

Kierkegaard II

On the Dedication to 'That Single Individual' and Concluding Unscientific Postscript

(excerpts)

PHIL101

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Section IV: What is it worth?

Reading IV.4

As we have seen, Kierkegaard was a Danish philosopher particularly interested in the nature and quality of human experience. He believed that there are significant obstacles to our living the good lives that we are capable of, where these obstacles are subtle and stubborn. As in the case of proper religious belief, Kierkegaard thinks that *objectivity* is a threat to proper human living. In this case, we encounter objectivity in the form of the general words and concepts that we use to understand ourselves. Kierkegaard thinks that the general and abstract nature of our thought can prevent our being the singular, concrete beings that we ought to be.

In our first passage, we see Kierkegaard distinguish between two conceptions of “truth”. On the one hand, we have “the crowd,” and on the other hand we have the single individual. What, exactly, Kierkegaard means here by ‘truth’ (and its opposite, ‘untruth’) is a key interpretive question. Consider this question as you read, and note that only one of these, the individual, receives “the prize.” So, we have a second interpretive question: what is the prize that Kierkegaard speaks of?

There is a view of life which holds that where the crowd is, the truth is also, that it is a need in truth itself, that it must have the crowd on its side.¹ There is another view of life; which holds that wherever the crowd is, there is untruth, so that, for a moment to carry the matter out to its farthest conclusion, even if every individual possessed the truth in private, yet if they came together into a crowd (so that “the crowd” received any *decisive*, voting, noisy, audible importance), untruth would at once be let in.

For “the crowd” is untruth. Eternally, godly, christianly what Paul says is valid: “only one receives the prize,” [I Cor. 9:24] not by way of comparison, for in the comparison “the others” are still present. That is to say, everyone can be that one, with God's help – but only one receives the prize; again, that is to say, everyone should cautiously have dealings with “the others,” and essentially only talk with God and with himself – for only one receives the prize; again, that is to say, the human being is in kinship with, or to be a human is to be in kinship with the divinity. The worldly, temporal, busy, socially-friendly person says this: “How unreasonable, that only one should receive the prize, it is far more probable that several combined receive the prize; and if we become many, then it becomes more certain and also easier for each individually.”

But the eternal, which vaults high over the temporal, quiet as the night sky, and God in heaven, who from this exalted state of bliss, without becoming the least bit dizzy, looks out over these innumerable millions and knows each single individual; he, the great examiner, he says: only one receives the prize;

¹ Kierkegaard's target here is the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). Hegel held that reality consists in logical constructions of concepts. Since concepts are general, rather than particular, this means that truth itself – i.e., reality – must also be general, rather than particular. Kierkegaard here uses the expression ‘the crowd’ to refer to the general, the multiple, as opposed to the specific or single. This helps him to capture Hegel's thought that it is the collective of humans, the collective human mind that is real, rather than the individual.

that is to say, everyone can receive it, and everyone ought to become this by oneself, but only one receives the prize. Where the crowd is, therefore, or where a decisive importance is attached to the fact that there is a crowd, there no one is working, living, and striving for the highest end, but only for this or that earthly end; since the eternal, the decisive, can only be worked for where there is one; and to become this by oneself, which all can do, is to will to allow God to help you – “the crowd” is untruth.

“Only one receives the prize.” That is, only *as one*, as an individual, does one receive “the prize.” That is, Kierkegaard suggests, there is something of significant value – “the prize” – that we can have only as individuals and not as a member of “the crowd.” Not that only one person in the world can gain this prize; “everyone” is capable of it, Kierkegaard asserts. This prize, notably, is something conferred within the vision of God, something that Saint Paul speaks “validly” of, which amounts to “kinship” with the divine. It must then be of great value and its value must penetrate to our very essence, given these clues. It is what “everyone ought to become” and, moreover, it is something that each of us is capable of – not, again, as a member of the crowd, but “by oneself.”

Kierkegaard offers further clues to his meaning in the following.

The crowd is untruth. There is therefore no one who has more contempt for what it is to be a human being than those who make it their profession to lead the crowd. Let someone, some individual human being, certainly, approach such a person, what does he care about him; that is much too small a thing; he proudly sends him away; there must be at least a hundred. And if there are thousands, then he bends before the crowd, he bows and scrapes; what untruth! No, when there is an individual human being, then one should express the truth by respecting what it is to be a human being; and if perhaps, as one cruelly says, it was a poor, needy human being, then especially should one invite him into the best room, and if one has several voices, he should use the kindest and friendliest; that is the truth. When on the other hand it was an assembly of thousands or more, and “the truth” became the object of balloting, then especially one should godfearingly – if one prefers not to repeat in silence the Our Father: deliver us from evil – one should godfearingly express, that a crowd, as the court of last resort, ethically and religiously, is the untruth, whereas it is eternally true, that everyone can be the one. This is the truth.

And again:

A crowd – not this or that, one now living or long dead, a crowd of the lowly or of nobles, of rich or poor, etc., but in its very concept – is untruth, since a crowd either renders the single individual wholly unrepentant and irresponsible, or weakens his responsibility by making it a fraction of his decision. ... The untruth is first that it is “the crowd,” which does either what only *the single individual* in the crowd does, or in every case what *each single individual* does. For a crowd is an abstraction, which does not have hands ...

The truth, Kierkegaard here states, involves “what it is to be a human being” while the untruth is associated with “the crowd.” Further, in “the crowd,” one runs the risk of losing some portion of one’s will and responsibility for oneself. Those who seek the adulation of the crowd, in particular, fail “to be human,” and this crowd is an “abstraction”.

There are perhaps two threads to this line of thought. First, as is well-known, the behavior of the individual may be much influenced by the group. In a group of friends, for example, we may find ourselves taking part in activities for which we later don’t feel solely responsible. Thus, in a relatively straightforward sense, we may seem to give up some portion of our will and thus responsibility to the group.²

² For instance: After a few drinks, a group of friends piles into a car to drive to the store. An accident occurs, after which, any of the group might reflect: how did I come to this point? Was I

Or so, at any rate, we may think. Such thinking is however misleading, Kierkegaard suggests, for there is no further being, “the crowd,” that one might give up one’s will and responsibility to. A crowd is composed of individuals; it is not an independent being in its own right. To the extent that we think of a crowd in *singular* terms, a crowd is “an abstraction,” as Kierkegaard puts it: merely an idea, in other words, a convenient way of our thinking of the complex actions of multiple individual beings. But such thinking does not absolve one of one’s personal responsibilities any more than it deprives one of a portion of one’s will. Rather, we have confusion, in the individual, and a failure to “get real.”

The failure of personal responsibility, for Kierkegaard, may be understood in the terms of abstraction. The abstract, as we have seen, is contrasted with the concrete. Where the concrete is the *fully real*, the abstract is incomplete, not fully real. Our concepts are the result of abstraction, on this view, they being general, non-particular representations of things.³

Note, then, the extent to which we think of ourselves in general, abstract terms. A short list of terms identifying “what you are” might include terms such as these: man, woman, student, son, daughter, sister, brother, white, black, liberal, conservative, etc. All such terms identify a “crowd”, a group of like persons. Each individual member of such groups, however, is unlike each other member, so that in thinking of ourselves in these terms, we necessarily fail to capture our particular, unique essence. The crowd, then, is an abstraction, and an abstraction is unreal, for Kierkegaard. Unfortunately, it is all too easy to mistake the abstraction for the reality.

All logical thinking employs the language of abstraction. ... It is easier indulge in abstract thought than it is to exist. ...

The difficulty that inheres in existence, with which the existing individual is confronted, is one that never really comes to expression in language of abstract thought, much less receives an explanation. ... Abstract thought ignores the concrete and the temporal, the existential process, the predicament of the existing individual arising from his being a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal situated in existence. ...

Existing is ordinarily regarded as no very complex matter, much less an art, since we all exist; but abstract thinking takes rank as an accomplishment. But to really exist ... that is truly difficult.

It is easy enough to get “caught up” in a crowd. The challenge to “authentic” being is more clearly revealed when one considers the extent to which a generalized self-concept may influence one’s actions. It is easy enough to make a decision based on one’s “objective” nature as a student or man or wife. As a student, I must do this; as a man, I must do that. But, cautions Kierkegaard, no such general term fully identifies me, for all such terms are general while I am a particular. Consequently, the task of being fully human is the task of moving beyond such “leveling” labels.

[T]he individual no longer belongs to God, to himself, to his beloved, to his art or to his science; he is conscious of belonging in all things to an abstraction to which he is subjected by reflection. ... The abstract principle of leveling ... like the biting east wind, has no personal relation to any individual, but has only an abstract relationship which is the same for everyone.

the sole author of this act? For a second example, consider the practice of the “conscience round” in firing squads: one rifle in the squad is loaded with a blank round, but the members of the squad do not know which rifle is so loaded.

³ This relationship between the abstract and the concrete is reflected in the basic meaning of the term, ‘abstract’. ‘Abstract’ derives from the Latin *abstrahere*, which means to draw away from. The abstract is something that we have drawn away from the concrete resulting in a portion of reality, not the whole of reality. For example, by abstraction, we can consider the shape of an almond: the almond’s shape is itself not a complete, real being, but only a feature of a complete, real being.

This task is made further challenging by the fact that the “untruth” is the easier way. The conceptual mind works with ideas and images that are as light as the wind and readily formed and reformed. We are easily deluded by the stories that we tell of ourselves, and there is shame and humiliation in delusion, posing a further challenge to our “true” being.

Do you dare to claim that human beings, in a crowd, are just as quick to reach for truth, which is not always palatable, as for untruth, which is always deliciously prepared, when in addition this must be combined with an admission that one has let oneself be deceived! Or do you dare to claim that “the truth” is just as quick to let itself be understood as is untruth, which requires no previous knowledge, no schooling, no discipline, no abstinence, no self-denial, no honest self-concern, no patient labor! No, “the truth,” which detests this untruth, the only goal of which is to desire its increase, is not so quick on its feet. Firstly, it cannot work through the fantastical, which is the untruth; its communicator is only a single individual. And its communication relates itself once again to the single individual; for in this view of life the single individual is precisely the truth.

The prize, then, for Kierkegaard is what existentialist philosophers have come to call *authentic* being: being “true” to oneself, where this requires realizing a “self” that is incapable of conceptual grasp. Being, thus, “yourself” is of inestimable value, Kierkegaard suggests. It is what God sees you to be, as Kierkegaard would think of it. And failing to be oneself is a tragedy, given the exquisite value of what is then lost, one’s authentic existence in the world.

This account differs from other theories that we have examined, thus far, in that it doesn’t identify any particular form of action as right or wrong. The theory entails no specific imperatives in terms of utility or the good will. However, like other theories of value, Kierkegaard offers an account of certain features of the world, features of the world representing some thing or state as of value. In this case, “the good” is avoiding living in terms of “the crowd” and thus realizing one’s concrete nature as a human being. We can find then an imperative to accompany this account of value: live an authentic life.

Ask yourself:

In order to determine your understanding of the reading, you should try to answer these questions clearly and succinctly.

1. What does Kierkegaard mean by saying that the crowd is untruth?
2. What is the relationship between concepts and untruth?
3. What is “the prize”, exactly, and what is its value?
4. What imperative appears to follow from Kierkegaard’s account?