

PHILOSOPHY 1 SPRING 2007

Blackboard Notes---Lecture on Kierkegaard and R. Adams

Kierkegaard is pondering, what it is to be a Christian and to guide one's life by Christian faith.

He says each of us has an infinite interest in eternal salvation (infinite payoff in an afterlife). For each of us, his personal relationship to Christian doctrine "is properly one of infinite interest to him." It is appropriate to have an infinite passion in this matter, given the infinite magnitude of what is at stake.

The question then arises, how reasonably to balance concern for one's relationship to God conceived in terms of Christian doctrine with other concerns in one's life—ordinary concerns for ordinary goods big and small—family, friends, achievement, romantic success, sports, play, fun and games, the satisfaction of eating an ice cream cone, etc., etc. How does one live a life that integrates devotion to eternal salvation, with a potential infinite payoff, with devotion to ordinary goods, finite goods?

Kierkegaard despises a routinized conventional form of Christianity, a practice that involves paying lip service to religious matters but channeling one's passion and resources and devotion to particular finite goods. Suppose there is a good of infinite value, to which one can devote resources including time and energy. The more resources one devotes to seeking this good, the greater the likelihood of reaching it. Alternatively one can devote personal resources to some or many of the goods that comprise a world of finite goods. It seems one would be irrational to devote any resources at all to any finite good. Devotion to the infinite good should entirely trump all other concerns. One should do whatever will maximize one's chances of gaining eternal salvation. That is the unique way to maximize the expected value of the life plan one chooses. This policy of forsaking all earthly goods looks extreme but seems required by the logic of the decision problem. (Compare this decision problem to the one Pascal discusses in "The Wager.") All for the infinite, none for the finite is not the way most of us lead our lives even if we are religious believers. But that extreme policy would seem to be the right answer to the problem of how to lead one's life given how Kierkegaard sets up the problem.

Further light on the issue may be shed if we consider some possible responses (not discussed by Kierkegaard, for the most part):

1. Satisficing. One should strive not to maximize one's chances of gaining the infinite payoff but should rather be religiously devoted to the point that yields a "good enough" or "satisfactory" chance of gaining the good. At that point, it is perfectly OK to devote personal resources to earthly finite goods—any goods in the array that one chooses.

Problem: How can this make sense? Wherever one sets the good enough level, if one could increase one's chances of the infinite payoff by devoting more resources to the quest for it, one should channel resources to the service of the infinite payoff religious interest above the level of the supposedly "good enough." We are back to maximizing.

The satisficing strategy sounds like the conventional non-infinite-passion religiosity that Kierkegaard despises.

2. Satisficing AS maximizing. This position holds that for finite creatures like us, striving to pursue religious devotion more and more unreservedly at some point has negative payoff. For each of us there is a good enough level of religious concern, such that if we devote more concern to religious matters than this, we lessen, rather than increase, our prospects of gaining an eternal payoff. In other words, we maximize the chances of gaining an infinite payoff by devoting ourselves to finite goods beyond the good enough level of religious concern. If I tried to become more saintly, the result would not be that I would become more saintly, but rather that I would become a prig or stuffed shirt or some grotesque or even monstrous parody of a saint. So while giving full wholehearted devotion to my religious concern I ought to pursue salvation only in moderation and be somewhat devoted to finite goods.

Problems: This is a possible strategy, more attractive than strategy 1. One danger is that the position is unstable in practice. How can I ever know where my good enough line is? If I draw the line too low, I develop the vice of complacency—I'm good enough, I don't have to strive to be better. If I draw the line too high, versions of the problems of extremism and fanatical single-mindedness resurface again.

3. Immanence and transcendence. My initial description of the problem how a religious believer should balance concern for the infinite good and concern for finite goods, perhaps presupposes that the infinite good is fully and starkly separate from and independent of the finite goods. The person who believes in "immanence" denies this. She holds that finite goods participate in the infinite, or that God is immanent, presenting every good aspect of the world. So in devoting myself to finite goods I am not necessarily turning away from the infinite; I am seeing the shadow of the infinite glimpsed in each finite good. Not only sublime experiences like seeing the Grand Canyon or a grand work of art put one in touch with the infinite; even humdrum and ordinary goods including eating a McDonald's hamburger are such that enjoying and appreciating them brings contact with the infinite.

Problems. This strategy can make sense. It is going to be tricky to work out. If God becomes too immanent in the world, we end up with pantheism—God is in every part of nature and in no way transcends it. The infinite then seems to drop out of our concern, we just pursue finite goods, amplified in value because of their connection to the infinite. If any good I go after puts me in touch with the infinite, what is wrong with devoting all my time and energy to trivial pursuits like improving my golf game and watching old action and horror movies on TV? If God is interpreted as transcending the world around us entirely, we are back to square one.

There is a sin of idolatry—literally worshipping a false God or a material image of God as though it were God. In an extended sense, idolatry is treating a finite good as though it had infinite value, or more broadly still, giving goods devotion that is disproportionate to their true value. But if my relationship with God is what is most important, has an importance that entirely transcends the importance of any other good, then to avoid

idolatry, shouldn't I devote myself entirely and unreservedly to my relationship with God? I then traffic in finite goods not for their own sake but just as means to get closer to the infinite or to improve my chances of eternal salvation. We seem to be back to the picture of one-sided devotion to the infinite good, any devotion to any lesser good looking to be irrational and wrong.

(This problem of seeing God as both immanent in the world and transcending it and of responding appropriately in one's choice of how to live and expend one's resources of devotion in the light of this picture of a world of finite goods infused somewhat with the infinite is worth further discussion. Kierkegaard wrestles with this issue in other writings, though not so far as I can see in our reading. Robert Adams reports and interprets Kierkegaard's views on this issue at section b i of his discussion of "The Passion Argument" in "Kierkegaard's Arguments against Objective Reasoning in Religion.")

In the reading for 4/28, Kierkegaard argues that objective reasoning is inadequate as a basis for faith and a subjective decision to embrace the Christian faith is the only adequate basis. The following difficulty then arises.

Kierkegaard asserts

1. A subjective decision can put one in possession of the true faith.

If

2. It is virtuous to help others, and the greater the help one gives, the more virtuous one is.

3. Assisting other people to embrace the true faith is the greatest help anyone can give anybody. (If one can increase the likelihood that a person will gain an infinite payoff, any finite costs or benefits, to the helper, the person one intends to help, or anyone else, will count for nothing in comparison.)

4. Absent one's help, many people will be led to heresy or unbelief and will fail to embrace the true faith.

5. Persecution to stamp out heresy and unbelief can increase the likelihood that persons will embrace the true faith (that is, lower no one's chances of salvation and increase some peoples' chances of salvation).

6. So, it is virtuous to carry out persecution to stamp out heresy and unbelief.

Kierkegaard of course does not assert 2 through 6, and would surely wish to reject 6. On what grounds might he reject 6?

He might assert that no individual can bring it about that another person embraces the true faith and gains salvation. Only each individual by subjective decision can acquire faith and only living according to that faith can bring the individual to salvation, according to Kierkegaard. –But this seems compatible with holding that one person can

help another to gain the true faith. Compare: Even if the only way any person can ingest good water is by drinking it herself, another person can bring it about that the person has good water not poisonous water ready to hand, available to be drunk.

Another possible way to reject 6 is hinted at when Kierkegaard writes, “If one who lives in a Christian culture goes up to God’s house the house of the true God, with a true conception of God, with knowledge of God and prays—but prays in a false spirit; and one who lives in a idolatrous land prays with the total passion of the infinite, although his eyes rest on the image of an idol; where is there most truth? The one prays in truth to God, although he worships an idol. The other prays in untruth to the true God and therefore really worships an idol.” This passage suggests that Kierkegaard holds that the content of the dogmas and doctrines one believes on a basis of religious faith matters not at all; what is of importance is the subjective spirit-and-attitude with which one embraces and follows whatever dogmas and doctrines one affirms. If so, trying to manipulate a person to induce her to affirm one rather than another set of religious doctrines is misguided.

The idea that the specific content of what is affirmed in religious faith matters not at all is a hard saying, one in tension with other claims Kierkegaard makes about Christianity. Suppose a person embraces with infinite religious passion some finite good, taken to be of infinite worth (golf, say, or philosophy). Could infinite passion for a finite good count as a Christian life? Suppose one embraces doctrines quiet foreign to Christianity, such as atheism or communism or Nazism. Can it be that the content of what one believes matters not at all, just the passion one invests in one’s faith?

Maybe Kierkegaard does not hold that the content of the doctrines one believes matters not at all. Instead he perhaps means to affirm that having a good subjective relationship to an inadequate conception of religion is better than having a bad subjective relationship to an adequate conception of religion. This allows that it would be still better to have a good subjective relationship to an adequate conception of religion. But if being better than in this context includes the idea that having an adequate conception of religion increases one’s chances of gaining salvation, then we are back to the possibility that persecution that boosts people’s chance of gaining the true faith is virtuous.

Kierkegaard holds that objective reasoning is counterproductive as a strategy for acquiring a Christian faith. He focuses on empirical objective reasoning in our reading, but he also states that the path of the “speculative philosopher” is also a dead end. So the arguments Descartes gives, intended to be certain demonstrations of the truth of religious claims, must be unsatisfactory on Kierkegaard’s view. Kierkegaard holds that central Christian doctrines are offensive to human reason. From the standpoint of objective reason, Christian doctrine is absurd. So rational arguments will not bring one to religious faith; rather subjective decision, the right subjective attitude, is what is required.

The possibilities here seem to be these:

1. Objective reasoning can conclusively establish that central Christian claims are true.

2. Objective reasoning can support but not conclusively establish that central Christian claims are true.
3. Objective reasoning can conclusively establish that central Christian claims are not true.
4. Objective reasoning can support, but not conclusively establish, that central Christian claims are not true.
5. Objective reasoning can do nothing to support either that central Christian claims are true or that they are not true.

Descartes affirms 1. Kierkegaard's position seems to involve denying 1 and 3 and also denying that opting for any of 2, 4, or 5 would have any bearing at all on the possibility of achieving Christian faith by subjectivity, by decision.

ADAMS ON KIERKEGAARD

Robert Adams notes that for Kierkegaard, faith or full wholehearted belief involves more than a finding that a claim is probable. Faith involves conviction and a commitment to disregard in one's deliberation and choices the possibility of error—that what one believes might be false. “Probably God exists” is not an expression of faith. “It is .999 probable that God exists” is not an expression of faith. Faith involves a leap beyond the evidence to a state of wholehearted conviction. Kierkegaard associates this leap of faith with an act of will, a voluntary resolve to be committed. (But of course, the voluntary choice to be committed to wholehearted belief in a claim may or may not be effective, and actually lead to conviction. And presumably conviction might just happen—one might just discover one day that one believes something with conviction.) Adams does not disagree with Kierkegaard's understanding of the difference between (1) faith in the sense of believing a claim with conviction and (2) holding that a claim is more or less probably on the basis of one's assessment of the evidence for it.

Adams identifies three arguments he finds in Kierkegaard against objective reasoning in support of religious belief—the Approximation Argument, the Postponement Argument, and the Passion Argument.

I quote Adams's skeletal statement of each argument.

Approximation Argument

1. The greatest attainable certainty with respect to anything historical is merely an approximation.”
 2. “An approximation, when viewed as a basis for an eternal happiness, is wholly inadequate.”
- Therefore, 3 “an eternal happiness cannot be based on a (rational certainty) about anything historical.”

Comment: The argument refers to objective historical reasoning, so might seem to leave open the possibility of basing religious faith on objective reasoning of other sorts, such as the rationalist quasi-mathematical proofs for religious claims such as the claim that god exists that Descartes seeks to advance. But Kierkegaard clearly means the argument to generalize. The person who seeks to base religious faith on philosophical proof is on the

wrong track just as the person who seeks to base religious faith on historical evidence is on the wrong track. Any type of objective reasoning will issue only in probability assignments. For all one knows, there is always the possibility of error so by objective argument one only raises the probability a given claim is true.

Elsewhere Adams distinguishes two possible distinct versions of the approximation argument. One version supposes that what is approximate and never certain is the justification one gets for belief by objective reasoning. The other version supposes that what is approximate and never certain is the belief itself.

Premise 1, version 1: "The greatest degree to which a belief can be justified by objective historical reasoning is only an approximation to certainty (that is, a probability of less than 100 per cent)."

Premise 1, version 2: The strongest belief that can be based on objective historical reasoning is a probability assignment of less than 100 per cent.

However one interprets it, the Approximation Argument according to Adams is a bad argument. Question: Why does he think this? You need to examine his text.

Postponement Argument

1. One cannot have an authentic religious faith without being totally committed to it. (This involves being determined not to abandon the belief under any circumstances that one recognizes as epistemically possible.)
2. "One cannot yet be totally committed to any belief which one bases on an inquiry in which one recognizes and possibility of a future need to revise the results."
3. "An authentic religious faith cannot be based on an inquiry in which one recognizes any possibility of a future need to revise the results."

Question: How does this argument according to Adams differ substantially from the Approximation Argument? What reason does Adams give for criticizing the Postponement argument?

Passion Argument

1. "The most essential and valuable feature of religiousness is passion, indeed an infinite passion, a passion of the greatest possible intensity.
2. "An infinite passion requires objective improbability."
3. Therefore, "what is most essential and valuable in religiousness requires objective improbability."

One might say that according to the proponent of the Passion Argument, one who tries to take the mystery out of central religious doctrines by seeking to show that they can be shown to be reasonable and rational by objective reasoning is subverting what is most essential and valuable in religiousness.

Question: What is Adams's criticism of Kierkegaard's position as represented by the Passion Argument? Do you agree or disagree with the criticism? For what reasons?

Note: Not every argument that Adams attributes to Kierkegaard is an argument that shows up in our short Kierkegaard reading. We are interested in understanding and assessing the Kierkegaard reading and also Kierkegaard's position as Adams represents it to be.