers of One Still Living*, a critical review of the autobiographical novel *Only a Fiddler* by Hans Christian Andersen – the Danish author who, although achieving world renown as a teller of fairy tales, also wrote several other novels, travelogues, librettos, and stageplays as well as many volumes of poetry. Kierkegaard considered *Only a Fiddler* an artistic travesty because its author lacked what he called “a life-view”. And in 1841, a few years after his authorial debut, Kierkegaard received the degree of “Magister” for his dissertation *On the Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*, a conceptual analysis in which irony is both depicted and deployed.

His published philosophical, psychological, religious, and Christian authorship consists of approximately 40 books and a comparable number of newspaper articles, all falling into two major periods: 1843-1846 and 1847-1851. Along with *Either/Or* and a series of 18 edifying discourses, books such as the following were also produced during the first period: *Repetition, Fear and Trembling, Philosophical Fragments, The Concept of Anxiety, Stages on Life’s Way, and Concluding Unscientific Postscript* – and this latter work, which came out in 1846, marks the turning point between the two periods. Although Kierkegaard published his edifying discourses under his own name, he published the rest of his works from this period under a host of pseudonyms, with names as varied as Constantinus Constantius, *Johannes de silentio*, Vigilius Haufniensis, and Johannes Climacus. The second period of his work, considered the Christian period, consists of texts such as *Works of Love, Edifying Discourses in Various Spirits, Christian Discourses, The Sickness Unto Death, and Training in Christianity*. And even though the two last titles were published under the pseudonym of Anti-Climacus, seemingly a counterweight to Johannes Climacus, the rest of the books from this period were published under his own name, S. Kierkegaard.

And there is yet more – Kierkegaard’s journals. Filling approximately 75 notebooks and folders, these journals – which give us a glimpse into the

workshop “where, behind the scenes, he practices his lines” – were completed from 1833 until 1855 with an ever-growing awareness of the fact that they would eventually be made public. As in the published authorship, there is a marked change in the journals around 1846. Before 1846, they reflect the literary undercurrents behind the published texts. They are uninhibited, open, experimental, revealing a young and vigorous author’s tentative insights, sketches and outlines, observations, paraphrasings, all full of incongruities, which fly in and out of context in relationship to each other and their author’s own life. After 1846, however, the journals are made up of a matching set of 36 identical ledgers amounting to a total of 5700 hand written pages. Their contents are introverted to the point of self-obsession and apologetic to the point of self-defensiveness. In these later journal entries, Kierkegaard finds himself interpreting and discussing his published works, reflecting on their as well as their author’s fate in contemporary culture.

In his authorship – and to an even greater extent in the journals – Kierkegaard describes the various possibilities of existence, especially its three primary states, which he calls “spheres of existence”, namely: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. His basic notion is that a human being must first separate himself – or ought to separate himself, since it is not everyone who simply does so – from his given circumstances, such as the parents, family, and social milieu in which he was born and raised. Then, he must begin moving through the various stages (or spheres) of existence, such that during this process he will gain himself in his eternal validity, become an independent individual, who is the “I” of his own actions and thus a subject, one who will proceed to give birth to himself as a unique and particular ethically responsible human being, until, finally – compelled by guilt – such a human being moves into the religious. Even as a 22-year old, Kierkegaard was already writing about this topic, first and foremost in relation to himself, in order to become clear about what it was that life was

for him, but also with an eye to its relevance for every human being. Thus, in a journal entry from 1835, he writes:

“Just as it takes a while for a child to learn to distinguish between himself and his surroundings, and thus for a long time he is unable to separate himself from his milieu, so that emphasizing his own passive aspect, he says, for instance: “*me* hit horsey”; thus does the same phenomenon repeat itself in the higher spiritual spheres. For this reason, I believed that I might achieve more peace of mind by taking on yet another academic discipline, by directing my powers toward another goal. This would have worked for a while, and I would have succeeded in dispelling a certain disquiet, but it would have no doubt returned once again, even more strongly, like an attack of fever after the pleasure of cold water. That which I am truly lacking is to become clear with myself about *what I should do*, not about what I should know, although obviously knowledge should precede any action. What matters is to find my purpose, to see what divinity really wants me to do; the critical thing is to find a truth, which is truth *for me*, to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and to die*.” Thus, when a human being has found that truth, which is the truth for that particular human being, then he or she has gained inner experience. “But,” warns Kierkegaard, “for how many are not life’s various impressions like the figures which the sea draws upon the sand only to immediately erase them, leaving nary a trace.”

This truth which I, as a particular human being, ought to find and make into truth *for me*, is subjective in the sense that it is I *qua subject* who must choose it. And it is made even further subjective in the sense that I ought to transform my subjectivity, my personality, according to it and take action according to it. Moreover, for Kierkegaard, truth is always truth in action, and for this reason he also emphasizes what *I should do*. Thus, many years later, he can present the notion in his philosophical masterwork *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that “subjectivity is truth”. A notion which ought not to be understood as meaning that truth is

subjective in the arbitrary or relative sense, where one truth is just as good and no better than another. On the contrary. According to Kierkegaard, there is an absolute truth in existence, an eternally valid truth, and it is precisely this truth that I *qua subject*, as a person, participate in whenever I chose that truth which is truth *for me*. Furthermore, I should also chose that eternally valid truth to such an extent that I appropriate it, and transform myself as a subject according to it and make it into the absolute norm for my actions.

If this does not happen, and I entangle my life amidst arbitrary truths, thus escaping my destiny, then there is only one possibility left to me: to go directly backwards along the very way I had been going forward. Kierkegaard illustrates this point using an image from one of those old folktales where a man runs the risk of being enchanted by a piece of music and thus has to play the piece backwards in order to break the magic spell. "One must walk backwards down the same road upon which one was going forwards, just like the enchantment is broken when the musical piece...is played through once again, correctly but backwards."

But if I do not return to my point of departure in order to find the right way into truth, but instead let my life be ensnared amidst various arbitrary truths, I will end up in frustration. A situation in which I would really like to will something, but since I really do not know what it is I will, nor am I prepared to use my own resources in order to discover it, for that would imply that I must extricate myself from the very life in which I have ensnared myself, then I am unable to get myself to will. This is the situation that Kierkegaard called "melancholy".

"What is melancholy? It is hysteria of the spirit. There comes a moment in a person's life when immediacy is as though ripened and when the spirit demands a higher form, in which it will apprehend itself as spirit. As immediate spirit a human being coinheres with the whole of earthly life, and now his spirit wants simply to collect itself from out of this dispersion and make itself self-transparent; the personality wants to become conscious of itself in its eternal validity: Should

this not happen, the movement is halted, it is forced back, melancholy sets in. One can do a great deal to try and forget it, one can work...but the melancholy remains.

There is something unaccountable in melancholy. He who has sorrows or worries, he knows what it is he sorrows or worries about. Yet if one asks a melancholy man what reason he has to be melancholy, what it is that is weighing down upon him, then he will answer, "I don't know. I cannot explain it". And therein lies the infinitude of melancholy. And his answer is quite apt, for just as soon as he knows what it is, it is relieved, whereas the sorrows of the sorrowing are by no means relieved by his knowing what he is in sorrow about. But melancholy is sin...for it is the sin of not willing profoundly and sincerely, and this is a mother of all sins...but just as soon as the movement has occurred, then melancholy is genuinely relieved, yet it can very well happen that for the same individual his life will bring him many sorrows and worries."

Kierkegaard, in *Either/Or*, does not assume, as do so "many physicians, that melancholy is of the body, and this is certainly strange, given that physicians cannot relieve it; only the spirit can relieve it, for it is of the spirit, and when the spirit finds itself, then all of the small sorrows disappear, the causes which, according to the opinions of some people, produce melancholy, that one cannot find oneself in the world, that one come both too late and too early to the world, that one cannot find one's place in life; for he who owns himself eternally, he comes neither too early nor too late to the world; and he who possesses himself in his eternal validity, he will probably find his significance in this life."

With this understanding of melancholy, Kierkegaard presages another important concept, anxiety, which he later develops in the psychological treatise *The Concept of Anxiety*. Here the pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis describes the phenomena of anxiety and asks himself this question: What does anxiety – or rather the fact that a human being can become anxious – reveal about being human? And he gives the answer: A human being is a self which is inextricably bound up in the task of becoming

itself. Vigilius Haufniensis also describes how this task fails because the individual gives up his freedom not merely in anxiety about the good but also in anxiety about evil, and thus ends in demonic enclosing reserve.

Anxiety heralds the advent of yet another new concept, despair, which is analyzed by Kierkegaard through the work of his Christian pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, in the book *The Sickness Unto Death*, which itself refers back to *The Concept of Anxiety*. Thus, it is Anti-Climacus who comes to formulate Kierkegaard's final notion of human nature: that a human being is a synthesis, a relation between disparate entities such as temporality and eternity, necessity and possibility, and it is moreover a relation which relates to itself. This notion is expanded upon by Anti-Climacus in the first half of the book, where he describes despair's various forms – despair understood as not willing to be oneself. In the second half of the book, Anti-Climacus elucidates his notion of despair, identifying it as sin, and in this way he harkens back to that doctrine of sin which was first presented in *The Concept of Anxiety*. In this way, despair is intensified frustration, or frustration thought together with God, i.e., not willing to be oneself as created by God, not will-ing to will or to do God's will. For "purity of heart is to will one thing", and that one thing is, in the end, God.

And that particular human being who wills one thing, God, and thereby also wills to be himself as he was created by God no longer flees from God and from himself – he no longer flees into the engulfing slavery of guilt nor into the unreal, yet ideal, dream image of himself; he is a human being who has truly come to himself and become contemporary with himself and his own identity, thus becoming present in the concrete proximity of life. Concerning this becoming present in concrete proximity of life, Kierkegaard writes three aesthetic, but godly, discourses in 1849 entitled *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air*: "What is happiness? What is it to be happy? It is truly being present oneself; but this being oneself truly present, it is this 'today', this to be being today, truly to be being today. And to the same extent that it is more true that you are being

today, and to the same extent that you are more yourself quite fully present in being today, then to that same extent is tomorrow, the day of unhappiness, not present for you. Happiness is in the present time but the whole emphasis lies upon: *the present time*. Therefore, God is blessed, he who eternally says: today, and it is he who eternally and infinitely is himself present in being today."

After having described the three human "existence spheres" in the first part of his authorship, Kierkegaard points out their shortcomings in relation to the Christian in the second period of his work. Here, it is the case that a human being first becomes an authentic self by relating to God as created by Him, and he also becomes a true self by professing Christ and having his guilt forgiven by Him. But beyond profession, action is required. Therefore, the truth is always a truth in action, like faith is always a faith in deeds.

In this second period of the authorship, the understanding of both the human and the Christian is sharpened. Kierkegaard claims, with increasing emphasis, that the decisive category is the particular human being – "that particular individual" – but at the same time accents more and more sharply a religiously grounded conception of common human equality. This is developed in parallel with a constantly growing critique of his own age, as seen in his 1846 publication *A Literary Review*, presented as a kind of commentary upon the then contemporary, but now classic, Danish Golden Age novel, *The Two Ages*, written by the Danish elder gentlewoman Thomasine Gyllembourg (1773-1856). Here he delivers an insightful characterization of emerging modern society and expresses his political and social thoughts by confronting his contemporaries' preference for leveling and passionlessness.

Kierkegaard understood himself as a religious author with the task of "presenting Christianity". He wanted to "clean the air", to prune away masquerade and hypocrisy, and thus force a return to "the Christianity of the New Testament". It is against just such a backdrop that, in the last few years of his life, he undertook an attack upon the

official preaching, ministry, and authority of the Lutheran Church in Denmark. He commenced his struggle with the church by stirring up a tempest in late 1854 through a series of lightning strikes in the shape of newspaper articles for the publication "*Fædrelandet*" ("The Fatherland") and then, with great pointedness, radicality, and journalistic flair, pushed his campaign onward by means of his own privately published pamphlet series "*Øieblikket*" ("The Moment"), numbers 1-9.

In October of 1855, he collapsed in the street, exhausted and ill; he was carried to Frederiks Hospital, today known as the Museum of Decorative Art, in the center of Copenhagen. Here he died on the 11th of November.

Kierkegaard was rediscovered at the turn of the century and achieved international renown after the First World War. He was, for instance, a source of great inspiration for dialectical theology as well as for both theological and philosophical existentialism. Yet from the 1960's

until the middle of the 1980's, he was held in rather low regard. But since then, he has experienced a tremendous renaissance both nationally and internationally, not only among scholars and researchers, but also among the public at large – even in those lands that were previously subject to a Marxist way of thought and of understanding existence.

This renewed interest in Kierkegaard reflects a rekindled desire to acquire an understanding of the whole of existence as well as a renewed search for a possible eternal truth, not only on the scholarly philosophical plane, but also on the ethically existential one, lying behind the many relative, epochal, and culturally-determined truths of today. And such a pursuit is connected with a new search for answers to fundamental questions about the significance of the individual, about the foundations of ethics, and about the connections between the religious and the social.

"Concerning geniuses, there are two kinds.

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