

Kierkegaard and Evangelical Christianity

Introduction:

Since the creation of Plato's *Republic*, philosophy had focused on the essence of beings or what the beings were inherently or predestined and born to be. Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was a Danish philosopher, theologian, critic, and author who wrote intensively and furiously on a variety of subjects during the course of his short life. Kierkegaard was the first philosopher in a branch of philosophy called existentialism. Existentialism focuses not on a being's essence, but what the being creates his life to be—his existence. Kierkegaard's writings focused mainly on his theology and critiques of the Catholic Church whose interpretation of Christianity he loathed. He also did not fully buy the Protestant critiques of Catholicism posited by Luther. His ethics were existentialist and predicated upon his religious beliefs and writings. With regard to politics, Kierkegaard does not supply much information on his views of political systems, rights, or justice. However, just as he diverged from Plato on the subject of the essence or existence of human beings, Kierkegaard also diverged from the political concepts in Plato's *Republic*. Since Kierkegaard's death, his works have gained recognition and popularity more in the realm of existentialist philosophy than in religion and theology. Although many Protestant denominations follow many of Kierkegaard's ideas whether or not they know it, some groups such as Evangelical Christians have a fundamentally different view of Christianity which leads them to completely different ethical views and political thoughts. This paper will attempt to explain the theology of Søren Kierkegaard, how his theology relates to his ethics, and how Kierkegaard would respond to the theology and politics of modern-day Evangelical Christians.

The Theology of Søren Kierkegaard:

Throughout his life, Søren Kierkegaard was a severe critic of organized religion (Vaino, 2010). He disliked the way in which it transformed what he thought should be a private, subjective encounter with God into a public, objective, and highly non-personal experience. Kierkegaard emphasized that his

writings “were not sermons; they do not impress ‘doctrinally’ but rather were meant to lead the listener to private and secret confrontation with God” (Vaino, 2010). Because of his emphasis on a private, personal relationship with God, Kierkegaard did admire the way in which the Catholic Church held the Eucharist on Friday. When it was on a Friday, no one could tell if someone was travelling to the Eucharist or somewhere else. This increased the privacy and spirituality of the sacrament (Vaino, 2010). Even though Kierkegaard criticized the Church of Denmark, “he did not criticize the sacraments themselves, but rather their abuse” (Vaino, 2010). He believed that the false piety and religiousness of the clergy had defiled the holiness of the sacraments by turning “the description of the Church as “*the communion of saints*” into a ““communion of indifferent existences,’ which is ‘really paganism”” (Vaino, 2010). Kierkegaard cherished the Eucharist when it was administered with sincere hearts because he believed it enabled forgiveness through “substitutionary atonement:”

What is the Redeemer but a substitute who puts himself completely in your place and in mine, and what is the comfort of Redemption but that the substitute, atoning, puts himself completely in your place and in mine! Thus, when punitive justice here in this world or in judgement in the next sins—it does not find me. I no longer stand in that place; I have left it to someone who stands in my place. I stand saved beside this other one, beside him, my Redeemer, who put himself completely in my place—for this accept my gratitude, Lord Jesus Christ. (KW 18:123; SV 11:258; see also KW 17:280; SV 10:290) (p19)

Essentially, Communion is about letting Christ take your place and cover you with his death the way a mother hen covers and protects her chicks with her life. By entering into Christ and living your life not into yourself, but into Christ, you can enter into Christ’s love which will cover all of your sins (Vaino, 2010). Some people falsely believe that the act of taking communion grants them salvation. Communion does not bring salvation; rather, it is symbolic of the salvation that Christ has already brought to the individual. It serves primarily as a reminder of Jesus and the new covenant of grace that he brought. Jesus himself iterated this concept in Luke 19:

¹⁹ And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁰ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”

The practicing of the Eucharist enables atonement by reminding the sinner of his place before God and within Christ. However, it does not grant atonement. Atonement comes only from Christ.

Some people ask if the receiving of Christ's forgiveness is dependent upon the internal state of the receiver to allow Christ's forgiveness to enter into the sinner's life or whether there is some eternal truth that will cause God's forgiveness to reach the sinner regardless of whether or not the sinner is prepared (Vaino, 2010). More simply put, does the sinner grant Christ access to his soul, or does the truth that is God force Christ into the sinner's soul? Kierkegaard addresses this idea in a passage from another one of his journals:

He stands at the door and knocks. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I shall come to him and sup with him and he with me. To be sure, the Eucharist is a visible event, these actual people kneel at the altar and each one receives the bread and the wine—but it still does not necessarily follow that Christ sups with every such person. No, only with him who hears Christ's voice[,]...only with him who opens the door (the door of the heart, for the door of the Church stands open to all and can be opened only by the single individual himself) (Vaino, 2010).

Clearly, it is up to the sinner to “open the door” and allow the forgiveness of Christ to come into his soul. Communion facilitates the atonement process as it establishes an actual connection with Christ as he comes and sups with you. This is the crux of Kierkegaard's theology: Christ joins you in communion and then takes your place as he covers you with his death. Instead of a mortal man standing in front of the throne of God to receive judgement for his righteousness or lack thereof, it is *Christ* who takes your place in judgement. Since all sins were judged on Jesus' body at the cross, those who receive Christ and let him take their place before the throne of God's judgement are seen through the being of Jesus in all of His perfect righteousness. Kierkegaard addresses this idea of substitutionary atonement:

Thus, when punitive justice here in this world or in judgment in the next seeks a place where I, a sinner, stand with all my guilt, with my many sins—it does not find me. I no longer stand in that place; I have left it to someone else who stands in my place. I stand saved beside this other one, beside him, my Redeemer, who put himself completely in my place (Vaino, 2010).

Thus, it is not the sinful-in-nature individual who stands before the judgement of God—it is Christ who is perfect. However, Christ will not force this process. Instead, He comes and knocks at the door. The

individual cannot open the door unless Christ first comes and knocks, yet it is up to the sinner's judgement to open the door or to leave it closed.

Another area in which Kierkegaard strongly criticized the Church of Denmark was hermeneutics or the way the clergy interpreted the scriptures. Kierkegaard believed that the hermeneutics of the Church focused on an objective interpretation of the Bible, whereas Kierkegaard believed that the Bible should be interpreted subjectively by and for each individual. The problem was that "the Bible was often read critically rather than doxologically" (Edwards, 2012, p. 182). As Kierkegaard himself wrote,

All this interpreting and interpreting and scholarly research and new scholarly research that is produced on the solemn and serious principle that it is in order to understand God's Word properly—look more closely and you will see that it is in order to defend oneself against God's Word (Edwards, 2012).

Because the endless interpretations of and research into the scriptures led to the preacher's detachment from the sacredness and holiness of the Word as well as the personal relationship with God one received when reading subjectively, Kierkegaard believed that the preacher was the greatest sinner of them all. The objective interpretation of the Word led to an insincere spectacle instead of actual ministering: (Edwards, 2012, pp. 185-186)

If it is assumed that speaking is sufficient for the proclamation of Christianity, then we have transformed the church into a theatre. We can have an actor learn a sermon and splendidly, masterfully deliver it with facial expressions, gesticulations, modulation, tears, and everything a theatre-going public might flock to (Edwards, 2012, p. 185).

In his wonderful parable of "The Tame Geese," Kierkegaard effectively explains the hypocrisy of the minister as he attempts to lead his flock through a non-subjective interpretation of the Word (Edwards, 2012, pp. 185-186). However, his critiques were not aimed at "the fact that they were *preaching*," but rather, "at the preacher's lack of personal engagement with their message" (Edwards, 2012, p. 186). In order to remedy this poor hermeneutical approach, Kierkegaard developed his own hermeneutical approach which Aaron Edwards breaks down into three categories: *de-familiarization*, *appropriation*, and *consequentiality* (Edwards, 2012, p. 181)). *De-familiarization* is the process of making the Bible unfamiliar to the reader, so that the reader may get a new experience out of it (Edwards, 2012, pp. 182-

183). Kierkegaard attempted to do this by rewriting Biblical stories such as the story of Isaac and Abraham, which he rewrote from multiple, differing perspectives in order to give the reader a variety of ways to experience the same story (Edwards, 2012, p. 182). *Appropriation* refers to the process of reading the Bible subjectively as though God wrote it for you as a “love letter” to you (Edwards, 2012, p. 183). *Consequentiality* refers to the consequences, or the desire to change or perform actions that comes when one subjectively reads the Word of God (Edwards, 2012, p. 183). Kierkegaard believed that reading the Word “must consequently lead to an ethical transformation” (Edwards, 2012, p. 183). Surprisingly, Edward’s category *consequentiality* does not refer to a consequentialist theology or ethics where people do things based on the good or bad consequences they will receive. Instead, it refers to a theology and ethics where there is an absolute truth that individuals encounter personally and subjectively. An ethical transformation in the individual is a consequence of this encounter, but it did not come about because the individual was seeking a reward or punishment.

The absolute or objective truth that individuals encounter is God. Kierkegaard describes the absoluteness and objectiveness of God in his essay, “Christianity as the Absolute Contemporaneity with Christ.” In this essay, he not only describes the absoluteness of God, but also how the individual should approach and encounter Him. Kierkegaard believes that God did not just come to Earth in the form of Jesus Christ to gently bring them back in an act of consolation (Kierkegaard, 1941). He came as the *absolute*. “It is out of love God wills it so, but also it is *God* who wills it, and He wills what He will. He will not suffer himself to be transformed by men and be a nice...human God” (Kierkegaard, 1941). He will transform men to *Him* and he wills this through his love (Kierkegaard, 1941). Because God and his will are absolute, all the philosophical and theological questions and answers for God, his actions, and his motives are nothing more than lies (Kierkegaard, 1941). Although it may not make sense to man, it is the absolute and therefore must be this way (Kierkegaard, 1941).

To be a Christian means becoming contemporary with Christ (Kierkegaard, 1941). In order to be contemporary, one must recognize Christ’s existence in every aspect of the present. Kierkegaard

describes this recognition when he writes, “If thou canst not endure contemporaneousness, canst not endure the sight in reality, if thou art unable to go out in the street and perceive that it is God in this horrible procession, and that this is thy case wert thou to fall down and worship Him—then thou art not *essentially* a Christian” (Kierkegaard, 1941). Therefore, being a Christian consists of being contemporaneous with Christ by recognizing Him in every second and aspect of the present. Due to the “endless yawning difference between God and man” being a Christian—becoming contemporaneous with Christ or “to be transformed into likeness with God”—turned out to be “an even greater torment and misery and pain than the greatest human torment” because one can never truly reach Christ or be able to fully comprehend Him in all aspects of the present (Kierkegaard, 1941). When Kierkegaard describes Christ as being contemporary, he is describing that Christ is eternal, yet He is in the present, temporary world. Because he is in the present day, we are contemporary with Him when we are a Christian because we exist with Him in the present. Christians two, five, or ten centuries ago were contemporary with Christ in their day, but we are not contemporary with them because we are in the present and they are in the past (Kierkegaard, 1941). The absolute exists in the present; thus, anyone who is not contemporary with the absolute has no existence with the absolute and the absolute has no existence to him (Kierkegaard, 1941).

There is a stark difference between history and reality. For us in the present, history is not our reality for we are not contemporaneous with it (Kierkegaard, 1941). “But what really occurred (the past) is not (except in a special sense, i.e. in contrast with poetry) the real. It lacks the determinant which is the determinant of truth (as inwardness) and for all religiousness, the **for thee**” (Kierkegaard, 1941). In this passage, Kierkegaard refers to the subjectivity of his theological experience. Because man can only be contemporaneous with what is his reality—his present—he can only be contemporaneous with two things: the time in which he lives and the life of Christ which exists outside of time and history although it is a part of history (Kierkegaard, 1941).

Kierkegaard’s thoughts of how one becomes a Christian are extremely simple, but he believes that many have failed to see the truth that he has seen, and so they are not truly Christians. “If thou canst

prevail upon thyself to become a Christian in the situation of contemporaneousness with Him, or if He cannot move thee and draw thee to Himself—then you wilt never become a Christian” (Kierkegaard, 1941). This idea refers back to Kierkegaard’s earlier comments that God does not transform for men, but that men must transform to God. To start yourself on the journey to becoming a Christian, you must admit to yourself that you are not truly a Christian so that you may be humble and fearful. Then you may experience “what it means in truth to be a Christian” (Kierkegaard, 1941).

A critical component of Kierkegaard’s theology is his famous “leap of faith.” Some scholars describe this as an abandonment of “the laws of logic” as the individual tries to “embrace something he knows is false, even impossible” (Evans, 1989). The thing the individual is trying to embrace is the truth that comes from subjectively encounter the Divine. However, the leap of faith is not a “blind leap into the dark” (Evans, 1989). No, the individual who leaps does so because he has good reason to believe that his previous beliefs about what is true are false, and he desires to encounter the truth. So, the person who leaps knows why he leaps and what he is leaping to (Evans, 1989). Therefore, the leap of faith is not based on irrationality, but perfect rationality.

Continuing with the idea that the leap is rational, perhaps it is perfectly acceptable to call it a leap *to* faith because the individual knows what he is leaping to—faith. The individual heeds God’s instructions and leaps to the truth that is God. The process of leaping is not a one-time event; it is a reoccurring and continual process (Evans, 1989). Throughout this process the individual receives the revelation from God that leads him to the end. At the end, the individual receives the faith that allows him to blindly trust God in things that might seem irrational to others. This leap to faith allows the individual to further encounter the truth of God subjectively. In the end, the individual receives, perhaps, not only faith but also life—the eternal life that saturates heaven but begins here on Earth—thus, fundamentally transforming the very being of the individual. As Kierkegaard wrote, “The real reason people are offended by Christianity is that it is too high, because it wishes to make a human being into something so extraordinary that he cannot grasp the thought” (Evans, 1989). By leaping and subjectively encountering

God, the individual existentially begins to transform. He receives more than faith and eternal life that begins in the world—he receives *his* life.

Many evangelical Christians today cling to the consequentialist theology of the Mosaic Law or Old Covenant from the Old Testament of the Bible. The Mosaic Law clearly outlined punishments for a plethora of activities in which the Israelites were not supposed to engage. It also offered God's divine favor for those who did not break any of the divine rules. If an Israelite broke the Law, he was separated from God until he offered a sacrifice to atone for his sin. The theology of today's evangelicals curiously mixes the Old Covenant of the Mosaic Law with the New Covenant of Jesus' grace. If an evangelical Christian sins, he believes that he has become separated from God again, and therefore, must ask Christ for forgiveness again.

Kierkegaard would be fundamentally opposed to this evangelical belief system. Because God is the absolute and because He changes the very being of men as he draws them to Himself, it follows that no man can remove himself from God through his sin. As Kierkegaard says, Christ “will move thee and draw thee to Himself” (Kierkegaard, 1941). God has changed him and made him contemporary with Himself—it is not man's efforts and actions that make him contemporary with Christ and, thus, it is not man's actions that maintain his contemporaneousness with Christ. Therefore, he does not and cannot receive salvation more than once. It is a one-time transaction that can never be voided. Unfortunately for the believer, he or she will still sin after receiving salvation due to the sinful nature of the world. Kierkegaard acknowledges the horrifying, sinful nature of the world as he calls it a “horrible procession” (Kierkegaard, 1941). However, the Christian's sins after salvation will not separate him from Christ because Christ has already drawn him to Himself. Kierkegaard liked to use the example of a mother hen covering her chicks to protect them and hide them (Vaino, 2010). Like the hen protects her chicks, “Christ's death becomes the hiding place for the sinner that can never be taken” from him (Vaino, 2010).

The Ethics of Søren Kierkegaard:

In order to begin to understand Kierkegaard's ethics, one must first understand the difference between disinterest and interest. Kierkegaard views disinterest as pure rationality, a lack of passion, and a lack of change from the beginning to the end of an inquiry. On the contrary, interest is grounded in passions, does not obsess with rationality, and experiences change during an inquiry. "In disinterestedness, a man finds only theories about ethical decisions and never makes an ethical decision" (Holmer, 1953). This view allowed Kierkegaard to explore the possibility of the "teleological suspension of the ethical" (Holmer, 1953). The ethical in this context refers to community law which applies to all such as in Aristotle's virtue theory of ethics. Kierkegaard examines this possibility and refutes virtue theory in the Biblical story when God tells Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Abraham "believes himself to be in the right against the majority" (Holmer, 1953). The debate within the community is only possible because the community shares interests and concerns; ethical agreement stems only from common interest in virtue theory (Holmer, 1953). When Abraham begins to sacrifice his son, he suspends the community's ethical rule because he claims to be acting in the interest of God, not the interest of the community (Holmer, 1953). Therefore, Kierkegaard's ethics clearly do not adhere to virtue theory. Anyone thinking about this situation wonders who was ethical. However, neither the community nor Abraham is disinterested or neutral. Also, "To pretend that there is a presuppositionless thought or a necessary standpoint which yet allows one to decide is folly for Kierkegaard" (Holmer, 1953). In other words, there is no predetermined plan or blueprint that dictates what someone should do. "Interest and need and passion" create action; disinterested awareness of a situation does not create action (Holmer, 1953). Abraham's interestedness in following God's orders with absolute obedience caused him to decide to act to sacrifice Isaac. The community's interest to not be murdered by anyone led them to decide that murder was wrong. Both Abraham and the community were acting ethically by taking action based on their interests and passions. Ethics is not the science of correct choices, it is actions stemming from interest.

Kierkegaard disagreed with those philosophers who viewed ethics as a sort of science. As Paul

Holmer writes:

Kierkegaard's attack is leveled against all who argue that a common rationality will bring common values. He is opposed to the conception of thought, whether Kantian, Hegelian, or utilitarian, which allows a thinker to construe ethical plurality as temporary or illusory or a token of lingering immaturity (Holmer, 1953).

Kierkegaard does not deny that rationality is a useful tool. He does argue, however, that rationality cannot dictate what choice to make (Holmer, 1953). Rationality allows the active person to logically sort ethical choices and alternatives, but it does not tell him which choice is the most ethical. The act of the thinking and evaluating within the individual was of the utmost importance to Kierkegaard. He believed that he could find a true theory about ethical decisions, but this theory could never replace the subjective thinking of the individual (Holmer, 1953).

The individual's subjective thinking, Kierkegaard believed, ultimately had to be oriented towards God. The ideal is not knowledge, but obedience to God (Marino, 2001). Therefore, Kierkegaard's ethics are not deontological. Ultimately, we ought to do what our Father in heaven commands us to do (Marino, 2001). This is not an ideal that is concerned with either the consequences of our actions, but rather, our obedience to the Divine. Therefore, Kierkegaard's ethics are not consequentialist. Each person's actions should be based solely upon what He commands him or her to do, not the consequences of the actions. This involves an interpretation within oneself as God gives direction; however, one cannot get caught up in in the process of thinking until the moment to act has passed (Marino, 2001). But, it is "irresponsible" to end prematurely the process of thinking just because one knows that he must make a decision (Marino, 2001). As long as the intention is pure the consequences or "externalities" are merely "accidental and unimportant" (Marino, 2001). Kierkegaard clearly illustrates the concept of right or wrong being based on intentions when he writes:

The main point is still that one should not be diverted by the external. When, in order to subvert the position that there is an absolute in morality, an appeal is made to variations in custom and use and such shocking examples as savages putting their parents to death, attention is centered merely upon the external. That is to say, if it could be proved that savages maintain that a person ought to hate his parents, it would be quite another matter; but this is not the their thought; they believe that one

should love them, and the error is only in the way of expressing it. For it is clear that the savages do not intend to harm their parents but to do good to them (Marino, 2001).

As the first couple of sentences show, people only raise the question of externalities when they are trying to avoid the “unconditionality of absolutes” (Marino, 2001). The absolute is the divine being of God; however, this absoluteness does not denote a deontology. Just as it is moral for the savages to put their parents to death because they act out of interest with a desire to be moral, it is moral for an individual to obey God not because He is the absolute, but because he or she is acting out of interested passion with obedience to God. When examining this passage, author Gordon Marino writes, “For the one who finally gave us the esthetic of morals that Kant lacked the Muse to write, the main task is not to allow externals—i.e., the perceived consequences of our actions—to make us flinch” (Marino, 2001). One could say that Kierkegaard’s ethics are not consequentialist, virtue theory, or deontological. Rather, they are an ethics of obedience for obedience’s sake.

Perhaps the concept that gave Kierkegaard the most trouble was that of the nature of truth. This issue arises when Kierkegaard discusses the propriety of ethical claims and religious beliefs as “propositional truth” (Holmer, 1953). Kierkegaard explains two types of propositions: those concerned about fact, nature, and history and those concerned with “being, from an abstract point of view” or an ideal essence such as Plato’s theory of the forms. Therefore, any propositional truth about an existing object is founded only upon the essence or characteristics of that object—not the existence of it (Holmer, 1953). When considering the proposition of the ideal and abstract, Kierkegaard writes:

But if being is understood in this manner the formula [the correspondence between thought and being] becomes a tautology. Thought and being mean one and the same things, and the correspondence spoken of is merely an abstract self-identity.

This seems to be an attempt by Kierkegaard to dismantle Plato’s belief of the essence of things based upon his theory of the forms.

So, what sort of propositional form would a cognitive ethics assume? Kierkegaard believes that there is an ethical theory that could be undoubtedly true, but this theory of the truth would only be about ideals that exist “only for one’s thoughts as possibilities” (Holmer, 1953). Kierkegaard then makes an

unprecedented shift to the idea that the word “true” should not be applied to propositions but to individuals. This moves ethical and religious truths away from being cognitive and toward being subjective (Holmer, 1953). Kierkegaard thus describes truth as “An objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth” (Holmer, 1953). This means that even after an accurate philosophical account of ethical and religious truths the ethical issue is ultimately reserved for the individual subject to passion and interest (Holmer, 1953).

Kierkegaard’s entire ethics is built upon the paradox of subjective truth. If something is true, it is the same for all people in all places, and at all times. If something is subjective, the meaning of it varies from individual to individual. Therefore, a subjective truth is paradoxically something that is both true and subjective. It is True, yet it varies from person to person as each one differently encounters God and is given the subjective truth by Him. Kierkegaard acknowledged the paradox inherent in subjective truth when he wrote, “the eternal, essential truth is itself not at all a paradox, but is a paradox by being related to an existing person” (Pattison, 1998).

This radical move by Kierkegaard to say that truth is subjectivity does not mean that all ethical issues disintegrate into nonsense. For Kierkegaard, subjectivity “is not subjectivism, irrationality, arbitrariness, or eccentricity” (Pattison, 1998). Instead, it is the language for the universal (Pattison, 1998). Kierkegaard means to communicate that the truth of statements such as “Christ is God” cannot actually be determined—“their form gives them an objectivity...which they do not possess” (Holmer, 1953). Therefore, they are cognitive only to those who share the same interests. However, they do express truths to those persons who are not disinterested and detached. They express subjective truths to those who are interested, passionate, and connected to one another (Holmer, 1953). An objective or disinterested individual might view a statement as uncertain or untrue, but to the interested individual the same statement is the subjective, or certain. This is not the same as relativism which says that different things are true for different people. Kierkegaard’s view is that the absolute is true for all people, but the subjective truth people receive when encountering the absolute or objective differs.

At this point, Kierkegaard has begun to lay the rudimentary foundations for existentialism.

Kierkegaard's ethics heavily emphasize and are dependent upon the individual. He believes that ethicality is not concerned with finding conceptual truths; instead, it is a matter of the individual seeking to become the truth, of translating ethical possibilities into realities. The end is not to understand truths but to engage in the process of becoming "something different than one was" and thus become the truth (Holmer, 1953). This puts the emphasis of ethics directly on the individual subject. At the same time, the subject must "become a subject" and "intensify passion to its highest [for] passion is subjectivity" (Pattison, 1998). The sciences demand that one separate himself from his passion, while ethicality demands that he be one with his passions. This ultimately leads to disagreement between individuals about ends, however, this is necessary because of differences in interest and passions. The degree of disagreement depends entirely upon how subjective the individuals are (Holmer, 1953).

The paradoxical tension between objectivity and subjectivity leads also to disagreements between individuals as they have different subjective experiences. Some critics such as Emmanuel Levinas criticized that Kierkegaard's subjectivity did not completely "jettison idealism's focus on the self" (Wells, 2012). However, for Kierkegaard, subjectivity depended upon the self—the self was what made subjectivity subjective. Without focus on the self, the interests and passions of the individual, subjectivity could not be. Subjective thinking is concerned with the part of an experience that is exclusive to *me*, a part that no one else can have or experience, "that part of me that is *isolated* in its essential *inwardness*" (Wells, 2012). Because subjective experiences are experienced singularly, they have to be communicated not directly, but indirectly (Wells, 2012). "Thus, although I cannot communicate my subjective experience of love directly to you, I can communicate indirectly so that you understand my experience by drawing an analogy with your own experience" (Wells, 2012). Therefore, the Kierkegaardian subject is not as ethically isolated as some may think he is. "The subject is surely isolated as we have seen, but this isolation is more epistemological than social; subjective existence cannot be conceptualized. As soon as one tries to catch it in a speculative net, the subject has already disappeared. Subjective existence is,

therefore, isolated and alone as far as human knowledge goes, but this does not imply any sort of ethical-social isolation” (Wells, 2012).

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* Kierkegaard repeatedly emphasizes that his subject is “isolated” (Wells, 2012). However, the subject is not totally isolated as some critics propose. Rather, he is epistemologically isolated, but he is still socially and ethically connected to the world and those around him (Wells, 2012). “Isolation has more to do with the epistemological status of subjectivity, than with any sort of social or ethical egotism” (Wells, 2012). In fact he “explicitly recognizes interaction between individuals in the ethical-religious sphere (Wells, 2012). This leads to his ethical belief that “individuals *must* recognize and respect the uniqueness of others: ‘The ethical requires itself of every human being, and when it judges, it judges in turn every single individual’” (Wells, 2012).

Looking at modern-day evangelical Christians, one may observe that many of them cling to a Hobbesian sort of consequentialist ethics. This ethical view is rooted in God as the ultimate power in the universe who gives rewards and doles out punishments as people earn them. Because evangelicals try to follow parts of the Mosaic Law that they believe are still relevant today (creating their own sort of an abridged Law), ethics consists of following God by not breaking this abridged Law. An unethical person—someone who breaks any part of the abridged Mosaic Law—will be punished by God. Not that he or she will be smitten where he or she stands, but he or she may experience poor health, poverty, family issues, or a variety of other problems that people do not normally desire. An ethical person—someone who lives righteously by upholding the abridged Mosaic Law—will be rewarded by God. These rewards may include monetary gain, good health, or anything else that people desire.

Kierkegaard, undoubtedly, would be fundamentally opposed to this consequentialist ethical theory for several reasons. First, Kierkegaard would oppose the consequentialist theology that the evangelical ethics are based upon. This consequentialist theology is composed of a mixture of Old Covenant Mosaic Law with the New Covenant of grace. Theologically, this mixed covenant is unsound

because it attempts to integrate the Old Covenant into the New Covenant despite the fact that Christ fulfilled the Old Covenant when He established the New Covenant. Second, from an ethical standpoint, although the evangelical ethics are undoubtedly consequentialist, they are also composed of a sort of deontology. In other words, one can know the true laws of God and this knowledge allows him to know what to do or not to do in order to be good. However, according to Kierkegaard, ethics involves receiving the objective truth that God gives you and then acting with complete obedience to God. Finally, ethics does not lead to rewards and punishments such as an abundance or a lack of money. Instead, it leads to change in the individual.

The Politics of Soren Kierkegaard:

Political philosophy has been based upon the writings of Plato ever since he wrote *The Republic* in 380 B.C. Plato's beliefs revolved around the Forms, the eternal, abstract truths of the universe which rational, empirical appearances can never fully embody (Pattison, 1998). Plato determined that the philosopher-king who had the knowledge of the Forms or the truth was the only one who was fit to rule. Perhaps the main question here is, "How is the philosopher-king possible?" How are the Forms, which are ideal and universal, related to an individual's existence which is always unique and particular? Kierkegaard did not care about these questions because he did not think that they were relevant. He believed that Socrates, in Plato's writings, was "always interested in existing in the truth, in appropriating it" (Pattison, 1998). Therefore, Kierkegaard argued for changing "the ontological locus of ideality from an objective realm of eternal ideas to human subjectivity or inwardness" (Pattison, 1998). In other words, he wanted to change what people normally thought of as being ideal from the eternal, objective truth to the inward, subjective truth which individuals try to appropriate existentially.

Although Kierkegaard did not write much purely political writing, it is possible to determine which kinds of political systems he may or may not support. I will start by examining which systems he would not support. First, Kierkegaard would not support an aristocracy or a meritocracy, which is just a sort of aristocracy based on merit. This is because he was not at all an elitist; rather, he was a fervent

egalitarian. However, his egalitarian thoughts and beliefs are not constrained to pure political equality, but they extend to a much deeper level (Pattison, 1998). He believed that every individual human being had the mark of humanity—“every human being possesses essentially what belongs essentially to being a human being” (Pattison, 1998). The individual, therefore, is responsible for existentially expressing his humanity (Pattison, 1998). Kierkegaard’s belief of an inward egalitarian quality completely destroys Plato’s hierarchical, meritocratic political system.

In addition to not being a supporter of aristocracy, Kierkegaard also would not support Marxist communism. Marxism often calls for a violent restructuring of the institutions and establishments present in society. Although he often criticized the Catholic Church, the system of social classes, and his modern society, he did not call for or try to inspire radical changes or the overthrowing of social institutions (Pattison, 1998). Furthermore, Marxism concentrates everything into the hands of the central government, leaving individuals with relatively little privacy or the ability to make personal decision. For Kierkegaard, this would seem like an attack on what it fundamentally means to be a subjective individual, for privacy helps the subjective individual enhance and develop his understanding of the truth.

Because of the emphasis on privacy and subjective development, Kierkegaard would support the right to religious freedom. This added freedom would give the individual space to develop subjectively. Each individual would have the freedom and opportunity to interact with and experience their eternal being even if it is not the same as Kierkegaard’s Eternal Being. Thus, this belief excludes theocracy from Kierkegaard’s list of legitimate and valid political systems. Even though Kierkegaard would support religious freedom, he would still assert that Christianity is the only legitimate religion due to his belief that God is the absolute.

A political system which Kierkegaard would tolerate is democracy. He would tolerate this system because it is the most egalitarian political system. Democracies tend to provide the most equal rights and distribution of political power when compared to other political systems. Because Kierkegaard believed that all human beings should be treated equally due to the fact that they all shared human qualities, he

would support the democracy that treated all these individual human beings equally. However, in his writings, Kierkegaard praised the monarchy the most (Pattison, 1998). His main reason for favoring monarchy, as weak as his reasoning may be, was that a monarchy allowed individual citizens to have more privacy than democracy (Pattison, 1998). When a citizen is responsible for fulfilling civic duties and participating in debate, he or she has less time to engage in subjective thought and development. By giving all responsibility for civic duties and political process to the monarch, the individual gains privacy and the space to develop. This view of a monarchy is not the same as Hobbes view of the monarchical “Leviathan.” The citizens in Kierkegaard do not give all their rights to the monarch because the State of Nature is deadly and dangerous and they want to gain protection in society—they do so to escape society and develop subjectively as they become the truth. This view is consistent with Plato’s philosopher-king who also prefers not to rule (Pattison, 1998).

Even though Kierkegaard expressed favor for the monarchy, he did not believe that it or any other system was fully legitimate. “Just as Plato thinks that the empirical world can never fully express the ideal...[Kierkegaard] also thinks that no political or social form can fully express the dialectics of human inwardness” (Pattison, 1998). This shows that Kierkegaard did not recognize the complete authority of institutions like the government or the Church. Furthermore, Kierkegaard believed that political institutions were malleable arrangement, “between the times,” subject to revision, and “temporary” (Pattison, 1998). This does not mean that he preferred past systems over the present systems or vice versa. It merely shows that he did not adhere to the Hegelian concept of historicism as the best system is not necessarily ahead of us, nor is it behind us.

Since Kierkegaard wrote, his critiques of the establishments have fallen mostly on deaf ears, and society has moved in the direction Kierkegaard opposed most: “the triumph of the aesthetic” (Pattison, 1998). Politically, this is represented by the continuation of the old system or the establishment of a new system based on class or economic interests (Pattison, 1998). Religiously, the establishment continues practicing its disastrously self-serving ways (Pattison, 1998). Religion, therefore, because routine or

“much ado about nothing” (Pattison, 1998). However, this may not have bothered Kierkegaard too much. As Robert Perkins writes, “...[Kierkegaard] attempts the task of relating the eternal truth, first and foremost, to the existence of an individual, leaving to his readers the task of thinking through the issues of political philosophy in the light of his vision of essential truth” (Pattison, 1998).

When analyzing evangelical Christianity, a consequentialist theology and ethical theory clearly has massive political implications. If the evangelical Christian voter views wealth and prestige as being indicative of a person’s ethical character, then the voter is more likely to vote for a candidate who has these qualities than he is to vote for a candidate who does not have them. For example, an Evangelical Christian may be more willing to support an individually wealthy candidate such as Donald Trump. Even though some of Trump’s outward behavior may be uncouth and possibly unethical, his wealth and fame are indicative of him actually being an ethical individual. Thus, the evangelical Christian would be willing to support the supposedly ethical Trump despite the image of him that is often portrayed in the media.

Consequentialism would also lead to particular political system. The political system in place must be able to punish those who break the domestic laws. Ideally, this political system would take a form similar to Hobbes’ absolute monarch. When an individual residing within the political community breaks a law, the government—who has a monopoly on the use of force—reacts swiftly, bringing judgement and punishment in response to the crime. When dealing with foreign states, the consequentialist state would punish those who acted unethically toward it or its allies. As in the domestic arena, it would respond swiftly to any breaches of trust or acts of aggression with overwhelming force. For contemporary examples of this type of state, one could look at either George H.W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq during the Persian Gulf War or George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq following the 9/11 terrorist attack. Both presidents directed the United States’ overwhelming military force against another country to punish it for acting in an unethical manner towards the U.S.

Most evangelical Christians have a cultural background that strongly emphasizes the greatness of America as it has been blessed by God. They cherish its values, traditional culture, and democratic government. Due to this deeply held belief that America's political system is already the best in the world because America is the best in the world, few if any evangelical Christians would be willing to support a monarchy such as Kierkegaard would support. They may also be in favor of pushing a state-sponsored religion—which would undoubtedly be Christianity—even though they profess freedom of religion. Kierkegaard would be fundamentally opposed to the idea of a state sponsored religion because it reduces an individual's ability to think and develop subjectively. Kierkegaard would also oppose the strong, consequentialist-driven democracy that doles out punishments to states that act unethically.

In conclusion, Kierkegaard's ethics and political philosophy ultimately are predicated upon his personal theology. The individual encounters the objective truth of the Divine in a particular way that create a paradoxical subjective truth within the individual. Ethically, the individual must listen to the voice of God and take action to obey his instruction regardless of the belief of the community or the consequences of obedience. Doing this allows the individual to existentially engage in the act of becoming the truth. Politically, this leads to a system where the subjective individual can be as disengaged from politics and ruling as he can possibly be, as he listens to the voice of God to form his subjective truth and act upon it.

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