

Kierkegaard: Indirect Communication and Ignorant Knowledge

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Any satisfying attempt to come to grips with the writings of Søren Kierkegaard cannot fail to appreciate the centrality of indirect communication for his own understanding of his authorial enterprise. In this dissertation, I make the case that Kierkegaard's significance has been misunderstood, due in large part to the fact that commentators have not properly appreciated his strategy of indirect communication. The portrait of Kierkegaard that emerges here is in many ways radically different from the image, that many of us are accustomed to, of Kierkegaard as the champion of an irrational ethical choice and the advocate an irrational religious leap. On such a standard reading of Kierkegaard's ethical theory, he is, naturally enough, portrayed as an opponent of Kant. According to such a story, while Kant seeks to ground ethics in human reason, Kierkegaard insists that ethics can find its basis only in the subjective choice of the individual. On my reading, Kierkegaard's ethical thought turns out to be much closer to that of Kant: What Kant and Kierkegaard have in common is not that they are trying to advance a novel ethical view, but rather that they are trying to articulate a conception of the ethical that we all can't help but have. Kant himself proclaims that he would never “want to introduce a new principle of all morality and, as it were, first invent it. . . as if, before him, the world had been ignorant of what duty is. . . .”¹ Likewise with Kierkegaard's religious thought, commentators often try to identify what is distinctive about his contribution to philosophy of religion by attempting to isolate his distinctive religious views, such as the thought that the religious life must involve a completely subjective and irrational “leap of faith.” I will argue that this approach too can be misleading, since the idea that faith in Christianity as a revealed religion cannot be arrived at merely through an exercise of reason but requires God's own revelation is not a radical or unorthodox claim. On the contrary, Kierkegaard's religious views hardly extend beyond what any catechized child in Denmark at the time would be expected to know. But, one might wonder, what is left that makes Kierkegaard of interest if he is stripped of the distinctive views that are ordinarily attributed to him?

This dissertation is an extended argument that Kierkegaard should be of interest to us not primarily because he said something that differs from what philosophers who came before had said. Rather, the most compelling aspect of his thought has to do with his recognition of the difficulties involved in grasping and communicating seemingly simple ethical and religious truths. Certain truths—that I am mortal and do not know when I may die, that my ethical life is a matter of the choices I make,

¹ Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5:8, note.

that if I am to know the content of Christianity at all it must be revealed to me by God—are easy enough to state. But what is involved in knowing these? How can I tell if, in these matters, someone else agrees with me? Is it enough for that person to be willing to paraphrase what I have said? One of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms, Johannes Climacus, writes that,

When one person states something and another acknowledges the same thing verbatim, they are assumed to be in agreement and to have understood each other. Yet because the one making the statement is unaware of the duplexity [*Dobbelthed*] of thought existence. . . he has no intimation that this kind of agreement can be the greatest misunderstanding. . . .²

Climacus' suggestion is that when it comes to certain ethical and religious (what he calls “subjective”) truths, one would do well to pay attention to how it is that a person's way of expressing his knowledge relates to what it is that the person is supposed to know. I make the case that Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings are most interesting when we see these as engaging with a figure whom I call the ignorant knower. As a first approximation, the ignorant knower has these three features: (1) he takes himself to know something relevant to how he ought to live, (2) he lives, however, *as if* he were ignorant of this, and yet (3) he manages to remain unaware of this disconnect between what it is that he purports to know and how he goes on with this knowledge. I argue that we should understand Kierkegaard's strategies of indirect communication in the pseudonymous authorship in light of this figure and what would be required to communicate with him successfully about his problem.

In Chapters Two and Three, I outline my novel interpretation of Kierkegaard's conception of indirect communication. These chapters take as their central text a set of Kierkegaard's lecture notes on indirect communication. I argue that for Kierkegaard, indirect communication is any sort of communication that is designed to impart a capability. I make the case that the indirection of such communication need not lie in the fact that the communicator doesn't “come right out and say what he means.” Rather, the indirection has to do with the way in which the recipient of the communication cannot demonstrate that the communication is a success by directly paraphrasing what has been said to him. Chapter Two develops this account of indirect communication with respect to the communication of ordinary capabilities such as soldiering and gymnastics. (Kierkegaard calls these esthetic capabilities.) Chapter Three turns to the treatment of ethical and religious capability developed in the lecture notes and argues that we can best understand such communication in light of the figure of the

² Climacus, Johannes [Søren Kierkegaard], *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 74 (hereafter *CUP*).

ignorant knower.

Chapters Four and Five each develop an interpretation of a particular Kierkegaardian text, *Either/Or* and *Philosophical Fragments* respectively, in light of the theory of indirect communication put forward in Chapters Two and Three. In each case I argue that the work is best understood as an indirect communication because it aims to impart to its reader a capability and that the intended audience is a reader who is an ignorant knower. These books, I argue, are not designed to convince the reader that she is ignorant or in error, but to bring about a practical awareness of the ways in which she is failing to appropriate what it is that she takes herself to know.

My approach to these pseudonymous works differs from the two main methodologies currently on offer. We can divide the commentators of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous texts into three main groups: (1) There are those who take the form of Kierkegaard's works to be effectively irrelevant to what he can teach us. This approach takes the pseudonymous authors to be mere mouthpieces for Kierkegaard himself, and then attempts to construct a coherent view from the various voices and perspectives. (2) There are those who accord an importance to the form of Kierkegaard's work that is extrinsic to the content of its teaching. The first step of this approach is to attribute a view to Kierkegaard that he could have conveyed to his readers in a more direct way. The second step is to explain why it was advantageous for him to convey this content in the somewhat unusual way that he did. If the importance of Kierkegaard's way of writing is extrinsic to the content he wishes to convey, then it is of course possible to imagine any number of justifications for why he might write something other than a treatise (e.g., to shield himself from censure by the authorities or by some other group he feared; to engage the reader's emotions and thereby stand a better chance of persuading him; to offer an illustration of the point he wants to convince his reader of; to create works which will be beautiful in addition to being philosophically significant; to hide his message from some readers whom he deems unworthy and to reveal it to others who know the secret key to interpreting it). What all such readings of his work have in common is that, although the form of the work is accorded some purpose, it nevertheless remains *inessential* to the work's teaching. (3) There are those who accord an importance to the form of Kierkegaard's work that is intrinsic to the content of its teaching. To my mind, the third approach is obviously the most interesting and ambitious of the three. The difficulty lies not so much in making it attractive as in rendering it intelligible and plausible. In addition, the third approach would appear to have the further advantage of being able to make sense of a great many things that Kierkegaard himself says about the character of his works. In effect, this dissertation will present an

extended argument for this third approach.

According to the third approach, which I'll be pursuing in this dissertation, the form of Kierkegaard's work has an intrinsic relation to its content. If form and content are inextricably linked then the point of the work cannot be to argue for some truth-evaluable philosophical thesis, a thesis that Kierkegaard could have chosen to express as a straightforward proposition, but for some reason refrained from so expressing. For if the content of some view *can* be expressed as a straightforward proposition, then, *ipso facto*, there isn't anything about that content which *essentially* requires it to be expressed in the peculiar form that many of Kierkegaard's works display. If the form and content of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous corpus are intrinsically linked, then the first two approaches share the mistaken assumption that we can extract a straightforward philosophical thesis from those works. That the aim of these works is not to convince the reader of some claim is, I take it, what Kierkegaard means when he writes of them that "their importance (whatever that may become *actually*) unconditionally does not consist in making any new proposal, some unheard-of discovery, or in founding a new party and wanting to go further. . . ." (*CUP*, 629)

So far I have given a schema for the sort of view that I will develop concerning the relationship of the form and content of Kierkegaard's works. What remains to be seen is how the form of these works can have an intrinsic relation to their content. Before turning to that task, I want to discuss an additional danger in reading Kierkegaard, one that leads me to impose a further constraint on my interpretation of indirect communication . This further danger arises as soon as we find ourselves drawn to propose that Kierkegaard was concerned to communicate a kind of content that cannot be communicated directly. The danger is that in saying something of this form, we take ourselves to have thereby saddled Kierkegaard with the burden, at once so heavy and so light, of attempting to communicate an ineffable content. In taking this to be a danger to be avoided in a successful account of Kierkegaard's indirect communication, I am following James Conant's reading of the Postscript. Conant criticizes those commentators who seem to recognize "the possibility of speech that lacks sense while still being able to convey volumes."³ One of the ways that Conant characterizes these commentators is as wanting to draw a distinction between "a work that revokes itself and leaves the reader empty-handed and one that has been written precisely in order to be revoked and hence leaves in its wake a distilled precipitate of ineffable truth."⁴ Conant thinks that there is no such distinction to be drawn. Although these commentators are particularly concerned to explain the revocation that occurs at

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid*, 252.

the end of the Postscript, one might have a similar worry about the understanding of indirect communication that I will be developing. If I explain Kierkegaard's conception of indirect communication by invoking a kind of content which cannot be expressed directly, allowing for the possibility of a truth that cannot be directly expressed, have I not thereby committed Kierkegaard to the view that there is a kind of ineffable truth which it is the aim of his authorship to communicate? I accept Conant's claim that it would be unsatisfactory to attribute to Kierkegaard the ambition to communicate ineffable truth and adopt as a constraint on my reading of Kierkegaard that we not attribute to him this ambition.

At this point, I've declared my allegiance to two constraints which it is not obvious can both be satisfied. If, on the one hand, there is no communication directly expressed through language (that language cannot be used directly to state the content of the communication because the form of the communication is essential) and, on the other, there is no ineffable truth beyond language that the communication is trying to get us to glimpse, in what sense do these works constitute a communication at all?

These then are the Scylla and Charybdis this dissertation will be steering between: on the one side, I will avoid giving an account of the content of indirect communication such that it turns out to be an ineffable truth, and on the other avoid the looming inability to explain in what sense indirect communication is a communication at all. The key to resolving this difficulty, I will suggest, is thinking about indirect communication in connection with communicating a capability. Once we expand our notion of communication so that it is able to include instances of communicating a capability, we are in a position to see that direct communication and indirect communication of ineffable truths do not here exhaust the space of possibilities for communication. Precisely because of the sort of content that it is, a capability is not an apt candidate to be an ineffable content. This is not to deny that in the end we might be able to find a proper sense for expressions such as the following: "the content of an indirect communication is the sort of thing can't be put into words." First, I will develop the idea that, for Kierkegaard, the content of any indirect communication is a capability (Chapter Two). Then I will present the figure of the ignorant knower (Chapter Three) and make the case that the particular ability that Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works are designed to communicate is a practical awareness of the problem of ignorant knowledge (Chapters Four and Five).

So far my sketch of the possibilities for conceptualizing the relationship between the form and content of Kierkegaard's works has been largely with reference to his pseudonymous authorship, since

pseudonymity is an instance of a Kierkegaardian strategy of indirection. I have then outlined the way in which these reflections on Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship develop some constraints on a general account of indirect communication. Once we get the entire picture here into view, I'll be concerned to show that these pseudonymous texts constitute, for Kierkegaard, merely one species of the broader genus of forms of communication that he terms "indirect".

Given that "indirect communication" is clearly used by Kierkegaard as a term of art, it is surprising that scholars proceed so often without stopping to ask what is meant by it. The phrase is certainly suggestive: we might imagine that if someone communicates directly he comes right out and says what he means while if he communicates indirectly, well, he is somehow more coy. But this isn't to imagine anything very distinct. Indirect communication has been understood to mean a great many thing by Kierkegaard's various commentators. To provide a brief, but not exhaustive list, here are some of the things it has been taken to mean: the employment of a nom de plume, the trafficking in poetic language or metaphor, a strategy of irony and/or humor, a method of showing rather than saying, and a means of communicating non-propositional content.⁵ Antony Aumann suggests that we can "organize Kierkegaard's comments concerning indirect communication" by seeing them as providing "two distinct but related accounts."⁶ The first account of indirect communication has to do with the "amount of guidance the communicator provides for his audience" and the second has to do with "the rhetorical style of the communication."⁷ I will be offering an alternative conception of Kierkegaardian indirect communication.

The key point for the understanding of indirect communication that I advance here is that the indirection of the communication does not lie exclusively in some fact about the stance of the communicator—such as, perhaps, the way in which the communicator fails to directly state or refrains from directly stating what it is that he has to say. Rather, in order to understand the indirection of such communication, we must also have in view the recipient of the communication. Nevertheless, a proper account of the nature of the indirection cannot succeed if it focuses exclusively on the character of the recipient. Our focus must be on the character of the nexus that obtains between the communicator and the recipient of the communication.

To understand what makes a communication "indirect" in the relevant sense, we need to

5 For a survey of the ways in which recent scholars have understood indirect communication see: Tony Aumann. "Kierkegaard on the Need for Indirect Communication" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2008), 2-3, Proquest (AAT 3331278).

6 Aumann, "Kierkegaard on the Need for Indirect Communication," 30.

7 Ibid., 30.

understand how to employ the “direct/indirect” contrast, and thus also, to understand, at the same time, what makes a communication “direct” in the relevant sense. In Chapter One, I argue that the directness of direct communication lies in the fact that direct communication conforms to what I call the direct reproduction criterion of understanding. On the direct reproduction criterion of understanding, it is possible (if the circumstances are right) for the recipient of a communication to demonstrate that he has understood it by simply directly paraphrasing what has been said to him.⁸ I argue that the indirection of indirect communication lies in its failure to conform to this criterion for the success of a direct communication. The indirection of indirect communication, therefore, lies, in the first instance, in the fact that the recipient cannot demonstrate that the communication has been a success by simply directly paraphrasing what has been said to him. This does not yet furnish us with a positive criterion of wherein the success of an indirect communication lies, but it at least provides us with a negative criterion—a criterion for what an indirect communication must not be if it is to count as indirect. Any construal of the relation of the form of an indirect communication to its content that takes that relation to be merely extrinsic already runs afoul of this negative criterion.

This understanding of indirect communication allows us to see why the rhetorical features of a text that are ordinarily understood to constitute its indirection (e.g. pseudonymity or metaphor) can be matters of indirect communication. Pseudonymity, for instance, can function as part of an indirect communication when the aim of using such a device is to deter the recipient of the communication from thinking that he can demonstrate that he has understood it by simply paraphrasing what is said. In addition, however, the conception of indirect communication that I advance here is broad enough that it will include many sorts of communication that don't exhibit rhetorical features that are ordinarily thought of as indirect. Thus, for example, in Chapter Two, I will argue that, according to Kierkegaard, teaching someone how to do something can be a matter of indirect communication. There I discuss at length the case of a swimming instructor who may issue commands such as "Kick your legs at surface level!" I will argue that these sorts of instructions can constitute an indirect communication on the part of the swimming instructor, even though he comes right out and says just what he means. The indirection doesn't here lie in any coyness on the part of the instructor, but rather in the fact that the pupil has in no way indicated that the communication, qua the communication of a capability, is a success simply by offering a faithful paraphrase of the instructions of the coach. In this dissertation, I will be focusing on the ways in which Kierkegaard's pseudonymous texts function as cases of indirect

⁸ This feature of direct communication is adapted from James Conant's unpublished paper "A Contradiction between Form and Content."

communication. It should be obvious, however, that if my broader argument concerning Kierkegaard's notion of indirect communication is successful, then the question of the indirection of Kierkegaard's non-pseudonymous works will need to be assessed in light of these findings. That these works are signed by Kierkegaard himself or that they seem superficially to exhibit a more direct form will no longer constitute sufficient evidence to support the conclusion that they are intended as cases of direct communication in Kierkegaard's sense.

The direct reproduction criterion of understanding is a standard for assessing the degree of success or failure of communications of a certain sort—those that Kierkegaard calls direct communications. It is, of course, true of direct communications, as it is of all human performances, that they can fail. Thus an attempt to communicate directly may end in a failure to impart to the recipient of the communication an understanding of what was communicated. If one takes indirect communication to constitute cases of failure of direct communication in this sense, thereby placing them at one extreme end of a spectrum of degrees of failure or success relative to a single standard of assessment, then one has not drawn the distinction between direct and indirect communications in a deep enough way. For Kierkegaard, the difference between direct and indirect communication is a difference of category, not a difference of degree along a spectrum between success and failure of a single sort. An indirect communication is, due to the character of the content one seeks to communicate, such that the direct reproduction criterion of understanding does not apply to it. The inapplicability of the direct reproduction criterion of understanding is, in this sense, a negative criterion for indirect communication.

In Chapter Two, I use examples of teaching someone how to do something to develop a positive account of what is taking place when a communication is of such a sort that this criterion no longer applies to it. This positive account turns critically on the thought that special demands are placed on a communication whose aim is to communicate a capability. This thought forms the basis for my understanding of the way in which the content involved in indirect communication, on the one hand, “cannot be put into words” while, on the other hand, this observation about the content in no way implies that the content in question must be an “ineffable truth.” My overall ambition in Chapter Two is to demystify Kierkegaard's understanding of indirect communication and to provide a more unified account of his remarks on this topic than are currently on offer.

Broadly speaking then, this is the nature of the positive account which will be provided in what follows in order to fill in the schema adumbrated through my, until now, largely negative account of

indirect communication offered in the previous pages. According to this account, the form of a work is intrinsically related to its content, if the form of the communication is indirect in the proper sense, and we are able to understand how the communication can be indirect in this sense through the way in which the the special sort of content that it communicates is that of a capability.

When it comes to ethics and religion, indirect communication is a matter of training a person to live in these ways. We could imagine the indirect communicator in the ethical case to be a sort of life-coach and in the religious case to be a sort of spiritual guru.

This putatively natural enough extension of the ideas of Chapter Two, however, is, importantly, *not* the story that I go on to tell in Chapter Three concerning Kierkegaard's notion of ethical and religious indirect communication. Although it is true that those who are failing to lead ethical or religious lives are, for Kierkegaard, in need of some form of training—and thus, in this sense, are fit candidates for indirect communication—Kierkegaard holds views about both the ethical and the religious life that prevent him from thinking that one adult person can straightforwardly “train” another how to live in these ways. This is true for one reason in the case of the ethical life and true for another reason in the case of the religious life. In the case of ethics, this has to do with Kierkegaard's distinctive understanding of the of the relation between what it is to be human and what it is to possess the capacity to live ethically. Here, too, these two things for Kierkegaard cannot be extrinsically related to one another. We shall see that for Kierkegaard, to interpret a person's failure to live ethically as a matter of simply lacking a particular skill (in just the way that an ordinary human being who does not know how to swim simply lacks a particular skill) is already to situate that person irretrievably outside of the realm of the ethical altogether. In the case of living religiously, Kierkegaard's paradigm of the religious life is a Christian life. Christianity is a revealed religion that places an enormous importance on the figure of Jesus as the teacher who is himself God's revelation. The capability involved in living a religious life, a life of faith that has been redeemed from sin, is not a capability that any ordinary adult is in a position to impart to another. In fact, for Kierkegaard, this capability can only be imparted by God himself.

Given Kierkegaard's conception of what is involved in living an ethical or a religious life, the topic of what it would mean to say of someone that she is able or unable to lead such a life—along with the related topic of what it would mean to say of her that she stands in this regard in need of practical training—requires delicate handling. There may be one sense in which she is already capable of living ethically or religiously and another sense in which she is not.

In order to see why this is the case—and thereby to better understand the sort of failure that Kierkegaard thinks can arise in the forms of practical knowledge required to lead an ethical or religious life—I introduce what I call the figure of the ignorant knower. The ignorant knower is someone who takes himself already to know what it is that one would be inclined to want to communicate to him. To draw on the examples I develop in Chapters Four and Five: the ethical ignorant knower may be willing to agree that his own ethical life is a matter of his ongoing activities of choice; and the religious ignorant knower may be willing to agree that Christianity is a revealed religion such that the Teacher himself is the teaching. But what it is that the ignorant knower claims to know fails to be efficacious in his life. He lives his life, we could say, in a practical denial of the very truths that he takes himself to affirm theoretically. In the most manifestly absurd cases of ignorant knowledge with which Kierkegaard presents us—cases that are meant to help us identify the less manifest absurdity involved in more pedestrian cases of ignorant knowledge—the way in which the person goes about attempting to affirm the truth at issue itself serves as a practical demonstration that he has not grasped that very truth.

I conclude the dissertation by discussing the way in which a proper understanding of indirect communication and ignorant knowledge sheds new light on Kierkegaard's relationship to traditional ethical theories such as those of Aristotle and Kant. Ignorant knowledge occupies Kierkegaard not because he wants to put forward a theory of it, but because he wants the possibility of this problem itself to become for his reader *practical* rather than merely theoretical knowledge. Kierkegaard's worry then, is that the precondition for engaging in ethical reflection like that of Aristotle and Kant has been lost under the conditions of science and scholarship, and that when a practical awareness of the problem of ignorant knowledge vanishes, so does the topic of ethics itself—ongoing ethical reflection capable of shaping the life of the thinker. Kierkegaard's project is, then, importantly different from that of Aristotle and Kant. His works, I conclude, are designed to resist the reader's ordinary (and distorted) way of taking up their content, and thereby to bring to his attention that his problem is not straightforwardly with what he purports to know, but with the way he has been knowing it.