

Kierkegaard on Socrates: Know Thyself as Choose Thyself

Kierkegaard's Re-conceptualization of "Know Thyself" as "Choose Thyself"

Kierkegaard understands the aesthetic way of life as an attempted choice to value self without valuing others. Other individuals are only means to the end of the aesthetic individual enjoying himself or herself. Hence, in order to overcome the inherent despair that inevitably comes with pursuing only the momentary and immediate pleasures of one's own existence, Kierkegaard affirms that one should choose oneself by repenting oneself: "For repentance puts the individual in the most intimate connection and the most exact cohesion with a surrounding world."¹ Having repented of seeking fulfillment only in himself, the aesthetic individual acknowledges responsibility for that previous choice through now taking the choice to seek value of self and others as all valuable for their own sake. Kierkegaard writes:

He who regards life ethically sees the universal [principle and value of personality in himself and in others], and he who lives ethically expresses the universal in his life, he makes himself the universal man, not by divesting himself of his concretion, for then he becomes nothing, but by clothing himself with it and permeating it with the universal.²

One who lives ethically lives by the Socratic commitment to choose the good in light of the well-examined life. One who lives aesthetically does not seek the well-

examined life, nor does he live by a choice which he can maintain. That is the essential difference between the aesthetic and the ethical. Kierkegaard sums up the ethical commitment in a very beautiful passage:

He who lives ethically has seen himself, knows himself, penetrates with his consciousness his whole concretion; . . . he is not like a witch's letter from which one sense can be got now and then another, depending upon how one turns it. He knows himself. The expression *gnothi seauton* has been repeated often enough and in it has been seen the goal of all human endeavor. That is quite right, too, but it is equally certain that it cannot be the goal if it is not at the same time the beginning. The ethical individual knows himself, but this knowledge is not a mere contemplation, it is a reflection upon himself which itself is an action, and therefore I have deliberately preferred to use the expression "choose oneself" instead of know oneself. So when an individual knows himself he is not through: on the contrary, this knowledge is in the highest degree fruitful, and from it proceeds the true individual . . . the self which the individual knows is at once the actual self and the ideal self which the individual has outside himself as the picture in likeness to which he has to form himself and which, on the other hand, he nevertheless has in him since it is the self.³

Kierkegaard's reflections exemplify existentialism as a description of the human being as a process of self-transcending freedom. The self-transcendence of consciousness and freedom prevents the self from finding fulfillment in the immediacy

and momentary of the aesthetic way of life. The process of becoming one's consciousness and freedom requires the courageous "know thyself" in the form of "choose thyself," knowing and choosing the ideal self as the term of the actual self in all its relations with others. Having chosen himself in the ethical, the aesthetic finds its proper sphere in human life. Kierkegaard explains:

He has himself, then, as an individual who has these talents, these passions, these inclinations, these habits, who is under these influences here, then, he has himself as a task, in such a sort that the task is principally to order, cultivate, temper, enkindle, repress, in short, to bring about a proportionality in the soul, a harmony, which is the fruit of the personal virtues. Here the aim of his activity is himself, but not as arbitrarily determined [as in the aesthetic way], even though it has become his by the fact that he has chosen it [by repentance in the ethical] This self which is the aim is not merely a personal self but a social, a civic self. He has, then, himself as a task Personality is the absolute, is its own end and purpose, is the unity of the universal and the particular, . . . the Archimedean point from which one can lift the world."⁴

The Contrasting Defenses of the Moral Law by Kant and Kierkegaard

The basis of the moral law for both Kant and Kierkegaard is human freedom. Kant distinguishes a negative and positive concept of freedom. The negative concept views freedom as the property of the will of a rational being insofar as it can be

independent of foreign causes determining it.⁵ The positive concept views freedom as autonomous, as giving to itself and to every other rational being a universal law. Kant affirms, “On the hypothesis, then, of freedom of the will, morality together with its principle follows by a mere analysis of the conception.”⁶ For the will can be free only by being independent of foreign causes, and that requires that the will be determined by rational consciousness alone, by the person’s mind only. Any other way of determining the will would cause a loss of freedom. If the freedom of the will can only come from being determined by rationality, then it necessarily follows for Kant that the will is determined by the categorical imperative. To be free, one must act rationally. For example, to be free in determining whether or not I ought to rob a bank, I should let my will be determined by reason alone, which requires, Kant says, that the maxim of my will be universalizable. If I would not universalize my action, that is, if I were to give myself one guideline but then contradict that guideline by giving another guideline to other rational agents, then I ought not to do that action. When the will chooses in accord with the universalization requirement of rational consciousness rooted in the requirement that it avoid self-contradictory maxims, then the will achieves positive freedom. Randall summarizes Kant’s argument:

The Idea of Freedom is thus the idea of acting on reason alone: man is autonomous when he is realizing perfectly the law of his own rational nature. Freedom is complete determination by reason, as contrasted with determination by the partial rationality of the purely mechanical order full of brute contingency. Free action is rational action as opposed to action dictated by impulse and desire.

If man's ultimate nature is "rational," then, in being determined by the law of freedom, he is being determined by the law of his own nature. In other words, he is then being self-determined, or "autonomous," and is hence "free."⁷

It is "autonomy" which "is the basis of the dignity of human and of every rational nature" in that such autonomy establishes the self as part of a kingdom of ends.⁸ A kingdom of ends is the union of rational beings who determined their actions by the universalization requirement and by the dignity of personality as an end in itself which both flow from the nature of rational consciousness. As Kant explains,

For all rational beings come under the law that each of them must treat itself and all others never merely as means, but in every case at the same time as ends in themselves. . . .

A rational being belongs as a member to the kingdom of ends, when, although giving universal laws in it, he is also himself subject to these laws. He belongs to it as sovereign when, while giving laws, he is not subject to the will of any other.⁹

In summary, Kant has argued that rational consciousness necessarily gives to freedom autonomy only by the first and second formulations of the categorical imperatives. Only by universalizing my maxims and only by treating personality as an end in itself can the individual achieve positive freedom, true autonomy.

However, we must object against Kant that it is not a logical necessity that rational consciousness give itself such fundamental moral imperatives. For it is not a logical contradiction for rational consciousness to say very immoral directives to itself in the following parody of the first formulation of the categorical imperative: “Everyone who is my unique self may rob this bank.” In this statement I am constituting myself as a class or set which can have only one member; I am universalizing the maxim of my action but I am not giving myself proper moral direction. So also we must argue that one who gives value to the persons of the class of Romans, for example, does not logically contradict one’s valuation of Romans by excluding the class of Greeks, for example, from having value for their own sakes. And we then can argue that one who gives value to oneself as a unique class does not logically contradict that valuation of the self in excluding others from having that same value. Logically, the individual could affirm that the whole world of others ought to be slaves and that he would be the only master, the only one who has value for his own sake, all others being only means. It would be outrageously immoral, but not a logical contradiction as Kant has claimed, to affirm that only oneself is an end in itself and that all others are only means to that tyrannical self who has affirmed that all others should be slaves.

We may identify the contrasting ways in which Hegel and Kierkegaard would respond to the tyrannical self who would attempt to live out an identity of the tyrant who makes all other selves only means. Such a selection of one’s identity would give rise to a dialectic of personal and social experiences which for Hegel moves the self with

necessity towards a moral identity but which for Kierkegaard moves the self only through free choice toward a moral identity. Stumpf's commentary helps to explain:

Kierkegaard's analysis of the "three stages" represents a sharp contrast to Hegel's theory of the gradual development of a person's self-consciousness. Whereas Hegel expounded the dialectical movement of the mind as it moves from one stage of intellectual awareness to another through the process of thinking, Kierkegaard describes the movement of the self from one level of existence to another through an act of will, an act of choice. Hegel's dialectic moves gradually toward a knowledge of the universal, whereas Kierkegaard's dialectic involves the progressive actualization of the individual. Whereas Hegel overcomes the antithesis by a conceptual act, Kierkegaard overcomes it by an act of personal commitment.¹⁰

What Stumpf says is substantially correct. Hegel uses a dialectical method for understanding the development of the spirit of God, *Geist*, in the world, since *Geist* is incomplete and can only develop itself by entering into relationship with the world it creates. The world (humans) and *Geist* (God) act upon each other, developing through the dialectic the true essence of existence. This dialectical development occurs through a three step process, repeated again and again: thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. A good example of this dialectical development, which can serve as a transition from Kant's discussion of morality to Kierkegaard's discussion of morality, is the Master-Slave dialectic.

Hegel analyzes the postulated state of nature of Hobbes in which every human is a wolf to every other human whereby every individual is in a state of war with every other individual. If, instead of one killing the other in mortal combat, the first defeats the second individual but then enslaves him. This state of Master and Slave has the following three stages: The thesis stage presents the master as free and independent and the slave as enslaved and dependent. The antithesis stage develops out of the tensions inherent in the thesis stage and presents the master as enslaved and dependent and the slave as free and independent. The synthesis stage would present both master and slave as conscious of and respectful of the rationality and freedom of both master and slave. The most famous example of a master and a slave reaching this insight would be two great Stoic thinkers, the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius and the slave Epictetus.¹¹

However, we must evaluate Hegel's analysis as failing to show that any master or any slave must intellectually grasp the claimed insights of Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus. There is no logical necessity that the slave grow out of the thesis stage of being dependent upon the master into recognition of himself as an individual of reasonable choice, not dominated by one's own desires, through the restrictions of his desires by the master. It is possible for the slave to do so; Epictetus did so. However, many slaves have not developed such awareness. The slave could just as easily select the option of rebellion against the master, not in order to establish a new community of Stoic respect for the dignity of every human, but in order to establish an enslavement of the old master. Although Hegel has attempted to describe these stages in the dialectic as flowing

along with logical necessity, there are other passages in which Hegel emphasizes human action and freedom in human becoming. He writes: “The very essence of spirit is action. It makes itself what it essentially is; it is its own product, its own work.”¹² If we keep in mind that it is humanity which according to Hegel reflects the development of *Geist* and is the agent through which *Geist* expresses itself in history, then we can understand what he means when he says, “Man is his own action, the sequence of his actions, that into which he has been making himself.”¹³ *Geist* is, therefore, what it chooses to do and become, and hence humans are what they choose to do and become. This role of choice and action is crucial to understanding how the dialectic of master and slave can proceed through freely chosen action and thought into developing the Stoic consciousness of the emperor and the slave. Human freedom is the key dynamic force in the dialectic.

It is Kierkegaard who brings out the role of freedom in human becoming even more than Hegel does. Kant had tried to show that it is logically necessary for a rational consciousness to give itself a universal moral law based upon the dignity of the human person, whether in the self or in any other rational being. However, we have argued in our evaluation of Kant that his argument cannot succeed because it is possible for a person logically to constitute oneself as a unique class which has only one member. Although it is logically possible to do so, this attempt to become a master over all others as slaves leads in Hegel’s analysis to its own overcoming. Hegel sketches this overcoming as a conceptual or intellectual act, whereas Kierkegaard clearly identifies this overcoming as a volitional act. The aesthete can be viewed as an individual who would enslave the world to the ideal of the aesthete’s self-enjoyment. The aesthete has

attempted to constitute himself as a unique class with one member only. Although logically possible as an identity, such a choice of oneself does not bring lasting satisfaction in rationality and freedom to the aesthete. Such a choice makes the rational consciousness and freedom of the aesthete dependent upon the external conditions of the world which prevent lasting fulfillment. For human freedom cannot, in Kierkegaard's analysis, lose itself in the necessity of passion and be fulfilled. Consciousness cannot be fulfilled in the momentary and finite but cries out for the eternal and infinite. The aesthete can fall into two kinds of despair, finite or infinite despair. In finite despair, the self gives up hope of fulfillment in one specific object and broods over this loss, but it can still then choose to pursue another finite object. However, in infinite despair, the self chooses to accept that no finite or temporal object will ever satisfy its longing for the infinite and eternal. But whether the self chooses to be in finite despair or in infinite despair, the fundamental point is that the self is changing itself by making a choice. Having exhausted the aesthetic realm of choices by choosing infinite despair over all finite and temporal objects, the self is then free to choose the ethical sphere of living in which all selves are ends in themselves.

Understanding Kierkegaard's Ethical Commitment as an Example of "Truth is Subjectivity"

In commenting on Kierkegaard's distinction between objective reflection and subjective reflection, Stumpf writes:

Truth, said Kierkegaard, *is* subjectivity. By this strange notion he meant that for existing, striving, deciding persons there is not available “out there” a prefabricated truth. Anticipating the pragmatic view of William James, who said that “truth is made” by an act of the will, Kierkegaard wrote that what is “out there” is “an objective uncertainty;” he argued that “the highest truth attainable for an Existing individual is simply “an objective uncertainty held fast in the most passionate personal experience. . . .”¹⁴

Although Kierkegaard wrote that passage primarily in reference to religious truth, we should also apply it to his fundamental ethical thinking, especially the transition from the aesthetic way of life to the ethical way of life. It is the purpose of this paper to defend and expand Walter Sikes’s affirmation for Kierkegaard of a freely chosen, existential basis of the person’s living in relation to the fundamental moral law of the ethical sphere of life, writing:

There is no law of necessity that moves the possible into the actual. The passage from the aesthetic to the ethical sphere of existence is not made by way of some bridge between the two. There is no bridge but instead a great gulf. The transition is always a “leap” that is never devoid of reflection though never produced by reflection. It is an “internal decision in which the individual puts an end to mere possibility and identifies himself with the content of his thought in order to exist in it.” The leap by which one actualizes existence in the ethical sphere consists of a radical decisive act—a passionate choice.¹⁵

It order to understand this application “Truth is Subjectivity” in Kierkegaard’s ethics in which he reformulates Socrates’ famous statement of “Know Thyself” into “Choose Thyself,” we may first learn from William James’s analysis of our grasp of the reality and value of our freedom.

In *Principles of Psychology*, James reviews the question of evidence in regard to the question of determinism versus freedom of choice. He concludes that it will be impossible to make mathematical measurements of the antecedents of a human act which would enable us to predict what that human act will be. In terms of objective evidence, the facts are not really facts, independent of the viewpoint we take with which to interpret those “facts.” The evidence is inconclusive; there are too many variables to be taken into account and it is practically impossible to measure the exact input of any variable into a human behavior. Hence, there are two ways to approach the universe, either with the assumption of determinism or of free choice. The determinist assumes the great scientific postulate that the world must be one unbroken fact with necessary connections from the past through the present and on to the future, so that the future is in principle predictable by true knowledge. The moral postulate which assumes freedom of choice does so because of its sense that what ought morally to be achieved can in fact be chosen by the human person. For the sense of the moral postulate is that when moral tragedies have occurred, namely terrible deeds that ought morally never to have been done, human persons were free to have chosen differently in order not to have made those choices or to

have prevented others from making those choices. James brings his analysis to a conclusion by choosing to believe in freedom of choice; he writes:

When scientific and moral postulates war, and objective proof is not to be had, the only course is voluntary choice, for skepticism itself, if systematic, is also voluntary choice. If meanwhile, the will be undetermined, it would seem only fitting that belief in its indetermination should be voluntarily chosen from amongst other possible beliefs. Freedom's first deed should be to affirm itself. We ought never to hope for any other method of getting to the truth if indeterminism be a fact.¹⁶

Kierkegaard's view is in accord with James's view. The very reality and the ethical way of valuing freedom are truths which can only be chosen subjectively by an individual. Kierkegaard has concentrated upon the individual's choice of the proper way of valuing both one's own freedom and the freedom of others in his reinterpretation of the Socratic commitment as "Know Thyself-Choose Thyself." But implicit in his thought, we have found a deep similarity between his existential choice of freedom and James's pragmatic choice of freedom. For Kierkegaard, the way in which freedom is chosen affects the very reality of freedom. One who chooses freedom aesthetically tends to lose one's own self, most precisely, one's own freedom, by becoming enslaved to desires for external objects. However, one who chooses one's own self ethically by choosing to value the freedom and dignity of every person gains one's own self and wins

one's own freedom, refusing to be enslaved to desires for external objects. Only the ethical choice of freedom relates the individual properly to one's own subjective truth.

In commenting of the Kantian aspects to Kierkegaard's ethics, Blackham writes that Kierkegaard:

. . . was a demoniac witness to the irreplaceable importance of the reflective will to choose the self absolutely and thus originate a life worthy to be called human, authentic. In the will to will absolutely, that is, without reserve and with all one's life, the individual gives himself a formal determination in which the empirical self is transcended and becomes purified and intensified, a value and a source of value. This formula is more than an adverbial qualification of the Kantian ethical formula which determinates the will to will only what can be willed universally, for it integrates both the how and the what, and it is grounded not merely in abstract reason . . . but in the whole personal nature and life of the existing individual. A man can only will absolutely in an original choice, which is also a choice of himself, and which becomes the ground of his own moral decisions.¹⁷

Kierkegaard and James together call our attention to the personal act of choosing to believe in the reality of freedom. Kant, who was aware of the conflicting viewpoints of scientific determinism and of moral freedom, did not affirm as his solution the right of the individual to choose to believe in freedom of choice, even though his outlining of the antinomy of determinism and freedom tended towards an existential-pragmatic resolution

of the issues. Kant had assumed that the rational identity of the human being necessitated logically the moral ideal of the moral law based upon the universalization principle and the respect for dignity of every person principle. However, the thought of Kierkegaard develops the view that one needs to choose oneself in the form of knowing oneself. This choice of oneself is more than just the choice of a universal moral ideal of valuing the freedom and dignity of every rational being, for this choice of oneself is grounded in the whole personal nature and life of the existing individual. One chooses oneself properly only by repenting oneself. For repentance puts the individual in a position of responsibility for all one's past choices and all one's future choices. Only by repenting oneself does one gain control of all one's choices, committing oneself to relate all future choices to this primary choice of living under the categories of good and evil rather than under the categories of the pleasant and the painful, the enjoyable and the boring. The aesthetic choice of one's own freedom causes a loss of one's self and freedom, enslaved to external objects through the categories of the pleasant and the painful. However, the ethical choice of one's own freedom gives oneself a lasting possession of one's freedom through the moral categories of good and evil. When the self chooses itself in the ethical way of life, then it knows itself as free and retains both the very reality of freedom itself, not losing itself to aesthetic objects, and also the universal moral value of self and others.

¹ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, translated by David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson, with revisions and a foreword by Howard A. Johnson (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959) Vol. II, p. 245.

² Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Vol. II, p. 260.

³ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Vol. II, p. 260.

⁴ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Vol. II, pp. 267, 269, 270.

⁵ Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 63.

⁶ Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 64.

⁷ John H. Randall, Jr., *Career of Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962-65) Vol. II, p. 152.

⁸Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p.53.

⁹ Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 50.

¹⁰ Samuel Stumpf, *From Socrates to Sartre: A History of Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982) p. 458.

¹¹ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, transl. J. B. Baillie, 2nd Edition (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949) pp. 229-240

¹²Hegel, *Reason in History: A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, transl. Robert S. Hartman (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1953) p. 89.

¹³Hegel, *Reason in History*, p. 51.

¹⁴ Stumpf, *From Socrates to Sartre*, p. 457

¹⁵Walter K. Sikes, *In Becoming the Truth: an Introduction to the Life and Thought of Soren Kierkegaard* (St. Louis, Mo: The Bethany press, 1968) p. 57; Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, translated by David Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941) p. 302; cf. p. 304, footnote.

¹⁶ William James, *Principles of Psychology*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1950) Vol. II, p. 573

¹⁷ H. J. Blackham, *Six Existential Thinkers* (London: Routledge, 2002) p. 18.