

Introduction to Kierkegaard

(H=Hegel; S=Schelling; K=Kierkegaard)

Hegel:

- phil. is NOT a flight from reality, is NOT a matter of building intellectual castles in the air.
- but neither is phil. merely an account of the totality of reality; phil. is rather itself an aspect of the Absolute's coming to know itself through finite spirit as finite spirit rises to the level of Ab. Sp. (i.e., for H phil. doesn't merely speak of reality; phil. is an aspect of reality realizing itself.)

Schelling:

- criticized H: H's phil. *leads* to truth but it does not *yield* truth precisely because it undervalues (even omits) *existence*.
- the human *existent* forever remains qualitatively distinct from (more than) abstract thought.

Kierkegaard:

- went from Copenhagen to Berlin to hear S lecture critically on H, and concluded that S's criticisms didn't go nearly far enough.
- K, along with Marx and Nietzsche, maintained that H's phil, however subtle the Dialectic and finite Sp's rise to the Ab., ends up freezing the status-quo: *no* amount of phil'l reflection, *no* degree of human self-transcendence, admits us to that "greater" which arises *only* as the status-quo disappears in the face of profound change.

Essential Features of Kierkegaard's Thought

1] PHILOSOPHY

- H has confused thinking with existing.
- to be sure, *thought* (i.e., systematic philosophy) can be non-fragmentary, but *life* is always fragmentary. Therefore phil'l thought must always flee reality (the existent.)
- any phil. that doesn't end up with a demand for that commitment which overcomes fragmentariness is actually a phil. that supports (albeit unknowingly) decadence.

2] CATEGORIES OF EXISTENCE

- existence cannot be "thought." (see Shepherd essay on K, Abraham and Isaac)
- to exist is a self-making through choice/decision.
- the most important issues for humankind are not solved by phil'l thought but by a commitment in which we become that "self" we should never become if we hadn't left behind the detachment of reflection (never mind a reflection that claims to rise to a standpoint *above* existence.)

3] DIALECTIC

-as with H, there are three stages.

-but for K

- (a) dialectic is a process whereby spirit is actualized in the *individual existent* and NOT in the form of an all-comprehensive universal (e.g., "humankind".)
- (b) the transition from one stage to another (aesthetic to ethical to religious) occurs by means of *choice/decision*, not thought. This choice isn't a selection from a "menu" (things or events or possibilities), but a choice of one's *self*.
- (c) there's no necessary, "dialectical", progression in the stages: a "leap" (self-willed self-commitment of the whole person) is always necessary.

4] SELF

-for H, the self is finite but has a dynamic towards the infinite as spirit rises *via phil. (thought)* to Ab. Stpt.

-for K, the self is "discovered" or "acquired" only in a personal *decision*.

-while K will speak of existence as "togetherness of finite and infinite", he means here what H never means: the *encounter between* the finite existent and the infinite God who eternally transcends phil'l thought and who can never be subsumed in a system of metaphysics.

-for K the human is always finite; we do not rise through thought to the standpoint of the Infinite.

(for H, at the Ab. Stdpt. thought no longer has an object independent of itself;
 thought is a pure creativity;
 thought develops itself by an internal necessity;
 thought (the Idea) is a divine self that unfolds itself in nature.)

-K rejects all the above: *commitment* is precisely what Ab. Sp. cannot do for anyone.

5] TRUTH

-for H, "The Truth is the Whole." The subject/object distinction is ultimately overcome.

-for K, there *is* objective truth (maths and sciences), but it is irrelevant to the *existent's* life of total self-commitment.

-subjective truth is faith: such faith is an "objective uncertainty held fast to with a subjective passion"; i.e., that on which I stake my whole being.

Note: K's well-known "Truth is subjectivity" must *never* be understood as countenancing *subjectivism*.

6] RELIGION

-for H, religion is a necessary moment (and therefore a profound moment) of finite spirit's rise to the Ab.; i.e., religion overcomes a duality that would otherwise be found between existence and thought. Still, religion is always lower than phil.

-K reacts against H's lack of qualitative distinction between God and humankind: H ends up with something that is neither.

-we never rise to God by means of phil; we encounter the God who forever transcends us through a choice/decision that is always riddled with objective risk and uncertainty. (See Shepherd essay)