

Kierkegaard and Optical Linguistics

by JAMES H. CHARLESWORTH

In Søren Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* there are numerous deposits of a profound philosophy of language. The various types of language he calls mediums, and the mediums he appears to be most interested in are verbal expressions and music. But, it appears to me, there is another medium which lies hidden in his written words. Hidden, both because it is scattered throughout the book, and because it is never called a medium. My impression is that this other medium is the language of the eyes.¹ At this initial point in the essay we are confronted by many questions, but because of the imposed limitations we must concentrate upon the two most important: Is there a medium of the eyes? How is it sufficiently different from the many gestures of speech to be called a medium? Let us now turn our attention to these questions using Kierkegaard's comments as our guide.

It appears that Kierkegaard thought there was a medium of the eye, even if as in the sense of the medium of music it is "only in a certain sense" (I, 66).² It seems that he thought the eye could express power, for example Johannes' side glance, *actiones in distans*, conveyed irresistible power (I, 307). Johannes, "the imperial voluptuary," and Don Juan's eyes are the same, in the sense that when their eyes blaze they demand, and when they flash they terrify (I, 101, 190).³

¹ Kierkegaard uses the noun "eye" three different ways in his *Either/Or*: to refer to the passive act of receiving impressions, as metaphorical expressions, and in the active sense of expressing something. In this essay we are only interested in this third meaning.

² All pagination refers to the Anchor Book edition of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*.

³ It is with caution that Don Juan is included in this list since Kierkegaard would insist that he must be heard and not seen. This example points out one important difference between the medium of music and the medium of the eye: the former only points out, but the latter often displays.

The expressions of the eye, *concupiscentia oculorum*, can be dangerous. Cordelia's eyes are dangerous for Johannes: "Her eyes . . . are hidden behind lids armed with silken fringes which curve up like hooks, dangerous to whoever meets her glance." (I, 312) It is important to note that while these words are ascribed to the seducer (Johannes), it is clear he has not looked into Cordelia's eyes because then he would be the one who is conquered. Moreover, this effect is not limited to the opposite sex, for Johannes could cause Edward to feel he had been thrown over backward just by "looking daggers at him" (I, 365). And he did. Even social status avails not against the disarming power of the "wild glance," since Nero, the Roman Emperor who wishes to terrify, may be afraid of the glance of the lowest slave (II, 191). In summation, Kierkegaard writes that there is no weapon, "so sharp, so penetrating, so flashing in action, and hence so deceptive as the eye." (I, 314) From the foregoing analysis it appears that Kierkegaard thought the eye could both express and evoke.

Analysis also reveals that he thought the eye could convey love: "Edward . . . is dead in love with her. To see that one needs only half an eye, when one looks at his two eyes." (I, 342) The verb "to look" in the preceding quotation needs amplification. Kierkegaard uses the verb "to see" to denote the passive activity of the eye receiving impressions from "out there". By the verb "to look," however, he denotes the active power of the eye to emit thoughts and feelings. Both "A" and "B" recognize this dual function of the eye, e. g. its ability both to recognize "signs" and to be a "sign" itself.

In the three preceding paragraphs we have observed that the eye when seen can express thoughts and feelings. Now the question must be asked if the eye can express itself in some concrete form which can be discerned without another eye. The answer is yes. Tears are organically and meaningfully connected to the eye, and can be understood by a Homer, a Beethoven, or a Helen Keller. Kierkegaard suggests that tears can express anger, hate, and sorrow (I, 194), or laughter (I, 138, 241). Consequently, one observes that "there is a sense in tears" (II, 241). But there is another, more perplexing way in which the eye does communicate without being seen. Kierkegaard captures this evocative quality of the eye when he writes that Cordelia could feel the seducer "looking" at her: "She does not see that I am looking at

her, she feels it through her whole body.” (I, 361) This second, unseen, evoking function of the eye is more difficult to comprehend and leads one to wonder how the eye could cause such an effect. And yet one’s experience suggests that he has felt another’s eyes looking. However, reason argues that such experiences should be explained as caused by some internal, emotional conflict. The medieval analysis of vision, that the eye extended to objects outside, would explain this phenomenon; but modern science has taught us to laugh at such a concept. Perhaps it is not so important to analyze precisely how the eye performs this function as it is to recognize that we do occasionally experience this phenomenon.

Now let us turn our examination to the second question posited in the introductory paragraph. Admittedly, most people would argue that the action of the eye is but another gesture. In one sense they are correct in that the eye like the hand often accentuates the mood of the preceding sentence.⁴ On the other hand however, after spoken words have exhausted themselves the eye often hits the mark intended, as when a leprously emaciated Hindu looks into your eyes. There is meaning. And all the words written to describe suffering do not come as close to the essence of this concept as does that one look. Wasn’t Kierkegaard correct when he wrote: “Behind the eye lies the soul as a gross darkness” (II, 190)?

We sum up the above impressions with the following suggestions. While we must be cautious not to consider the medium of the eye as a language qua language, nevertheless, it fulfills two of the three functions of a language. It can *express* thoughts, feelings, and attitudes, and *evoke* reactions in the receiver, but it cannot *designate* its reference (as with scientific generalizations). The grammar of this medium seems to have four discernible “signs”; and, therefore, it has a kind of morphology. A “look” can be given through four main somatic articulations, or combinations thereof. The *angle* of the look can be either direct or oblique (Kierkegaard suggests that the upward glance is the most dangerous). It can be *focused* either before, at, or beyond the

⁴ It should be observed that as the pictograph historically preceded alphabetic language, so the eye often betrays a change which is later made conscious and expressed via words: “A change is taking place, and it is taking place in her. . . Her glance betrays this immediately.” (I, 395) On the other hand, it appears that the medium of the eye has a close relationship with silence, since both are often the fourth letter in a three letter word, thereby giving meaning to the totality.

observer (Kierkegaard wrote that Cordelia's "glance travels beyond that which appears immediately before it." (I, 395) The *aperture* of the "look" can vary from almost closed to stretched open, and the *movement* of the eye can vary in direction and speed. The syntax of the look, or the arrangement of these four "signs," has a direct bearing upon what is expressed or evoked. The ultimate meaning, however, is dependent upon time, e. g. the suddenness of the look, its duration, and its juxtaposition with the past and future.

In conclusion, it seems that any future discussion upon the philosophy of language should include consideration of the medium of the eye. A phenomenology of language, broadly defined as man's mode of uniting himself with an interlocutor through expressions, should be sensitive to this phenomenon of the eye. We dare not forget that words are far more profound and meaningful than an articulate series of sounds or the records of a lexicographer.