

CONCRETENESS, ABSTRACTION AND THE NOTION OF LEAP IN KIERKEGAARD

The following attempts a succinct interpretation of Kierkegaard's concept of «leap» which is, in my opinion, the significant index of the protensions of his immense and multi-levelled thought. The intentionality of this concise presentation must be considered the springboard of a more detailed and searching study. Phenomenologically, the revolving nexus of Kierkegaard's thought is the category of the Single One (the Self) that is not transformed into logically abstract elements but is instead *ideated* concretely into three essential structures in which the human experience is qualitatively and ontologically different and out of which the self is woven.

From an «existential» stance, the behavioral life of the individual falls between three dynamically (not abstractly) possible levels of consciousness. There, I shall categorize as «regional ontologies» or «ontological regions». This is more apt than the traditional conception of «stages» of «spheres of existence»¹. The self is, therefore comprised of three ontological regions, the Aesthetic, the Ethical, and the Religious. These regions are possible modes of dwelling in the world within one and the same personality. By an ontological region, Kierkegaard means an *independent state of consciousness of one's own being which differs in content from other regions, yet it can hardly have an isolated existence in the individual*. The individual must, so to speak, freely determine where it belongs. This is Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, either the aesthetic speculative or the ethical and religious. Kierkegaard's theory of ontological regions allows then for alternatives. Such alternatives render man in possession of freedom (which is intimately and instinctively connected to the human self) that gives him the choice of moving from one mode of existence to the other. But such a movement is not, in a Hegelian manner, a matter of

1. The concept of «stages» is misleading because it gives the impression that the self is a process in an evolutionary flux. This is not so. For these comprise the «cross section of the self» and co-exist simultaneously. Also, the notion of «sphere» conveys that they are abstract domains of the self, while in fact they are factual and concrete. See any edition of *Either/Or*, *Stages on Life's way*, *Philosophical Fragments* and the *Postscript*.

rational smooth transition. On the contrary, it is a dynamic (actual) decision which is *discontinuous* with reason. This is where the notion of the «leap» comes into play. Here the leap is intertwined with passion, for Kierkegaard considers every region of existence to possess its own passion. Thus, the aesthetic passion is essentially a *zest for pleasure*, however, not in strictly hedonistic terms. The ethical passion is a *zest to abide by the moral law*, and the religious passion is suffering on whose grounds religious faith emerges. «Passion is the real measure of man's power. And the age in which we live is wretched, because it is without passion»². Consequently, it is passion which prompts the individual to effect a transition from one ontological region to the other. Such a transition is described by Kierkegaard as always a crisis, a *breach* of continuity. However, the individual cannot by sheer process of reflection and analysis transport himself to a different mode of living. For this, a *passionate resolution of the will* is necessary. It is this breach (which he calls the leap) between the abstract and concrete that the notion of the leap becomes central in Kierkegaard's description of the personality.

Furthermore, since the individual is a concrete entity, abstract reflection does not alone spark the internal dynamism of the individual for dealing with the facticity of actions. Here, Kierkegaard finds himself head on against Hegel's conceptual monism which stands against and over the *concreteness of existence*. He considers Hegel's view of reality as *static* and changeless. For change is a predicate of existence and not of thought. Hence, the *transition between two existential alternatives* is made by a leap and not by the mediation of concepts. Again, against Hegel, Kierkegaard urges that thought and logic cannot harbor freedom since logical thought is necessary and not contingent. Only in actual existence is freedom made possible and the «leap» becomes the axis of most existential choices: «In logic, no movement can come about, the word "transition" is...a witty conceit in logic... It belongs to the sphere of historical freedom, for transition is a *state* and it is actual»³. Personality says Kierkegaard will forever repeat its immortal dilemma of Hamlet: «To be or not to be, that is the question»⁴. It is in the dramatic concreteness of life and not in thought that tension between possibilities exists, and such a tension is overcome by a leap or decisive choice. Therefore, for Kierkegaard a leap is a jump between two concretely (not abstract) discrete regions of being, an act that bridges the «gulfs» between existential possibilities and contradictions. This ultimately means *that leaps are many but one in kind* whether in an act of marriage, formulation of scientific laws or a choice of a profession. All leaps

2. *The journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, Oxford Univ. Press, 1982, year 1841, sec. 396, pp. 102-3.

3. Søren KIERKEGAARD, *The Concept of Dread*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1977, p. 12 and pp. 73-74.

4. *Journals*, p. 74, year 1839, sec. 286.

have a common quality, namely passion and trust⁵. Among the many leaps which the individual is challenged to perform is the leap *par excellence*⁶ in which religious passion and faith emerge. When performing this leap the transition is not made only by an act of the will as it is in other leaps but also by divine assistance, by God granting the condition to man⁷. On this basis, *religious faith becomes an existential fact and not a rational one*. It becomes a confidence, a jump into a vacuum without a good reason for hope. This, however does not mean that Kierkegaard is advocating irrationalism the way he had been traditionally considered⁸. For the leap of faith, being concretely *existential*, is necessarily *outside* the *static* domain of logic, being thus, it makes no sense to say Kierkegaard's concept of the leap is irrational or rational. For *these two categories cannot be predicated fo the leap without doing violence to language*. The leap belongs to a different order of being. Consequently, religious faith, from a *cognitive* stance, *is neither true nor false*, but simply *exists* similar to *real* objects. That is why Kierkegaard resented to hear somebody saying that religious faith is to a certain degree true⁹. Finally, it must be stated that the Kierkegaardian individual, when performing the many existential leaps in his behavioral compass, does not move whimsically, unintelligently and at random. On the contrary, the leap is a process up to which rational analysis can lead, preparing the way, but cannot grasp it essentially¹⁰.

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5. *Ibid.*, year 1850, sec. 1044, p. 386.

6. Sören KIERKEGAARD, *De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, Stanford Univ. Press, 1980, pp. 77-84.

7. IDEM, *Philosophical Fragments or a Fragment of Philosophy*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1975, pp. 17-55.

8. Instances of these writers are: David E. ROBERTS, *Existentialism and Religious Belief*, Oxford Univ. Press, p. 71, p. 108, Jean WAHL, *Études Kierkegaardiennes*, Paris, Fernand Aubier, «n.d.», p. 145, Marjorie GRENE, *Dreadful Freedom*, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988, chap. II.

9. Sören KIERKEGAARD, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1980, p. 209.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.