

Kierkegaard, Judge William, and the Idea of Community

by Jeremy Walker

Either Or is one of those rare ethical works which seem to speak concretely to our condition. Its appeal is quite different from the cooler and more rarefied attraction which moral philosophy normally exerts. To read *Either Or* is not only to see a brilliant mind at work on its ideas; it is also to sense a profound experience of life, and a vivid sensibility to life's complexities. This may tempt us to identify *Either Or* as a »philosophical novel« or poem, rather than as a work of ethics.¹ And indeed Kierkegaard's method, here and in other early works, has many resemblances to the novelist's. To philosophise in this manner is, in truth, an art. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to treat Kierkegaard as no more than a novelist. For behind the direct and moving diagnosis of everyday human existence lies a detailed, rigorous, and general scheme of philosophical reasoning, which gives structure and meaning to the seemingly contingent analyses which fill the book.

Serious study of *Either Or* immediately reveals that work's extraordinary resemblance to a central strand of Hegelian moral philosophy. This links Kierkegaard with other Hegelians; the reader who is familiar with the British tradition will naturally think of F. H. Bradley. The ethical position stated by Judge William in the second volume of *Either Or* can easily be described by the phrase »my station and its duties«. There is perhaps an inwardness to Judge William's position which is missing from Bradley's; but they are connected by their explicit relating of ethical themes to psychological and ontological themes. For both men, ethics is concerned as much with the nature of the moral self as with the principles and duties proper to this self. Their concern derives from their common master Hegel. For Hegel's accounts of *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit* are analyses of the development of the human subject as much as expositions of concrete ethical views. Richard Wollheim says that reading Bradley might show contemporary

philosophers that ethical problems are inseparable from psychological ones;² I would add that they are inseparable from metaphysical problems about persons.

This perhaps sounds like a technical issue; but it is more than that. To read Kierkegaard's books, like Hegel's and Bradley's, as pure philosophy would be to miss half their point. Philosophizing for such men was more (but not less) than a detailed and rigorous explication of concepts. It was the reflection of central problems of their age. Their ethics was not just a generalized analysis of the principles of any possible moral point of view; it was a concrete, practical response to the quandaries of their societies. Being philosophers, such men did not often discuss the day-to-day evolution of Germany, Denmark, or Britain. They were more concerned with what they saw beneath the surface; the nature and tendency of their society and age, and the possibilities and difficulties so constituted for individuals in their everyday lives.

It is this diagnostic generalization which gives their ethics its relevance to our condition. For, though much has changed since they wrote, much that is deep and not immediately visible has not. In Hegel's eyes, the crucial problem of modern Western society was how to restore some form of human »community«, the ancient forms of which had been dissolved by the powerful spirits of modernity. Individualism, rationalism, a fetishism of logic and experimental science, a drive towards total liberty and total equality: such ideals seemed to have made it impossible to live a communal and fraternal life. There existed, too, a philosophical justification for these ideals. Starting with Hobbes, and culminating in Kant, the theoretical arguments had further contributed to the dissolution. Paradoxically, even those ethical writings which were aimed at guiding modern man could only deepen his confusion. For at the heart of modern ethics lay the very ideal which summed up man's alienation from his fellows and himself: the ideal of the individual human will as creator of values and well-spring of duties.³

Although this ideal is presented most strikingly in Kant's writings, it is also plainly visible in subjectivist and romantic moralities. Both Hegel and Kierkegaard placed their accounts of *Sittlichkeit* in the context of an attack on all moralities of the creative individual will. It is this fundamental feature of their work which makes them relevant today. For, whatever has superficially changed, the dominance of that ideal has scarcely been ques-

tioned. It controls our ethical theorizing as much as our social and political practice; and it rules Oxford and Harvard as successfully as Paris and Heidelberg. If the nineteenth century philosophers returned to life, they would find much in our culture and its intellectual representatives that was profoundly familiar.

I have so far taken Hegel and Kierkegaard together, as advocates of »community«. But they spoke for very different kinds of community; they spoke in very different senses of »community«. This is the point at which we must recall that Kierkegaard does not always write *in propria persona*. In *Either Or*, Judge William expounds a Hegelian community, although Kierkegaard himself never did so. Judge William's ideal reflects the bourgeois (*bürgerlich*) images of Northern Lutheranism; but Kierkegaard's own ideals were churchly, and perhaps even mystical.

It cannot be too often said that Kierkegaard's own opinions are not those expressed by Judge William; that Kierkegaard directly opposes Judge William in many crucial issues, of which one is the sense of the ideal of community. Judge William wants to create empirical community in place of modern society;⁴ Kierkegaard is quite uninterested in sociology. By »community« he, rather, intends the true Church, the mystical body of the faithful, which cannot be identified with any earthly institution.

Kierkegaard's vision is decisively profounder than Judge William's, or Hegel's. For Hegel can be accused of advocating a backward-looking and wholly negative ideal, namely the restoration in post-revolutionary Europe of forms of life drawn from idealizing Greek and mediaeval societies. This cannot be said of Kierkegaard, who is radical in a way impossible for a Hegelian; for his thought cuts so deep that the whole empirical concept of history becomes irrelevant, and only the existential problem of one's relation, as this individual, with God remains. Over and over again, Kierkegaard repeats that true community cannot be founded by any external or collective action, but only through such individual relations with God.⁵ »Community«, therefore, means the inward and spiritual resultant of isolated acts in which individuals detach themselves from the assumptions of the modern world.

Kierkegaard's divergence from Judge William is now clear. It is integral to Kierkegaard's diagnosis of the spiritual condition of the modern world that it offers the only possible cure for itself. If »levelling« and »the crowd« are the neurosis of modern society, still they impose on us in visible form

a reduction of status which corresponds to our eternal essence. We become human, and equal.⁶ Now this result could not be achieved either by historical Catholicism or by established Protestantism. Paradoxically, it is the very process of secularisation which holds out the only hope for its own overcoming.

Judge William's opinions are likely to find a readier welcome in our time than Kierkegaard's. For we have continued to advance towards the incorporation of moral and religious life within the socio-political; towards identifying morality and religion with public institutions. Even Judge William may appear too inward for contemporary taste; what passed a century ago for a paradigm of bourgeois respectability may now appear over-intense, and exaggerated. Still, there is nothing new in the general preference for Judge William over Kierkegaard. Far from escaping the latter's notice, this preference constituted the major premiss of his indirect critique of modernity. For how can you communicate a message which contradicts everything the public believes, except by presenting it in forms which, though superficial and deceptive, the public can accept as relevant?

Towards the end of *Either Or*, a radical inconsistency becomes visible within Judge William's concept of ethics.⁷ A contradiction becomes visible between the social (secular) and Christian aspects of his vision. This contradiction can be understood in two different ways; either Judge William is unsuccessfully trying to squeeze the spirit of a Christian morality into a Hegelian bottle, or he is unconvincingly expressing a Hegelian ethics in the language of Christianity. Whichever view the reader takes, he will naturally construe Judge William as a hypocrite, insofar as the latter adheres unconsciously to two incompatible ideals. Now Kierkegaard's technique is designed partly to reveal Judge William as a hypocrite. For it is this judgement which implies that Judge William's conceptual scheme is inadequate. However, the reader is now faced by a choice between two possible inferences. One leads him to follow Kierkegaard towards a re-sanctification of individual life; the other leads him to follow Hegel towards a re-secularization of *Sittlichkeit*, by ignoring the Christian language and emphasizing marriage, friendship, »personal relations«, and the public context of morality. *Either Or* cannot itself determine either reading uniquely.

The Christian reading of *Either Or* presents no problems which I can discuss in this study. I shall therefore turn at once to the Hegelian reading.

It is a truism, but true, that the regeneration of community is a concern of the present time. To this concern the second volume of *Either Or* is profoundly relevant. Its message that a truly moral life requires commitment to the concrete situations of every day is a welcome contrast to philosophies of isolation and absurdity. But it does not achieve this contrast by denying the truth in such philosophies; on the contrary, the justification of *Sittlichkeit* is grounded on the reality of despair. By this tactic, Kierkegaard not only serves the truth, but also grips his audience. His psychology of despair is, indeed, a large part of the reason for his contemporary popularity. The modern intellect is, as it has long been, at a pre-ethical stage of feeling and understanding; so that a diagnosis of the human condition as essentially despairing will naturally be received as accurate. Now Judge William argues that the despair which is grounded not in contingent events, but in the very structure of the psyche's relations with external objects, can be finally overcome. All that is needed is an act of commitment to a life essentially involving others. For Kierkegaard himself, of course, this claim is disastrously false. If despair can be overcome at all, it is not in this way.⁸ Yet if we reject Kierkegaard's vision, Judge William's argument appears sound.⁹

More important, Judge William offers a concrete account of the life which involves others. He does not just point to »community«; he offers a precise judgement of its essential nature. In doing so, he enables us to re-integrate the past and the present. Here Judge William distinguishes himself from the tedious propagandists for the ways of our ancestors (*et hoc genus omne*) whose words are so loud and so ineffectual. For, unlike them, he explicitly derives his ideals from a philosophical concept of the human self. Hence the ideals of marriage, friendship, and work cease to float vainly in the air, and receive a firm foundation in metaphysics. Thus Kierkegaard may attract the attention of readers who are unmoved by mere conservatism. For he answers their tacit appeal for justification rather than mere reminiscence.

I said earlier that both Hegel and Kierkegaard advanced their accounts of *Sittlichkeit* as dialectical responses to the modern »existentialist« moralities. In Hegel, the dialectic emerges in the demonstration that the concepts which are used in expressing and justifying »existentialism« are incoherent until developed into forms which express and justify the ethics of *Sittlichkeit*. Of these concepts the central one is freedom; that is, choice. Kierkegaard partly

imitates Hegel. For Judge William shows »the young man« that the very concepts employed by the latter to explicate his aestheticism can be coherently grasped only when developed into the forms they take in Judge William's moral vision. *Either Or* is, among other things, a Hegelian deduction of marriage, friendship, and vocation from choice.

I cannot here attempt to discuss the soundness of this project. The crucial point is that Kierkegaard believed that the modern moral outlook would collapse under philosophical pressure; and that such pressure would create, even if only as an intermediate result, an ethics of *Sittlichkeit*. (But I suggested earlier that further pressure will destroy this position too). Is Kierkegaard right? I do not know; and even if I thought that I knew, I would hesitate before answering. For answering this question goes beyond solving an intellectual problem. It requires the reader to take a stand on his relation to the deepest beliefs and values of his world.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Louis Mackey's *Kierkegaard: A kind of Poet*.
2. See his Introduction to Bradley's *Ethical Studies*, Oxford, 1962.
3. See Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*.
4. For the meaning of these two ideas, see Tönnies' *Community and Society*.
5. See, for example, *Works of Love*.
6. See *The Present Age*.
7. This inconsistency is embodied in the concept of the *extraordinarius*.
8. *The Sickness Unto Death* shows what Kierkegaard thought.
9. Consider, for example, the related and similar arguments in the work of Carl Rogers.