

IS AN EXISTENTIAL SYSTEM POSSIBLE?

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In one of his most infamous tirades against philosophical metaphysics, especially of the Hegelian variety, Søren Kierkegaard maintained in *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that an existential system was impossible, even though a logical system was possible.¹ I propose to examine the philosophical meaning and alleged justification of these claims as well as their theological significance.

1. The meanings of "system," "logic," and "existence"

It is impossible to understand what Kierkegaard meant by the claim that an existential system is impossible without being clear about what he meant by "system". He treated "system" as inevitably involving "finality" or "completeness," and thus allowed only closed systems to count as systems. We are told that "System and finality are pretty much one and the same, so much so that if the system is not finished, there is no system. ... A system which is not quite finished is an hypothesis; while on the other hand to speak of a half-finished system is nonsense."² This equating of system with completeness or finality will be further illustrated in later citations. Given this meaning of "system," Kierkegaard appears to have claimed that a logical system can be final or complete, whereas an existential system cannot be. This still leaves us wondering about the meaning of "logic" and "existence."

Since Hegel was the antagonist, it is both initially and, on examination, plausible that Kierkegaard was using "logic" in some peculiarly Hegelian sense. For Hegel, oddly enough, "logic" and "metaphysics" were synonyms. In the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Hegel informed us that "Logic as the logic of speculative philosophy replaces what used to be called metaphysics."³ We should thus expect Kierkegaard's assertion that "A logical system is possible" to mean that a metaphysical theory that is complete with respect to its beginning and ending is possible. Even here Kierkegaard failed to keep track of the distinction between temporal and epistemological termini, especially in his complaint that Hegel had no way of beginning immediately with immediacy. Contrary to our expectations,

Kierkegaard actually argued, against Hegel, that his "Absolute System" did not have an absolute or presuppositionless beginning point.⁴ Neither did it have any finality of outcome since, like all other human attempts at metaphysical speculation, it was at best only an unfinished "persistent striving" for the truth, which cannot properly be called a finished "system."⁵ Thus, in developing the theme "A logical system is possible,"⁶ Kierkegaard actually argued that a logical (or metaphysical) system is not possible after all!

The situation is further complicated by the fact that it is unclear whether Kierkegaard wished to affirm (or deny!) that a conceptual metaphysical *theory* could be final or complete, or whether *reality*, i.e. the objective referent of such a theory, could be final or complete. The importance of this double meaning for "logical or metaphysical system" emerges when we ask what Kierkegaard meant by "existence" and why he thought that an existential system was not possible.

Kierkegaard treated "existence" and "becoming" as synonyms, and when he denied that an existential system is possible he may have been denying either that a conceptual *theory* about existence or becoming could be final or complete, and/or that the *reality* or objective referent of a possible theory of becoming could be final or complete. Unfortunately, he did not always keep track of this vital distinction. That he equated "existence" and "becoming" may be amply illustrated:

"Since the existing subject is occupied in existing . . . it follows that he is in process of becoming."⁷

". . . existence is a constant process of becoming. . ."⁸

"The existing subject is eternal, but *qua* existing temporal."⁹

"An existing individual is constantly in process of becoming; the actual existing subjective thinker constantly reproduces this existential situation in his thoughts, and translates all his thinking into terms of process."¹⁰

"Existence itself, the act of existing, is a striving . . ."¹¹

In some contexts, Kierkegaard was clearly aware of the difference between the claim that a metaphysical theory can be a system, i.e. that thinking can be a system, and the claim that the objective referent of such a theory can be a system, i.e. that reality is a system. For example, in his discussion of the concept of "objective truth" as "the conformity of being with thought,"¹² the distinction between intensions and extensions, i.e. between concepts and their referents, was clear enough. Kierkegaard's primary argument for the impossibility of a system of existence was that existence is not final or complete; yet there is an ambiguity here that generates much of Kierkegaard's characteristic confusion. Did he mean that our human thinking about reality can never be final or complete, or did he mean that reality itself could never be final or complete? He affirmed *both* in his discussion of the notion of truth as the conformity of thought and being. The notion of "being" needs defining, he justifiably maintained:

If being . . . is understood as empirical being, truth is at once transformed into a *desideratum*, and everything must be understood in terms of becoming; for *the empirical object is unfinished* and the existing cognitive spirit is itself in process of becoming. Thus the *truth becomes an approximation* whose beginning cannot be posited absolutely, precisely because the conclusion is lacking, the effect of which is retroactive.¹³

When the domain of objective metaphysics turns out to be becoming, i.e. existence, there can be no finished *system* of objective truth about existence, Kierkegaard believed, for one or both of the following reasons. Existence is inherently unfinished, and/or human metaphysical theories about existence are inherently unfinished. Now for the theological complications.

2. Existence and God outside of time

Unfortunately, Kierkegaard's classical conception of God completely undermined his own metaphysical claim that existence or becoming is inherently unfinished. His final view was that it *appears* to be only to us. With an exception to be noted later, Kierkegaard generally subscribed to the classical concept of God as totally complete and unchanging in his timeless eternity, which included all time all at once. No doubt Kierkegaard meant many things by "eternal,"¹⁴ just as most of his key concepts have multiple meanings. But in his explanation of the claim that existence (becoming) is not a system, it is clear enough that eternity was being conceived as timeless completeness. God was said to be "he who is outside of existence and yet in existence, who is in his eternity forever complete, and yet includes all existence within himself."¹⁵ Here the completeness and unchangeableness of God applies not merely to his moral righteousness and dependability but to his inclusion of all existence, all becoming, within himself in a timeless present. Kierkegaard's classical concept of the eternity of God as including all time all at once was clearly expressed as follows in his sermon on "The Unchangeableness of God" from his *Edifying Discourses*:

No, in a manner eternally unchanged, everything is for God eternally present, always equally before Him . . . For the unchangeable clearness of God is the reckoning, complete to the last detail, preserved by Him who is eternally unchangeable, and who has forgotten nothing of the things I have forgotten, and who does not, as I do, remember some things otherwise than they really were.¹⁶

In light of these classical theological doctrines, it is not surprising that Kierkegaard's claim that an existential system is impossible immediately received this qualification:

An existential system cannot be formulated. Does this mean that no such system exists? By no means; nor is this implied in our assertion. Reality is itself a system — for God; but it cannot be a system for any existing spirit. System and finality correspond to one another, but existence is precisely the opposite of finality.¹⁷

Kierkegaard was unaware of the contradictions inherent in these claims. Just as in his hands the thesis that a logical system is possible turned into the thesis that such is impossible, so the thesis that an existential system is impossible turned into the thesis that an existential system is possible. If something is real, it is possible; and for God all existence is real, final and systematized, he believed. Here of course, we are talking about the totality of becoming as *the object* of metaphysical knowledge. God has both the object and the knowledge, he thought. Later, in writing about “the conformity of thought with being,” Kierkegaard insisted that “This conformity is actually realized for God, but it is not realized for any existing spirit, who is himself existentially in process of becoming.”¹⁸ Existence in itself is *not* the opposite of finality after all! Becoming *appears* to be unfinished to us, but it *really* is not since it is all there for God.

For Kierkegaard, the claim that an existential system is impossible can only apply to human-level metaphysical theories at best. Since we have just caught Kierkegaard thinking system and existence together, it is simply not true that “system and existence are incapable of being thought together.”¹⁹ Any existing spirit, like Kierkegaard himself, who thinks that for God existence (becoming) is a finished system *is* thinking system and thought together, whether he realizes and admits it or not. This is a religious belief, possibly a mistaken one, that belongs to *Kierkegaard's* very *human* metaphysical system, not necessarily to God's. Modern process theology enables us to appreciate the humanness, if not the error, in this way of thinking about God.

It is only in light of Kierkegaard's equating of existence with becoming and of divinity with changeless eternity that we can understand that Kierkegaard was not affirming atheism when he denied the existence of God: “God does not think, he creates; God does not exist, He is eternal.”²⁰ Of course, if God in his consequent nature is changing or becoming, as process theology maintains, then God in his consequent nature does exist after all in precisely the relevant sense. Although he never developed the thought, Kierkegaard himself once hinted at such a revolutionary vision of God:

The existential sphere of paganism is essentially the aesthetic, and hence it is quite in order for the pagan consciousness to be reflected in that conception of God which holds that He, Himself unchanged, changes all. This is the expression for outwardly directed action. The religious lies in the dialectic which governs the intensification of inwardness, and hence it is sympathetic with the conception of God that He is Himself moved, changed.²¹

Kierkegaard was probably correct in characterizing the doctrine of the absolute unchangeableness of God as pagan.²² Nevertheless, he generally subscribed to just this pagan view himself, as we have seen. Amazingly enough, it was precisely this view that generated his absolute paradoxes for Christianity, as we now must determine.

3. Existence, Christianity, and God in time

Kierkegaard identified Christianity with paradox, telling us that “Christianity is precisely the paradoxical.”²³ No doubt, he meant many things by, and equivocated many times on, the notion of paradox; yet, the paradoxical as the logically contradictory is usually thought to be at the heart of his position. Furthermore, he identified a number of paradoxes or absurdities as being central to Christian belief and practice. (He was never really able to separate the “how” from the “what” of Christianity.)²⁴ In this own mind, the most central paradox of all involved the logical and ontological incompatibility of time and eternity, which he thought to be inherent in the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. As he formulated this paradox, “The absurd is – that the eternal truth has come into being in time, that God has come into being, has been born, has grown up, and so forth, precisely like any other individual human being, quite indistinguishable from other individuals.”²⁵ Again, “The eternal truth has come into being in time: this is the paradox.”²⁶ In more detail, “. . . the absolute paradox, just because it is absolute, can be relevant only to the absolute difference that distinguishes man from God But the absolute difference between God and man consists precisely in this, that man is a particular existing being . . . while God is infinite and eternal.”²⁷

Now Kierkegaard resisted with his whole being any suggestion that the paradoxes of Christianity could ever be resolved in some “higher understanding,” i.e. in some better theology. The Christian “uses understanding . . . to make sure that he believes against the understanding.”²⁸ Yet, he could have been wrong about this, as he was about so much else. If he was right that the view of God as absolutely changeless is only a pagan view, then he has to be wrong in thinking that Christianity insists that there is an absurdity in the thought of “Deity in time.”²⁹ *Paganism* might find this thought absurd or logically incoherent, but why should *Christianity*, if it is indeed open to the conception that God “is Himself moved, changed”?³⁰

There is a contradiction in the notion of “Deity in time” if this is interpreted to mean that “God as eternal and unchanging in every conceivable respect is nevertheless changing, existing, becoming in the Incarnation.” I do not wish to deny that there may be *many other incoherences* in the notion of the Incarnation, but it is obvious enough that *the one particular paradox* which Kierkegaard saw as being central to Christianity completely loses its sting when viewed from a process perspective. From that perspective, God always has a changing, existing, becoming consequent nature; and there is no contradiction in the reformulated notion that “God as consequent, changing and existent continues to be conse-

quent, changing and existent in the Incarnation.” Of course, this “resolution” of the paradox of “God in time” will not work if the paradox is reformulated as “God *merely* in time,” as seems to be the case in some of Kierkegaard’s discussions of “Religiousness B.”³¹ However, I will not attempt here to develop a critique of the sort of “unitarianism of the second person of the trinity” (as Robert L. Calhoun once termed it) which is implicit in the view that God exists and is known *only* in the Incarnation. Even Kierkegaard did not consistently subscribe to such a radically incarnationist theology. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, a distinctly Christian work, he offered this very profound concept of God: “His concept embraces everything . . . ; he comprehends actuality, all its particulars.”³²

Medieval theology had available to itself a slightly different resolution of the alleged paradox of the Incarnation, rooted in the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. Christ was both fully human and fully divine, but it was only the human but not the divine nature that was involved in existence or becoming in the Incarnation. The divine nature was infinite and eternal, the human finite and temporal. Kierkegaard formulated one version of Christian paradox as: “The paradox is that Christ came into the world *in order to suffer*.”³³ Of course, he did not explain *why* this is a paradox, and he did not attempt to relate this paradox or any of his others to the doctrine of the *two* natures of Christ. (Many seeming inconsistencies can be resolved by assigning incompatible properties to one or the other of two natures.) St. Anselm had resolved the paradox of suffering by relegating suffering only to the human nature of Christ, thus preserving the classical theological assumption of the impassivity and non-suffering of the divine nature:

But we say that the Lord Jesus Christ is very God and very man, one person in two natures, and two natures in one person. When, therefore, we speak of God as enduring any humiliation or infirmity, we do not refer to the majesty of that nature, which cannot suffer; but to the feebleness of the human constitution which he assumed.³⁴

Again, process theology offers another resolution to the paradox. God is in himself (and not merely in the way he appears to us, as Anselm believed), a suffering and compassionate divinity. “God is the great companion — the fellow sufferer who understand,” as Whitehead put it.³⁵ Given the classical concept of the absolute impassivity and imperturbability of God, there is a contradiction in the thought that God came to suffer. But if suffering with those who suffer is an inherent part of the very nature and perfection of God, as process theologians believe, there is again no paradox.

It seems that the absurdities which Kierkegaard thought to be at the very heart of Christian theology had their root in a certain way of conceiving of the nature of God which Kierkegaard himself, in one of his better moments of insight, characterized as “pagan.” If he had only conceived of God, or at least some aspect of God, as existing, i.e. as becoming, Christianity might have been spared the damage which he did to it in associating it with rank irrationalism. Perhaps it is only Kierkegaard and not Christ who is so offensive!

Finally, we should note that process theology answers the question of whether existence (becoming) is a completed system in a way which is quite different from that of Kierkegaard. He thought that for God, becoming was eternally finished; process theology insists that for God, becoming is everlastingly unfinished, an open arena in which God's creative expressiveness can continue infinitely. *The universe in itself* is a system, albeit an open one, and not a mere "bloc universe" as William James termed the classical view. (Modern thinkers do not confine "system" to "closed system" as Kierkegaard did.) Having a much higher tolerance for philosophical uncertainty than Kierkegaard, process theologians also hold that *our human knowledge about the open universe* is also a system. Again, it is an open and incomplete one, but hopefully a logically and religiously more available one than anything that Kierkegaard ever had to offer.

NOTES

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 99–113.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
3. G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), p. 85.
4. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 101–107.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 98–99.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 169, italics mine.
14. As Mark C. Taylor indicated, "Kierkegaard uses the word 'eternal' in a bewildering variety of ways." Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 91.
15. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 108.
16. Søren Kierkegaard, *Edifying Discourses* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 162.
17. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 107.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 296.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 387n.
22. I have attempted to develop and defend such a claim myself in: Rem B. Edwards, "The Pagan Dogma of the Absolute Unchangeableness of God," *Religious Studies* 14 (1978), 305–314.
23. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 95.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 181ff.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 195.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 504.

29. Ibid., p. 517.
30. Ibid., p. 387n.
31. Ibid., pp. 498, 505–508.
32. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 121.
33. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 529.
34. St. Anselm, *Proslogium; Monologium; An Appendix in Behalf of the Fool by Gaunelon; and Cur Deus Homo* (LaSalle: The Open Court Publishing Co., 1954), p. 190.
35. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality, Corrected Edition* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), p. 351.