

WITTGENSTEIN AND KIERKEGAARD IN AND ON PARADOX

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The article provides an analysis of the confrontation with the limits of reason in Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard. For both thinkers such a confrontation denotes some sort of "running up against the paradox" that helps human beings to constitute themselves as ethical and/or religious subjects. In contrast with the so-called "austere" interpretation of Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard (Conant and others), the seemingly futile running up against the absurdity is presented as a necessary ingredient of a certain view of language and life, i.e. a view that conceives life and language merely as a succession of events and a description of facts. However, the meaning of a certain subset of events and propositions *shows* itself only if these events are *valued* in terms of *the totality of individual life or state of affairs* and if these propositions are accompanied by a wholesome way of living and a wholesome attitude towards the world. For both authors the confrontation with the absurdity is also closely related to the confrontation with madness as a far limit of reasoning.

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I open the discussion with two indicative citations from Kierkegaard's philosophical autobiography and Wittgenstein's diary (1930 – 1937), respectively:

"Without God I am too strong for myself, and in perhaps the most agonizing way of all I am shattered. [...] [A]nd only in trust to his co-knowledge have I dared to venture what I have ventured [...] alone in dialectical tensions that – without God – would drive insane anyone with my imagination, alone in anxieties unto death, alone in meaninglessness of existence without being able, even if I wanted to, to make myself understandable to a single person [...]" (Kierkegaard 1998, 74-75).

"The only thing that at some point may break in me & I am sometimes afraid of, is my intellect. Sometimes I think that my brain won't take the strain & will give out. And given its strength it is frightfully strained – at least that's how it often feels to me" (Wittgenstein 2013, 13).

"Respect before madness. – That is basically the only thing I speak of" (Wittgenstein 1997, 90).

The two citations clearly indicate that Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein continually confronted questions driving them to the verge of sanity and managed to artistically incorporate these confrontations into their own thinking and writing. I shall return to this point at the end of the discussion, but would like to focus first on Wittgenstein's unusual claims

about the running up against the paradox, claims in which the name of Kierkegaard is also mentioned briefly. In his discussions on ethics with Moritz Schlick and Friedrich Waismann in 1929, Wittgenstein said the following:

“To be sure, I can imagine what Heidegger means by being and anxiety. Man feels the urge to run up against the limits of language. Think for example of the astonishment that anything at all exists. This astonishment cannot be expressed in the form of a question, and there is also no answer whatsoever. Anything we might say is a priori bound to be mere nonsense. Nevertheless we do run up against the limits of language. Kierkegaard too saw that there is this running up against something and he referred to it in a fairly similar way (as running up against paradox). This running up against the limits of language is ethics” (Waismann, 1979, 68f).



L. Wittgenstein

such endeavours in a positivist fashion as mere nonsense, Wittgenstein felt this tendency to be extremely noble and worthwhile (Wittgenstein, 1965, 12).

Yet even in his later years he frequently returned to the theme of the inescapability of nonsensical speech. In 1946 he even scribbled down in one of his notebooks:

“Don't, for heaven's sake, be afraid of talking nonsense (Unsinn)! But you must pay attention to your nonsense” (Wittgenstein, 1984, 56).

As already noted, Wittgenstein pointed out certain similarities between his own “running up against the limits of sense” and Kierkegaard’s “running up against the paradox”. Kierkegaard, at least in his pseudonymous writings, argued that it is absolutely inevitable for human beings to confront a wide variety of absurdities. This idea is espe-

Later on in the discussion, Wittgenstein rejected all theorizing on ethics, i.e. all hypothesizing on the existence of values, the notion of “good” etc. In his opinion, every definition of good is already a misunderstanding. But at the same time, he pointed out that “the tendency to run up [against the limits of language] shows something”, and in this respect favourably quoted St. Augustine, who had supposedly said: “What, you swine, you want not to talk nonsense! Go ahead and talk nonsense, it does not matter!” (*ibid.*, 69).

Similar ideas can be found at the close of Wittgenstein’s lecture on ethics delivered in 1930 where he firmly rejected all attempts at defining or legitimizing ethical values. Such procedures, he felt, were but an expression of a human tendency to transcend the limits of meaningful language. However, far from rejecting

cially prominent in *Philosophical Fragments*, where the Reason's confrontations with paradox are vividly depicted. Kierkegaard's main focus in that work is our futile, yet frequent striving to rationally grasp the Absolute which, all the endeavours notwithstanding, remains firmly beyond our reach. Kierkegaard speaks of the paradoxical passion of Reason, a passion that is coming to the Unknown or is running against it (Kierkegaard, 195, 94).

Kierkegaard's thought frequently revolves around the notion of "absolute paradox". In his other works, he tries to portray different aspects of the absolute paradox by skilfully employing a vast range of symbols, such as an unconditional choice remaining a choice even when one decides on not choosing anything (in *Either/Or*), transgressions of the ethical in the case of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac for God (in *Fear and Trembling*), a lover's renunciation of his beloved for fear of losing God (in *Repetition*), and most prominently, the acceptance of Jesus Christ, the paradoxical God-man, in his finite infinity (in *Sickness Unto Death* and *Philosophical Fragments*).

In *Sickness unto Death* the absolute paradox is depicted as a fundamental existential situation of every individual, while an individual, in turn, is defined as someone who attempts to realize his self, yet inevitably runs up against the impossibility of such an endeavour and is therefore continually caught up in the throes of existential despair. But the solution tacitly provided by Kierkegaard, namely the acceptance of faith in Jesus Christ as God incarnate who alone can absolve one's sins, is equally paradoxical. This is because the very process of acceptance doesn't occur "smoothly" but necessarily involves a higher form of "offending at" Christ. The "offending" individual is fully aware that he is unable to bypass Christ, i.e. that he is unable to leave the problem of Christ unattended, yet at the same time he is unable to persuade himself into believing in Him wholeheartedly. Therefore, this particular form of offence "continues to stare at one and the same point, the paradox" (Kierkegaard 1983, 110).

Although it is true that Kierkegaard also mentions the so-called "demonic" type of "offending", typified by blatant rejection of Christ (in numerous guises) and hence by direct non-acceptance of the paradox, it can be safely assumed that his personal spiritual stance was much closer to the abovementioned "offending at the paradox" than to unwavering faith. This is also reflected in his common recourses to pseudonyms, revocations of authorship etc.

With subtle irony, in *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard/Climacus refers to himself as a "humorist", i.e. as someone who is satisfied with his circumstances at the moment, hoping that something better will befall his lot. He even implies that no one should be referring to his book, for if someone *had* referred to it, he would merely have shown that he had failed to understand it correctly. In a sense then, Kierkegaard/Climacus revokes his own work, thereby creating a new paradox for his helpless readers and interpreters. To make things even more complicated, there is yet another appendix at the end of the book called *First and Last Explanation*, which this time carries the author's real name (Søren Kierkegaard). In it, Kierkegaard accepts the authorship of his numerous books written under different pseudonyms, but is quick to add that none of them contain a single word of his own (Kierkegaard 1983, 626).

He thus kindly asks his future interpreters not to cite them as his own works, but rather as works of the respective pseudonymous authors. At the very end of his text, in the *Explanation*, Kierkegaard even tells us that the importance of these works is *precisely in the opposite, in wanting to have not importance, in wanting at a remove that is a distance of double reflection, once again to read through solo, if possible in a more inward way, the original text of individual human existence-relationships, the old familiar text handed down from the fathers* (*ibid.*, 629f).

Here, the reader is once again confronted with a paradoxical claim purportedly negating all importance of his previous work. It is interesting to note, however, that Kierkegaard *did* accept the authorship of his upbuilding religious discourses (*ibid.*, 627).

The question that naturally arises, then, is whether this constantly recurring issue of “running up against the paradox” is also merely a literary fiction – a feigned and ultimately pointless self-rejection of Reason? I feel this to be a highly unwarranted conclusion, as it is clear from the overall context of his writings that Kierkegaard’s dismissive stance towards his pseudonymous works serves as a means for preventing them from being (mis)used as an inspiration for new theoretical suggestions, a source of intriguing new ideas, or even an initiative to form a new party. It is at this point that Kierkegaard leads us directly to Wittgenstein and his similar revocations of *Tractatus* (1974). The penultimate proposition of *Tractatus* reads:

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them over them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder, after he has climbed upon it.)

He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright (§ 6.54).

This is immediately followed by the famous proposition § 7 on silence:

What we cannot speak about must we pass over in silence (§ 7).

Several influential interpreters of Wittgenstein (e.g. Cora Diamond, James Conant, Warren Goldfarb etc.) have maintained that these revocations need to be taken in complete earnestness, i.e. that we should understand propositions in *Tractatus* as strict nonsense and thus refrain from discussing them. And this, they claim, holds not only for the so-called metaphysical or mystical propositions, but for *all* propositions of *Tractatus*. According to this interpretation, usually referred to as strict or austere interpretation (e.g. Diamond, 1988; Conant, 1990; Goldfarb, 1997), *Tractatus* isn’t based on any special type of nonsense, e.g. a significant nonsense purportedly trying to *paradoxically say* what sensible propositions *show*, but a complete revocation of everything we are unable to speak of. James Conant tried to broaden this interpretation of (self-)renunciation of *Tractatus* to similar self-revoking claims in Kierkegaard and thus provide an equally “strict” or “austere” interpretation of his philosophy (Conant 1993, 1995).

I believe that although the austere interpretation reasonably grounds and emphasizes some important aspects of their work, e.g. the need to revoke their own words and the extremely powerful ethical and (in the case of Kierkegaard) religious orientation, it also greatly exaggerates or is just too simple to be able to grasp the complex dialectical reflection “propelling” both Kierkegaard’s and Wittgenstein’s thoughts.

At first glance, Wittgenstein seems more radical in his revocations than Kierkegaard, explicitly “declaring” his propositions as nonsensical and thus renouncing them as inappropriate or incomplete. But looks can be deceiving, and upon closer inspection Kierkegaard’s self rejections turn out to be no less radical, consisting in thorough “sifting through” of not only his own treatises but also of all the established and inherited knowledge. For both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard, the breakaway from their own texts and claims is thus a strategic means to perpetuate and develop their respective spiritual orientations.

Such a conclusion is further substantiated by Wittgenstein’s ethical and philosophical reflections from the time of his “return” to *Tractatus*, i.e. from late 1920’s and early 1930’s. His ideas during that period can be gleaned from his discussions with members of the Vienna circle, his lectures on ethics and his diary entries. In a journal entry from May 1930 (at a time when his lectures on ethics were held) he clearly states that he didn’t perceive *Tractatus* as a book filled with nonsense but rather as a book containing different passages, both good and bad:

“In addition to the good & genuine, my book, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, contains kitsch, i.e. passages I used to fill up empty spaces with my own unique style. I am not sure how big a part of my book they occupy & that is now hard to determine correctly” (Wittgenstein 1997, 28).

This would mean that Wittgenstein felt certain propositions in *Tractatus* to be of lesser quality, perhaps even kitsch, but not completely nonsensical, and this is all the more true for the propositions he deemed “good and genuine”. I sincerely doubt Wittgenstein would have judged all ethical and philosophical ideas from *Tractatus* to be false or even worthless.

Wittgenstein never used the ostensibly sensible, paradoxical propositions to disclose profound truths or meanings or even initiate a leap of faith, as *might have been* the case with Kierkegaard, but was instead trying to call our attention to the limits of language games and thus solve potential philosophical (conceptual) confusions. However, this is not to say that his method was merely a pedagogical or philosophical trick, for it was closely aligned with a wholesome (re)directing of his personal life towards the quest of solving *the problems of life* that were troubling him.

This realization is also true of Kierkegaard, only in his case the predominant theme is the valuation of propositions or historical events in light of the fundamental decision – acceptance or rejection of Jesus Christ as God-man Saviour –, while the emphasis in Wittgenstein is on the possibility or impossibility of a happy and unproblematic life and speech.

Although Wittgenstein briefly mentions Kierkegaard and values him immensely (for him, he was “by far the most profound thinker of the last century”, perhaps even “far too deep” (in Drury, 1981)) there is no need to conclude that the latter had any direct influence on the former.

Wittgenstein’s quotations from at the beginning of the paper demonstrate that at a certain point in his life Wittgenstein was seriously afraid of going mad and even inter-

preted his writings against the background of this ominous threat. Although it is possible that his mental disposition was partly influenced by occasional mental disturbances (see Waugh, 2010), it is probably more appropriate to perceive his permanent exposure to madness as the end result of his *philosophical stance*, i.e. his confrontations with borders of sense and meaning and his search for a happy and unproblematic life.

The same holds, in my opinion, for Kierkegaard. The two quotations from his philosophical autobiography, *The Point of View of My Work as an Author*, clearly indicate that most of Kierkegaard's work was written under the threat of going mad. It even seems plausible that Kierkegaard needed the uncompromising belief in God as some sort of defence against himself and his powerful intellect. He was well aware of how crucial these confrontations with the limits of reason were for his work. In one of his journal entries he wrote:

"If my suffering, my frailty, were not the condition for my intellectual work, then of course I would still make an attempt to deal with it by an ordinary medical approach. There is just no point in suffering as I suffer and not do a thing about it if one's life has no significance anyway. But here is the secret: the significance of my life corresponds directly to my suffering" (Kierkegaard 2013, X2A, 92).

Again, although it is possible to find hints of Kierkegaard having suffered from occasional bouts of mental illness, which he termed "thorns in the flesh" (Hansen, Hansen, 2013), it is more important to realize that, for him, running up against the absurdity was by no means a strictly academic endeavour; instead, he perceived it as a series of confrontations with the borders of human existence, as a passionate undertaking aimed at self-annihilation.

It is therefore possible to conclude that for both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein the running up against the limits of expressibility is an inevitable result of an honest and radical reflection on one's specific and overall existential situation. Both thinkers were fully aware of the fact that approaching these limits is a dangerous undertaking; at a certain point, every move brings us to the verge of madness. For Kierkegaard, every fundamental decision is a mindless step, and this is all the more true for any decision based on the absurdity of faith. It seems, therefore, that a (certain) kind of madness is inevitable for anyone who is willing to take upon himself the burden of reflecting his individual existential situation.

Faced with this dreary conclusion, the reader might find some solace in the following words of Wittgenstein:

"Madness need not be regarded as an illness. Why shouldn't it be seen as a sudden – more or less sudden – change of character" (Wittgenstein 1984, 54).

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