

NIETZSCHE VERSUS KIERKEGAARD. CHOOSE: "THE WILL TO POWER" OR "FEAR AND TREMBLING"!

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Abstract

The author demonstrates the difference between Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's Existentialism. This is his third essay about Nietzsche's works. One should pay attention to the author's criticism of Bertrand Russell's false accusation against Nietzsche.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Existentialism, Becoming, Being, Eternal Recurrence.

KIERKEGAARD'S EXISTENTIALISM

Allow me to commence with this question: What is existentialism? Here is the definition according to Webster's Dictionary:

"A philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts".

Kierkegaard's belief was that, having to choose between Reason or Faith, man should select the latter. It is my view that prior to examining Søren Kierkegaard's existentialism, one must be acquainted with Hegel's opinion about Reason and its significance. Why? Because no metaphysical thinker, ever, explained with such credibility and loftiness what Reason is. Here are Hegel's arresting ideas:

"The only thought which philosophy brings with it to the contemplation of history is the simple conception of Reason; that Reason is sovereign of the world; that the history of the world, therefore, presents us with a rational process. This conviction and intuition is a hypothesis in the domain of history as such. In that of philosophy it is no hypothesis. It is there proved by speculative cognition, that Reason

– and this term may here suffice us, without investigating the relation sustained by the Universe to the Divine Being – is Substance, as well as Infinite Power; its own infinite material underlying all the natural and spiritual life which it originates, as also the Infinite Form, that which sets the material in motion. Reason is the substance of the Universe"... "Spirit, and the course of its development, is the substantial object of the philosophy of history. The nature of Spirit may be understood by contrasting it with its opposite, namely Matter. The essence of Matter is Gravity; the essence of Spirit is Freedom. Matter is outside itself, whereas Spirit has its centre in itself. Spirit is self-contained existence". "Reason is the conscious certainty of being all reality"... "This unity is consequently the absolute and all truth, the Idea which thinks itself".¹

These are unprecedented, unrivaled statements. Kierkegaard was impressed with Hegel's conclusion about the Infinite Power of Reason, but decided that rather Faith, in spite of being founded on logical paradoxes, is conducive to discovering the ultimate truth about the Universe's existence. His point of view was that a persuasive frame of thought cannot be viable, unless humanity's accumulated experiences are included within it. Only when using reason and experience jointly, in harmony with faith, a cogent explanation of the Universe can be delivered. Not agreeing with Hegel about the necessity of a cold and detached reasoning – when referring to Divine Power – Kierkegaard presented a different theory attempting to prove that much rather through Faith, God reveals himself, in stages, corresponding with humanity's progress in understanding the axiom of his

presence. What counts most is man's personal experience and not a reasoning in the abstract practiced by traditional philosophy. God is far beyond the realm of reason! If one believes firmly in the power of God, all external pressures to deny His existence become ineffective. Only with a strong pillar of support, like faith in God, man, in spite of unavoidable doubts, pain and despair, will be able to find peace and define himself. In other words, the more man grows spiritually, the greater are his chances to understand why God becomes the only explanation possible, when the question asked is: Who created the Universe?

Kierkegaard is adamant in his conclusion that man has the right to choose and make final decisions regarding his beliefs. As a consequence, his actions will reflect such beliefs. He writes:

*"One became great by expecting the possible, another by expecting the eternal; but he who expected the impossible became greatest of all. Everyone shall be remembered, but everyone was great wholly in proportion to the magnitude of that with which he struggled. For he who struggled with the world became great by conquering the world, and he who struggled with himself became great by conquering himself, but he who struggled with God became greatest of all."*²

Kierkegaard's confidence that man continues to improve spiritually under the guidance of God, from the anthropological form to the present, was unbending. He believed, also, like Leibniz before him, in *"the best of all possible worlds"*! (Leibniz, who was prolific in Latin and French, wrote in these languages more often than in his inherent German. The above famous line was known first as: *"Le meilleur des mondes possibles"*).

This extremely optimistic view of the world caused Schopenhauer's skepticism and triggered his forceful reaction regarding the validity of Leibniz's philosophy. He questions the reasoning for the immense sufferings of humanity. Here is a compelling example of his thinking:

"Unless suffering is the direct and immediate object of life, our existence must entirely fail of its aim. It is absurd to look upon the enormous amount of pain that abounds everywhere in the world, and originates in needs and necessities

inseparable from life itself, as serving no purpose at all and the result of mere chance. Each separate misfortune, as it comes, seems, no doubt, to be something exceptional; but misfortune in general is the rule. I know of no greater absurdity than that propounded by most systems of philosophy in declaring evil to be negative in its character. Evil is just what is positive; it makes its own existence felt. Leibniz is particularly concerned to defend this absurdity; and he seeks to strengthen his position by using a palpable and paltry sophism. It is the good which is negative; in other words, happiness and satisfaction always imply some desire fulfilled, some state of pain brought to an end. This explains the fact that we generally find pleasure to be not nearly so pleasant as we expected, and pain very much more painful.

*The pleasure in this world, it has been said, outweighs the pain; or, at any rate, there is an even balance between the two. If the reader wishes to see shortly whether this statement is true, let him compare the respective feelings of two animals, one of which is engaged in eating the other. The best consolation in misfortune or affliction of any kind will be the thought of other people who are in a still worse plight than yourself; and this is a form of consolation open to every one. But what an awful fate this means for mankind as a whole!"*³

Not agreeing with Schopenhauer's pessimistic concept about man's existence and destiny, Kierkegaard argues that faith in God is the best solution for man's tribulations.

In addition to *Fear and Trembling* (1843), I mention two of his many books: *"The Concept of Anxiety"* (1844) and *"Christian Discourses"* (1848).

In *"Fear and Trembling"* Kierkegaard talks about the *"paradox"* and the *"leap"*. He wrote:

*"Infinite resignation is the last stage before faith, so anyone who has not made this movement does not have faith, for only in infinite resignation does an individual become conscious of his eternal validity, and only then can one speak of grasping existence by virtue of faith."*⁴...

"The act of resignation does not require faith, for what I gain is my eternal consciousness. This is a purely philosophical movement that

I venture to make when it is demanded and can discipline myself to make, because every time some finitude will take power over me, I starve myself into submission until I make the movement, for my eternal consciousness is my love for God, and for me that is the highest of all.

The act of resignation does not require faith, but to get the least little bit more than my eternal consciousness requires faith, for this is the paradox.”⁵...

“All Christianity is rooted in paradox, according to Fear and Trembling, it is rooted in fear and trembling (which are specifically the desperate categories of Christianity and the leap-whether one accepts it) (that is, is a believer) or rejects it (for the very reason that it is the paradox).”⁶...

...Monotony exercises in the course of time a benumbing influence upon the mind. Like the monotonous sound of water dripping from the roof, like the monotonous whir of a spinning wheel, like the monotonous sound of a man walking with measured tread back and forth on the floor above, so this movement of reflective grief finally gives to it a certain sense of numb relief, becoming a necessity as affording it an illusion of progress. Finally an equilibrium is established, and the need of obtaining for itself an outward expression, in so far as this need may have once or twice asserted itself, now ceases; outwardly, everything is quiet and calm, and, far within, in its little secret recess, grief dwells like a prisoner strictly guarded in a subterranean dungeon, who spends year after year monotonously moving back and forth within its little enclosure, never weary of traversing sorrow’s longer or shorter path.⁷

(p. 168) How beautiful is this last paragraph!

What is a leap of faith? *“It is the act or an instance of believing or trusting in something intangible or incapable of being proved”⁸.*

Kierkegaard considers existence of greater importance than the essence of being! He believes that man must define himself, become aware of his presence in the world, and only afterward, should he question the essence of his existence.

“The Universe is change, life is an opinion”.

(Marcus Aurelius, Meditations)

Jean Paul Sartre articulates the concept of existentialism very simply: *“man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards”⁹.*

NIETZSCHE’S EXISTENTIALISM!

Initially under Schopenhauer’s influence and for a short period of time agreeing with his pessimistic concept of a humanity without hope, Nietzsche, eventually, renounced to this view of the world. He challenged his readers to question all false values deriving from a doctrine that destroys life’s energy and its atavic instincts. Christian Doctrine was rejected by Nietzsche who declared: God is Dead! As a corollary, all ethical values of that doctrine became inconsequential. The meek and obedient, with sheep’s mentality, were horrifying to Nietzsche. He declared that humans must fight for a better life while living here on earth and not hoping for a next time’s chance somewhere in paradise, in a fictional form of existence that has no basis to be expected. Nietzsche’s existentialism is profoundly in contrast to Kierkegaard’s concept regarding humanity’s behavior and choices. Christian moralities, according to Nietzsche, endanger man’s survival. He believes that a need to conquer, to exercise his will to power is the only way man can survive and become an accomplished being, in control of his destiny. Imposing his will upon the weak, the ones unwilling to fight for a better life, becomes the duty of a superior man who cannot be restrained by morals promoting equality between... *“the few creative and the worthless many”*. Fighting relentlessly against *“a herd’s mentality”* is the only chance for man’s real freedom and progress. In *“The Antichrist”* as well as *“The Gay Science”*, Nietzsche considers Christianity as representing a *“god of decadence”* who requires man’s complete submissiveness that will secure his salvation from sin.

Why is sin so important to this doctrine? Because forgiveness from sin comes only through God’s representative on earth, the priest, the new appointed shepherd, whose mission is to control the masses of uninformed and obedient sheep. In his first book, *“The Birth of Tragedy”*,

Nietzsche gives a suggestive example of a god whose enthusiasm and energy encourages man to emulate him, searching for pleasure and enjoying life, regardless of false moralities that squash his natural gifts. This god heralds the rights of humanity for experiencing life in its fullness and unrestricted happiness. He is Dionysos, the god of wine, music, dance and orgiastic impulses.

When Dionysos' passion intertwines with Apollo's opiate and calm reasoning, what supervenes is the birth of tragedy- greatest among all man's creations! "Dionysos is the symbol of the stream of life itself" and "one with life". Nietzsche's strong belief in humanity's capacity to gain real freedom by breaking the chains of superstitions and unrealistic hopes of salvation was determined by his optimistic view that mankind will upgrade its appreciation of what a *Being* and its *Becoming* represent. Nietzsche explained the *Becoming* as a natural crescendo in the evolution of a *Being's* existence.

He believed that trusting in God must be rejected by a positive way of thinking that offers solutions to critical questions obsessing humanity from the time of its awakening, out of darkness, up to the moment in history when man's conscience began searching what it means to be. He did not accept Plato's and Aristotélēs' explanation for the need of a first mover. Therefore the Universe does not have a beginning nor an end. Nietzsche offered a new concept about Mankind as being sentenced to experience the Eternal Recurrence, as an unavoidable destiny, like, and within, the physical Universe.

Sometime, in the future, humanity may welcome the appearance of a superior being, the Übermensch, who will lead men to their deserved happiness, justified by their own achievements, and not resulting from compassionate gift crumbs offered by God.

A great number of detractors, biased or uninformed, sprung out of mediocrity and began competing for "15 minutes of fame", attacking Nietzsche's philosophy. I must recognize that Bertrand Russell belongs to a higher class of critics but, sadly, lowered himself to a point of no return. Without being stylistically agrestic, he tried, de facto, to demote one of the greatest minds that ever existed.

Let us listen once more to his false propaganda about the Übermensch, that shows absence of intellectual integrity and a flagrant distortion of Nietzsche's thoughts:

"If the men who do not possess these aristocratic qualities (who are the vast majority) band themselves together, they may win in spite of their individual inferiority. In this fight of the collective canaille against the aristocrats, Christianity is the ideological front, as the French Revolution was the fighting front. We ought therefore to oppose every kind of union among the individually feeble, for fear lest their combined power should outweigh that of the individually strong; on the other hand, we ought to promote union among the tough and virile elements of the population"...

..."Aristocracies of birth are nowadays discredited; the only practicable form of aristocracy is an organization like the Fascist or the Nazi party"¹⁰...

How ignoble, how unfair was Russell, and without any ground for these claims! The British philosopher's oleaginous personality comes to life when remembering his back and forth incensing of both Super Powers of the last century. Russell was perspicacious to find audiences willing to applaud his well known theatrical and spineless posturing. Sometimes critical of the Soviet Union or, when convenient, of the United States, he professed platitudes about world peace, noticeable in improvised speeches regarding nuclear disarmament, which left me with a nauseatingly bad taste that recurs any time I listen to his recorded voice.

Well, enough about Russell. Let's return to the subject of this essay...

Kierkegaard was accused by atheists of being a confused religious man. Strangely, in Denmark, the Church became very critical of him because he displayed great doubts about that institution's behavior. Lastly, many of his critics consider him a poet rather than a philosopher. The difference between Kierkegaard and Nietzsche is not about the individual's responsibility for his existence and beliefs, a concept agreed by both, but rather the reasons that make a man's life meaningful. Kierkegaard finds that God may be the only

pillar for mankind's existence, while Nietzsche's existentialism is based on the idea that it is up to humanity to experience life in all its fullness. His message is that the intensity, urgency and excitement of life, in spite of all sufferings inflicted on humanity by unforeseeable events, makes it worth living. Beings may vanish, with the exception that, due to the enforced Eternal Recurrence, another form of life must, and will, emerge. The uniqueness of life's energy originates in the mighty power of the Universe that is infinite and everlasting.

"With Nietzsche metaphysical thought reached its apex". (Heidegger)

I cannot come to an end without asking you, the readers of these pages, to reflect on the quotations selected. Also, I have to confess my subjective, perhaps biased, conclusion concerning German philosophers. When compared to the rest of Europeans, they seem to be more refined, employing a professorial style that, without being aloof, includes, as well, poetical tendencies. The same can be mentioned about Soren Kierkegaard.

It is my hope that you will do your own research to discover the beauty of Nietzsche's books, their philosophical significance, and enjoy the imagery of pure poetry, that, sometimes, takes us away from the ugliness and boredom of our present world.

And now the dream-like poetry of these lines from *"The Gay Science"*:

*– "We have left the land and have embarked!
We have burned our bridges behind us – indeed,
we have gone further and destroyed the land
behind us! Now, little ship, look out! Beside you
is the ocean: to be sure, it does not always roar,
and at times it lies spread out like silk and gold
and reveries of graciousness. But hours will
come when you will realize that it is infinite
and that there is nothing more awesome than
infinity.*

*Oh, the poor bird that felt free and now
strikes the walls of this cage! Woe, when you
feel homesick for the land as if it had offered
more freedom and there is no longer any
'land'!"¹¹*

In closing, for your enjoyment, I selected a few of Nietzsche's famous quotes:

"Faith: not wanting to know what is true".

*"Every church is a stone on the grave of a god-
man: it does not want him to rise up again under any
circumstances".*

*"Convictions are more dangerous foes of truth
than lies".*

*"A casual stroll through the lunatic asylum shows
that faith does not prove anything".*

*"Fanatics are picturesque, mankind would rather
see gestures than listen to reasons".*

*"I cannot believe in a God who wants to be praised
all the time".*

*"I would believe only in a God that knows how to
Dance".*

*"In Christianity neither morality nor religion
come into contact with reality at any point".*

*"The Christian resolution to find the world ugly
and bad has made the world ugly and bad"*

"Fear is the mother of morality"

*"Is man one of God's blunders? Or is God one of
man's blunders?"*

"Morality is the herd-instinct in the individual."

*"Once spirit was God, then it became a man, and
now it is even becoming a mob."*

*"The word "Christianity" is already a
misunderstanding – in reality there has been only one
Christian, and he died on the Cross."*

*"Two great European narcotics, alcohol and
Christianity".*

"Woman was God's second mistake".

"In heaven, all the interesting people are missing".

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Endnotes

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5. *Ibidem* (32).
6. *Ibidem* (34).
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