

GOING FURTHER: Soren Kierkegaard on Faith

Søren Kierkegaard disagrees with the view of Aquinas on Faith. For Aquinas, faith is 'belief that' a commitment to a set of beliefs or claims. For Kierkegaard, faith is 'belief in' - an attitude of trust. To have faith in someone/something is to trust that person. Faith is quite different from areas that can be resolved by appeal to evidence. It requires a decision and a passionate commitment in spite of the lack of certainty.

Kierkegaard argues that we are wrong to think of religious beliefs in the same way as other beliefs. Religion is not a type of philosophical system, and we are wrong to assess religious beliefs in a philosophical way. For Kierkegaard the arguments for the existence of God are unconvincing, they were devised by people who already believed in God, in other words their faith came first.

Faith is characterized by passionate commitment; beliefs formed 'objectively' are not, they may have no impact on one's life. To believe that God exists, but to treat this as just another fact, about which we feel nothing, is not to have faith. Faith isn't (just) a matter of what, but of how, we believe. For example to merely know that your girlfriend has brown eyes is a fact about which it is possible to be indifferent. To love her is a very different sort of thing. It requires enthusiastic and passionate commitment.

This commitment is best summed up in Kierkegaard's famous phrase 'the leap of faith.' (see Indiana Jones and the last crusade) This leap actually requires objective uncertainty:

'If I am able to apprehend God objectively, I do not have faith; but because I cannot do this, I must have faith. If I want to keep myself in faith, I must continually see to it that I hold fast to objective uncertainty' (Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments, p. 204).

In other words, if we were able to know the answers something would be lost.

He comments that we 'cannot believe nonsense against the understanding, which one might fear, because the understanding will penetratingly perceive that it is nonsense and hinder [us] in believing it' (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 568). This suggests that any 'faith' we may have is likely to at least be plausible. If it were not, we would not be able to bring ourselves to believe it. (This suggests that we may not be able to totally help what we believe) Nevertheless reason has to know its own limits. It cannot know the truth about God. It has to take a leap.

Kierkegaard writes in 'Either/Or' about 3 different spheres of existence. The 'aesthetic' man lives purely for pleasure and experience whereas the 'ethical' person has a higher form of existence where they behave according to moral principles and are aware of/consider how their actions affect others. Yet the person who lives the life of faith has leaped over to a higher realm again. They have a different view of the world. (Kierkegaard believes that 'truth is subjectivity'.)

The paradox and absurdity of the life of faith is illustrated by the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham has to go beyond his view of the ethical in order to follow by faith the command of God to sacrifice Isaac.

Bibliography

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