

## CORRESPONDENCE

TO THE EDITOR OF *Philosophy*

DEAR SIR,

Please allow me some remarks on the review of Kierkegaard's "Journals" and "Fear and Trembling," which appeared in *Philosophy*, July 1939.

There are two fundamental dangers in the interpretation of Kierkegaard, one of them regarding method, the other one regarding the contents themselves. In trying to understand his philosophy the possibility suggests itself of interpreting his extreme position by means of biography and of explaining his doctrines by relating them to the facts of his life and his character. But Kierkegaard demands that people should face the contents of his teaching in themselves, not relatively to the facts of his life. If the interpreter does not want to face this philosophy personally, it is certainly his task to open the door to other people by explaining its claim. The other danger is in some ways connected with the first one: the knowledge of Kierkegaard's poetical talent leads the interpreter to deal with him as a poet, to appreciate him aesthetically. But to do this is to mistake the significance of his work totally. For Kierkegaard's aim is to communicate reality; the terrible anxiety of "sin," the "fear and trembling" are peculiar to the severity of the "existential" thinker, not to the unreal poet (see, e.g., *Der Augenblick* (Jena, 1923), pp. 91-93: the poet is most dangerous, because he leads away from reality).

Kierkegaard's aim is to interpret Christianity in the radical form of Paul. The Tertullian saying: "credo quia absurdum" adequately expresses his tendency to a belief in another world radically different from this one. But there is another important point to be noticed: Kierkegaard lives in the nineteenth century, at the end of an epoch of growing rationalism and "enlightenment," and of destruction of religious belief. He does not close his eyes to these facts. He places himself in his century, deals with its problems in existential seriousness. Therefore, it is true, the meaning of Christianity in his eyes is the same as in Paul's, but his attitude to it must be different: he cannot possibly have unquestionable belief (especially since he knows the real meaning of this word); he cannot naïvely "jump"; he must proceed by reflection. So as the real problem the question arises: how can the finite subject (the individual, soul) find a way to the "totally different," the infinite, God? How can the individual, who is "not in the truth," in the "error," "acquire the truth," i.e. find existential belief, not *Weltanschauung*? (see *Philosophical Fragments*, London—New York, 1936).

To begin with, Kierkegaard is forced to criticize the contemporary opinion (Hegel in philosophy, the State church in religion) that the way to the absolute is not through the concrete individual, but through something general (the church as institution, the "spirit" (Hegel)). Only the single concrete individual in his loneliness can find his way to God, can realize belief. For there is no "mediation" of the contrast between God and the individual in general spirit, because this contrast is not surmountable at all. The contemporary opinion (suggested by Hegel) was that nobody must remain at the stage of belief, everybody must "go further." The reason for the possibility of this opinion is, Kierkegaard says, that nobody knows what belief really means (see especially *Der Begriff der Angst* (Jena, 1912), Introduction). Belief in Kierkegaard's meaning demands that the concrete human being should live in it, not "go further": for living in belief means a permanent struggle "in the Paradox." Kierkegaard's own reflection belongs directly to this struggle, it is existential thinking; it is dialectical thinking, which always breaks again at the Paradox. But it is just this breaking which is important. "Going further" is impossible; the "system" claims to do so, but it does—less. (See *Fear and Trembling*, Epilogue.)

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The peculiar problem of Kierkegaard's life (and, he maintains, of human life altogether) is the "jump" into belief; after which people speak "in the truth," in "authority." Kierkegaard says all over again that he himself has not this authority. But nevertheless without doubt Kierkegaard speaks in his later works from the basis of belief, after the "jump." He has here overcome the dialectic, the positive believer speaks. And that is highly important for the interpreter: he is obliged to see these two sides simultaneously if he wants to understand the real Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard is neither a positive theologian in unquestionable belief, nor a reflecting thinker who eventually breaks at the contradictions of his thinking, unable to reach that point which he aims at. And Kierkegaard is certainly not "morbid."

Kierkegaard is the thinker of the nineteenth century (besides Nietzsche perhaps), who against the abstractions of idealism and the materialism of positivism strove for the existential reality in its efforts for transcendence; and he had enough critical ability and intellectual sincerity to see the difficulty of the problem and to avoid "solutions" which perhaps would have made him famous and fashionable but which would not have faced the problems with which he struggled.

I am,

Your obedient servant,

EMIL FACKENHEIM.

ABERDEEN,

*August 1939.*