

Kierkegaard's Conceptual Confusion

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Something about the Forgiveness of Sins

1. The difficulty in psychological terms lies here at a quite different point than generally imagined. (Let us suppose¹)
2. The difficulty is to what [level of] immediacy does one who believes return, or what is the immediacy which follows this belief, and how does this belief relate to what is otherwise called immediacy.
3. To believe the forgiveness of sins is a paradox, the absurd, etc., etc.: this is not what I am speaking of but of something else.
4. I assume then that one has had the prodigious courage of faith to believe in truth that God has literally forgotten his sin – a courage perhaps not found in ten persons in each generation, this crazy [*af-sindige*] courage which, after coming to a mature conception of God, is able to believe that God can absolutely literally forget.
5. But I assume this. What then? Since now everything is forgotten he is like a new man. But if absolutely no trace is left does this mean that it should be possible for one to live with the carelessness of youth? Impossible!
6. And in this connection I would point out that it is an indescribably dubious matter to bring up a child rigorously in Christianity because his life is thereby horribly confused [*forvirrer ... rædsomste ...*] until sometime in his thirties.
7. But would it be possible now for one who has believed the forgiveness of his sins to become young enough to fall erotically in love.
8. Here is the difficulty of my own life. I am an old man brought up with extraordinary rigour in Christianity; therefore my life is for me horribly confused [*rædsomt forvirret*]; therefore I have been brought into collisions which no one imagines and still less speaks about. And only now, now in my thirty-fifth year, with the help of heavy

sufferings and the bitterness of repentance, have I perhaps learned enough about dying from the world that I can rightly speak of finding my whole life and my salvation through faith in forgiveness of sins. But really, even though I am as spiritually strong as ever, I am much too old for such things as falling in love with a woman. (VIII 1 A 663 / cf. 1215)²

This study argues that many of Kierkegaard's most widely read and influential works are permeated by his conceptual confusion of the historical question "Did X happen?" and the mythological³ one "Is X a paradox or the absurd?", a confusion clearly illustrated in the third paragraph of the above quotation but so familiar that most Kierkegaard scholars fail to recognize it as such. There is a wealth and variety of evidence for this central claim but I begin by focussing upon this note from 1848 because it contains the first hint of his own insight that he had himself confused these two questions and that his confusion was due to his upbringing. I then argue that his subsequent journals show that he has at last succeeded in believing in his forgiveness, that he now adopts a new and different conception of paradox and absurd and that his published works show important changes after this date. Finally, I reflect briefly upon what this means for our view of his pseudonymous works which, generally speaking, are shaped and informed by this confusion.

The entry in question is actually a "Loose Paper" entitled "Something About the Forgiveness of Sins.", is almost certainly from Easter 1848⁴ and hints at the intellectual side of this celebrated experience and its role in his final reconciliation with Christianity. It must be read in light of the fact that for almost eight years following his break with Regine the central problem in his religious life was that he could not believe in either the forgiveness of his own sins or Christianity and that he had long regarded both as paradoxes. We see this, for example, in an entry from early July 1847 in which he writes rather equivocally that from now on his thrust will be "into the specifically Christian" and quickly adds "'The forgiveness of sins' must be emphasised ... [and] established again as a paradox before anything can be done." (VIII 1 A 229 / 6037) The long entry quoted above shows that he is beginning to doubt the latter claim and is important as perhaps the earliest evidence of his later realization that the forgiveness of sins and Christianity need not and, indeed, should not be treated as paradoxes and of his insight that it was his own upbringing which had caused him to treat them in this way.

This entry is complex and complicated and the reader should read the whole carefully, preferably in the original. For those for whom this is not convenient or possible I have provided the above deliberately literal but, I believe, correct translation of the first eight paragraphs and now offer the following commentary using the numbers provided for reference.

All of the first seven paragraphs are quite short but, disregarding the one consisting only of the words “Lad os antage” and occurring only in the original Danish, the second says that it is about the degree or level of immediacy which may be expected to follow belief in the forgiveness of sins and the seventh that it is about the more specific question whether someone who has so believed might “become young enough erotically to fall in love.” It is clear then that this entry is about the degree or kind of spontaneity or immediacy he may expect to achieve after finally believing that his sins have been forgiven.

However it is equally clear that this entry is also about another and related matter. Four of the first eight paragraphs deal mainly with his problems in attempting to believe the forgiveness of his sins. The third and fourth describe his previous attempts to reach such belief, the sixth introduces his new insight into the causes of his failure and the eighth spells out that insight and, almost in passing, shows that and how he has at last succeeded. We now begin a more detailed discussion of these four paragraphs noting at the outset that it was most probably Kierkegaard's concern with the “degree of immediacy” question which at last forced him to ask and finally enabled him to understand why he had for so long been unable to believe the forgiveness of his own sins.

The third paragraph begins “To believe the forgiveness of sins is a paradox, the absurd, etc., etc. ...”⁵ This remark is mistaken and, given the context, revealing. It is mistaken because it confuses the historical question “Have my sins been forgiven?” with the mythological question “Is the forgiveness of sins a paradox or, more generally, self-contradictory and unintelligible?” It is revealing because it shows that even at this late date he seems unable even to mention the forgiveness of his sins without repeating his familiar formula even though he must add immediately “this is not what I am speaking of but of something else.” In fact most of the following paragraphs deal precisely with this matter. The fourth speaks of “the prodigious courage of faith” involved in believing that God has literally forgotten one's sin and suggests that this “crazy courage” is not found in “ten persons in each generation.” The sixth assumes the claim of the fifth (that it is quite impossible even for one who

believes himself forgiven “to live with the carelessness of youth”) and explains this by saying “And in this connection, I would point out that to bring up a child rigorously in Christianity is an indescribably dubious matter, because his life is thereby horribly confused [*forvirrer ... rædsomste ...*] until sometime in his thirties.” The eighth paragraph makes clear that he is talking about himself and his difficulty in believing in his own forgiveness. It begins: “Here is the difficulty in my own life. I am an old man brought up with extraordinary rigor in Christianity; therefore my life is for me horribly confused [*rædsomt forvirret*]” and adds that it is only now “in my thirty-fifth year,” after much suffering and repentance, that I can “rightly speak of finding my whole life and my salvation through faith in the forgiveness of sins.”

Note the clear and dramatic shift within these mostly very short paragraphs. The first two spell out the main subject of this entry. The third automatically and unquestioningly identifies belief in the forgiveness of sins as “a paradox, the absurd, etc. etc.” The fourth stresses the allegedly extreme difficulty of believing that God has literally forgotten his sin. The fifth declares that it is impossible even for one who has been forgiven to live with the carelessness of youth. The sixth explains how his own life has been “horribly confused.” The seventh sharpens and repeats the main question without however marking this as a question or providing an answer. By contrast, the eighth explains his inability to believe as due to the fact that he was “horribly confused,” clearly implies that he has at last come to believe and ascribes this to suffering and faith without even mentioning paradox, the absurd, etc. In fact the paragraphs with which we are here particularly concerned begin with the formula which had so long prevented him from believing, explain his inability to believe as due to his upbringing and resulting confusion and end by presenting him on the eve of his thirty-fifth birthday as at last so certain of the forgiveness of his own sins that he must now ask himself whether he can now be expected to become young enough to fall in love. Indeed, it appears that it was this new certainty of forgiveness which prompted him now to reflect at least more or less consciously upon the cause of his earlier inability to believe and finally to see that it was due to his upbringing which taught him that God did not forget or forgive sins and that his forgiveness must therefore be a paradox. In short, his upbringing led him to confuse the historical and the mythological questions or, perhaps more accurately, to substitute the latter for both. Certainly it left him unable to ask or answer the historical question on its own terms.

Of course these two explanations are in fundamental agreement and both are clearly supported by much of what we know of Kierkegaard's upbringing and life. His father and the Brethern with whom he was closely associated conceived sin primarily in terms of sex and God as stern, angry and unforgiving and he imposed these views upon his son. He had himself committed certain sexual indiscretions, was never able to "forget" these sins and regarded their forgiveness as unthinkable. Søren knew this and could not bear to think of surpassing him in this or any other respect. On May 8, 1837 following his meeting with Bolette Rørdam he thanks God "for not letting me immediately go mad" (II A 67 / 5219) and his account of his very first meeting with Regine a day or two later expresses dismay at his experience of sexual attraction, asks God not to let go of him but to let him live and reform. (II A 68 / 5220) He frequently treated her badly, refused to be reconciled for a very long time and even interpreted his refusal as doing God's will. It was then entirely natural that he should have experienced the forgiveness of his sins as a paradox and, attempting to believe, fallen into this confusion. Of course it was during this same period that he produced most of his pseudonymous works or "poetic experiments" most of which assume and even celebrate this confusion.

Before considering some of the other evidence supporting this thesis we pause to note that Kierkegaard frequently wrote as if the most urgent problem for both his father and himself was that of forgetting their own sins and, perhaps lapsing into a kind of anthropomorphism, he frequently wrote of God as forgetting as distinct from forgiving his sins. For example, this use goes back at least as far as 1841⁶ and occurs twice in both VIII 1 A 649 / 1123 and in the entry we have been discussing. However after this entry he continues to stress his need to forget his own sins⁷ but only once comes even close to suggesting that God "forgets" rather than "forgives" sin.⁸ In fact this change is typical of others which we now consider.

To date we have based our case mainly on some apparently incidental remarks from a single 1848 journal entry ostensibly about another subject but there is much other evidence supporting this interpretation and even suggesting that this entry marks a kind of watershed in his thought and writing. In fact, there is so much that we cite most of it in simple, summary form.

It is clear from Kierkegaard's journals that his concern with the forgiveness of sins drops off sharply following this entry; indeed, the relative

frequency of the nine expressions⁹ most clearly indicating such concern is 3.13¹⁰ in VII 1 A, peaks at 3.97 in VIII 1 A but falls to 1.32 in IX A and to 0.59, 0.38, 0.66, 0.15, 0.18, 0.0 and 0.47, respectively, in the last seven volumes. This drop is dramatic and strongly suggests that his own problem has been solved. Perhaps more important, not one of these 41 instances in these seven volumes treats the forgiveness of sins as a paradox or absurd and not one occurs in any sentence containing these words. In fact he now adopts a much more traditional and Christian view of forgiveness. This is clear from the following five excerpts which are privileged in the sense that they contain and illustrate 16 of the 22 words most distinctively characteristic of these later “forgiveness” sentences.¹¹ “... when I for the last (*sidste*) time have repented (*angret*) my sin and received (*annammet*) the gracious (*naadefulde*) forgiveness of my (*mine*) sins ... my last words ... will be words of gratitude for the indescribable (*ubeskriverlig*) good he has done for me” (IX A 371 / 6266) “... what I have constantly prayed (*bedet*) to God for: that I might rightly thank (*take*) him for the indescribable good, ... (IX A 180 / n.t.) “... in earliest times ... they assumed that baptism (*Daaben*) made satisfaction (*Fyldest*) only for the past, ...” (X 5 A 103 / 1494; my trs.) “... the sinner gains the confident courage to dare to believe (*troe*) that God is gracious (*naadig*) toward him, although he still suffers his punishment (*Straf*.” (X 1 A 462 / 3637) and “To you is proclaimed (*forkyndes*) in the name of Jesus Christ the forgiveness of your (*Dine*) sins, grace, eternal (*evig*) salvation (*Salighed*) – just believe (*troe*) it.” (XI 2 A 295 / 3581) These excerpts clearly confirm that he now sees that God is a forgiving God, that the forgiveness of sins is something which the believer can and should simply believe and that it is no longer necessary to conceive this belief as logically self-contradictory or unthinkable.

It is worth noting that Kierkegaard continued to use “paradox” and “absurd” in his journals almost as frequently after this entry as before.¹² It is also worth noting that, while it is often difficult to tell in what precise sense if any he intends any particular use of these words, there is a variety of evidence that it was usually in a quite different sense than before. For example, his first use of “paradox” after this entry describes Christ as such because he is “the compounding of God and a socially insignificant man.” (IX A 57 / 321)¹³ and his first of “absurd” notes that “I, a rational being, must act in the situation where my understanding [says] ‘You can just as well do the one thing as the other, ...’” (X 1 A 66 / 3707) Again, the characteristic vocabulary of these later paradox and absurd sentences

differs from that of both his earlier ones and those in his 11 mainly earlier pseudonymous works much more than their vocabulary differs from that of each other.¹⁴ Finally, this new focus is indicated by the following excerpts and summaries which are also privileged in the sense that, as indicated, they illustrate the most characteristic vocabulary of these sentences and together show that he now understands the paradox primarily as the concept, category or sphere (*Sphære*) of that which cannot be understood and therefore, in his terms, can only be believed. "... it is nothing but superficiality to think that the absurd is not a concept, that all sorts of absurdities are equally at home in the absurd. No, the concept of the absurd is precisely to grasp that it cannot and must not be grasped (*begribes*). This is a negatively determined concept but it is as dialectical as any positive one. The *absurd*, the *paradox*, [emphasis in original] is composed in such a way that reason (*Fornuftten*) has no power to dissolve it in nonsense (*Nonsens*) ... if faith is completely abolished, the whole sphere is dropped, and then reason becomes conceited ... " (X 2 A 354 / 7) This concept cannot become popular (*populairt*) because it does not flatter human vanity and requires humility. (IX A 680 / 3091) Christianity has an inverted dialectic but men picture Christ as "the most superlative superlative (*superlativeste*) in a direct dialectic and hence as directly recognizable." (X 2 A 549 / 4782) "My life, ... is in the sphere of the paradox: the positive is recognizable [only] by the negative." (XI 2 A 21 / 6918) "'Christian' Simplicity ... is for the sake of influencing movement away from speculating (*speculere*) and reasoning etc. and in the direction of existing." (X 3 A 424 / 3095) "The spontaneous believer (*Troende*) in his immediacy is not integrated, ... When he talks to another, he well-meaningly, enthusiastically, presents the absurd as the most superlative of superlatives – and hopes in this way to convince the other *directly* [emphasis in original]. What is lacking is the tension of the dialectical. To understand that for reason¹⁵ it is the absurd ... and then still believe it. (X 2 A 592 / 8) In fact his main concern appears to be to make the simple and obvious point that there is and must be something which the reason because of the nature of its operation cannot understand, a point already made by Kant¹⁶ and familiar in our own day as the insight that a deductive system rests and must rest upon certain primitive postulates which, as the foundation of that system, cannot be defined in terms of it. That he insisted upon identifying such items as paradoxes is surely due to his well known fondness for this idea, his love of dialectic, his contempt for Hegel and perhaps the fact that he was already under the

spell of his own pseudonyms. Similarly, it was presumably their preoccupation with the transition to belief and relative lack of interest in the state of belief as such which prompted him to add the following as an afterthought to the last words quoted: "At the same time it naturally follows that for the believer it is not the absurd." (X 2 A 592 / 8) Presumably he means "...is no longer self-contradictory."

The published writings also show important changes but their evidence is more complicated. The previous high for the relative frequency of the 12 words most clearly concerned with forgiveness of sins in these works¹⁷ is 8.48 in *The Sickness Unto Death* but this rises to 58.17 in *Two Discourses at the Communion on Fridays* and 59.70 in "An Edifying Discourse" in the two years following this entry. Given the sharp drop in interest in this theme in the journals, this suggests that he has begun writing for others about forgiveness only after and perhaps because he has at last succeeded in believing in his own. There is one occurrence of "paradox" in *The Instant* but this is from the last year of his life, is quite out of character and violates his otherwise almost total restriction of this word and "absurd" to his pseudonyms.¹⁸ However, the most telling evidence is the difference between even the pseudonymous works *The Sickness Unto Death* written before this entry and *Practice in Christianity* reportedly written between the middle of August and the beginning of December 1848 and hence shortly after it. Given their respective subject matters, one would expect *Sickness* to show much lower frequencies of the various forms of "paradox" and "absurd" than *Practice* but in fact the former shows a relative frequency of 4.35 for these forms and the latter one of only 0.97. In fact, a closer look at this later work shows something even more startling. The pseudonymous *Practice* does not contain a single occurrence of any form of "absurd" and only eight of "paradox," the last at the end of a very short introduction to the last seven parts of No. II. (*Practice* 121 / 123) This is remarkable given their subject matter as indicated by their titles, the abundance of other words previously strongly associated with "paradox" and their own 20 most characteristic words;¹⁹ indeed, one can only speak of the withdrawal or disappearance of this word, or perhaps these words, and assume that it must be due to a sudden realization that even his pseudonyms can no longer be allowed to advocate belief in the logically self-contradictory represented as such.

The conclusion can be stated very briefly. As a result of his own personal struggles Kierkegaard himself finally came to understand that he could

not and, indeed, did not really believe what he continued to perceive as logically self-contradictory. However before doing so he had produced a number of pseudonymous works advocating faith as, among other things, the capacity to believe just such contradictions represented and experienced as such. So far as these works are concerned we seem then to be faced with the choice of attempting the impossible or heeding his many clues²⁰ and treating them simply as works of poetry and imagination. It is difficult to resist adding that he repeatedly accused his contemporaries of destroying Christianity by confusing its concepts²¹ and that, like the rest of us, he had a keen eye for faults of which he was himself particularly guilty.

Notes

1. Kierkegaard has crossed out these three words in ink and they do not appear in the Hong and Hong translation.
2. In general, references in this study are given in the body of the text. In the case of the journals or *Papirer A* they show the volume number in the Danish second edition, the entry number in that edition and, after the forward slash, the entry number in the *Journals & Papers*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna M. Hong. In the case of the published writings or *Samlede Værker* they show the English title and the page number in the Danish third edition followed by that in the current Hong and Hong translation. As noted later, the translation of this particular passage is my own and this is why I have prefaced the entry number in the Hong and Hong translation by “cf.”
3. I use this term as essentially equivalent to “conceptual” and have chosen it only to avoid any confusion with that word as used in the title of this paper. Note that the apparently neutral term “natural event” is also mythological or conceptual in this sense.
4. This estimate is based mainly on the nature of the contents of this entry and has been supported by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn for whose help concerning this paper I am most grateful.
5. Note the second “etc.” which is missing from the Hong and Hong translation of this passage. I interpret this second occurrence and the inclusion of *both* “a paradox” and “the absurd” as meaning that Kierkegaard is here using these words in the totally general sense of the logically self-contradictory, incoherent, unbelievable, etc. Note that, strictly speaking, this expression commits the category mistake of treating the act of believing as itself “a paradox, ... etc.” but that I disregard this in favour of the deeper conceptual confusion of which it appears to be merely a reflection.
6. Cf. “... perhaps the most wonderful thing about God is that he is able to forget men’s sins.” (III A 101 / 1324)
7. Consider the following. “You shall forget. You *shall* stop thinking of your sin. Not only are you permitted to let it alone, not only do you dare to pray God for permission to forget – no, you shall forget it, for you shall believe that your sins are forgiven.” (IX A 177 / 1217) “Consequently the task is: to forget. And the embattled individuality is a religious person who prays to God for help and assistance – consequently for help and

- assistance to forget. ... to defend myself by forgetting.” (X 2 A 595 / 3447) “ ...that you try to enjoy life without a care, because everything, everything is forgotten, and the more you are able to express this, the more it pleases God. (XI 1 A 66 / 4706)
8. Cf. “It is the Deity’s joy to forgive sins; just as God is almighty in creating out of nothing, so he is almighty in – uncreating something, for to forget, almightily to forget, is indeed to uncreate something.” (XI 2 A 3 / 1224) I confess that I find the notion of God’s uncreating something as confused as that of his forgetting as distinct from his forgiving sins.
 9. These are *Forladelse*, *Forladelsen*, *Syndernes*, *Syndsforldelse*, *Syndsforldelsen*, *Syndsforldelens*, *Syndsforldelse*, *Syndsforldelsen* and *Syndsforldelse*.
 10. The previous high for these words is 4.01 for III A, the volume covering the period of his break with Regine.
 11. These words are identified by counting the frequency of every word in all the relevant sentences containing any of the nine “forgiveness” forms already mentioned and comparing their frequency in these sentences with that in Kierkegaard’s *Papirer A* as a whole in order to identify those which are so much more frequent in the former than the latter that they must be presumed to be very closely connected in his mind with forgiveness at that time.
 12. The relative frequencies of the eleven forms of these two words in these 16 volumes are as follows: 0.00, 0.49, 1.00, 10.73, 3.43, 0.00, 0.00, 1.93, 0.36, 1.34, 3.46, 0.44, 1.12, 0.36, 0.82 and 1.41 or, to give the broader picture, 1.35 in those prior to VIII 1 and 1.24 in those after it. Note that we have excluded this volume from this comparison because of the difficulty of dating many of the entries containing its 17 occurrences of these words.
 13. This entry makes the lowly Christ a paradox, presumably in the logical self-contradiction sense, but Anti Climacus soon after rejects the use of this term in this connection because it involves only a “direct superlative.” (*Practice*, 105 / 104)
 14. The words most characteristic of all the paradox and absurd sentences in the 11 main pseudonymous works and those for these same sentences in the journals of 1838 to 1848 show an index of concordance of 0.295 but those for these same pseudonymous works and the journals of 1849 to 1855 show one of only 0.073 and those of the earlier and later journals show one of only 0.060. The index of concordance is the accepted statistical measure of the degree of similarity of two lists of different lengths.
 15. Note that this use of “reason” is precisely the one which he has already condemned elsewhere: “But people have a rattle-brained, conceited notion about human reason, especially in our age, when one never thinks of a thinker, a reasonable man, but thinks of pure reason and the like, which simply does not exist, since no one, be he professor or what he will, is pure reason.” (X 2 A 354 / 7)
 16. For Kant this was a primarily epistemological insight but Kierkegaard subverts its relevance to his own claim by ascribing it to his theory of “radical evil!” (X 2 A 501 / 3093)
 17. In this case these are *Forladelse*, *Forladelsen*, *Syndernes*, *Syndsforldelse*, *Syndsforldelsen*, *Syndsforldelens*, *Syndsforldelse*, *Syndsforldelsen*, *Syndsforldelens*, *Tilgivelse*, *Tilgivelsen* and *Tilgivelsens*.
 18. The one occurrence of “paradox” in *Two Ages* is used to describe the ages’ estimate of “the considered opinion of a first-class mind” and so cannot be ascribed *simpliciter* to Kierkegaard.
 19. In order of importance these words are as follows: *Meddelelse*, *Meddeleren*, *Ukjendelighed*, *Ukjendeligheden*, *Tegn*, *ligefremme*, *Incognito’et*, *ligefrem*, *GudMennesket*, *Modsigelsens*, *Incognito*, *incognito*, *afskaffer*, *ModsigelsensTegn*, *Hjerternes*, *Meddeler*, *Meddelelsen*, *Forargelsens*, *Tankebestemmelserne* and *ReflexionsBestemmelse*.
 20. I have documented some of these clues in a recent study entitled “Faith in Kierkegaard’s Published Writings” (forthcoming) in which I suggest that he clearly understood the

connection between language and reality well enough to see that events could be either “paradoxical” (i.e. logically self-contradictory) or historical but not both and that his pseudonymous works almost always choose the former option.

21. In his *Papirer A* Kierkegaard uses the expression “confusion of concepts” (*Begrebs-Forvirring*) only three times but always to refer to the debasing of traditional Christian concepts by others. Cf. Pap. IX A 189 / 6220, X 1 A 351 / 6407 and X 2 A 453 / 390. I have not been able to find any comparable expression in the *Samlede Værker* but in these works he uses the four main forms of “confusion” (*Forvirring*) 161 times.