Decoding Kierkegaard’s Search for Truth in Subjectivity

Term Paper Introduction Assignment

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In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard’s definition of truth is not a clear explanation for everyone who is not so familiar with his philosophy which is the foundation for existentialism. He states in his reading that truth is “An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person” (207). Since Kierkegaard’s understanding of truth is based purely on subjectivity which can puzzle many readers and would create the question, did he not include objectivity into the search for truth. The answer is that he did, but he concluded that objectivity would not be sufficient enough to explain truth specially the one which surrounds faith. To make his point clearer, an analysis of Kierkegaard’s text by Edward J. Hughes, *How Subjectivity is Truth in the Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* examines Kierkegaard’s understanding of truth in subjectivity. But to get to this point, Hughes compares objectivity against subjectivity and makes it to a central point in his essay which is explained in the following way, “Since Kierkegaard is a dialectical thinker concerned with exploring the polarity subjectivity and objectivity, it will be useful to turn first to objectivity in order to discern what subjectivity is not” (197). On the other hand, a second analysis by R. Z. Friedman, *Kierkegaard: First Existentialist or Last Kantian?*, claims that Kierkegaard’s philosophy is influenced by Kantian thinking which the author describes as going from morality to religion. He states, “The leap of faith is not, as existentialism would have it, an absolute beginning in philosophy or in individual reflection but a transition from morality to religion within an essentially Kantian context” (159). Kant’s way of thinking is that of a self-conscious and rational mind that collides with Kierkegaard’s passionate inwardness of trust to find the truth. Since Hughes seems to understand Kierkegaard’s perspective on subjectivity and Friedman does not, I am going to argue for Hughes’s point of view, but I also will consider Friedman’s misunderstanding of the philosopher.

Kierkegaard is a philosopher who is unique in his understanding of truth and how to find a way to discover the truth for himself and in others. His passionate inwardness looks at truth in a subjective manner which is combined with trust the highest form of truth there is, according to him. Many members of the general audience and even philosophers are confused by his approach towards discovering truth because there are analysists out there who seem to understand him that he is more than just a trustful person in himself and actually thought about it before he concluded that subjectivity is the only way to find truth. Kierkegaard never denied that objectivity is needed to find truth, but he also pointed out that it is not enough to find the ultimate truth, especially if we need to put trust into God’s hands. Since he is also considered a Christian philosopher, it does not wonder, if he would describe himself as a trustful follower of Christ who he seems to see in a relationship like manner. Like already mentioned, he is not denying objectivity which is the starting point of Hughes’ analysis about Kierkegaard’s sometimes puzzling subjectivity towards truth and trust.

Hughes starts with the question, what is objectivity? The definition of objectivity is based on facts which are combined with hard evidence to proof the facts. Those facts are locked in to hit a certain target which is visible and that makes objectivity finite because it gives limitation to matters which do not fall in this category. Not every being is visible and can be explained objectively like an experiment in scientific research where the facts and results can be written down and so are physically visible. Faith in God would not be such a thing which can be proven physically because faith and believe is not based on facts and evidence but on trust in the divine and that is subjective. Our whole relationship with God is not limited by objectivity and instead is enriched by the trust we have for God and its heavenly nature. Like already mentioned objectivity is a good tool for science where reason and facts are components to get a successful result.

Before I get to Friedman’s point, Kierkegaard is a follower of the Kantian view which sets reason and ethical thinking as the central point, I would say he is not correct to make such a claim because the Kantian view cannot be compared with Kierkegaard’s passionate inwardness. It is true that only one philosophical theory is led by subjective thinking and that is Kierkegaard’s method. Kant’s way of thinking is grounded in pure reason where he is using his objective and rational mind to engage in matters of morality. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, is thinking with a mind which is based on trust to find truth and has his grounding in existentialism and Christian philosophy. In other words, Kant is a rational thinker, and Kierkegaard is a thinker who uses emotional characteristics which makes both quite different.

Since the basics of Kierkegaard’s, Hughes’, and Friedman’s central points are defined, I will go more in depth what each text is about, and which are the singular aspects of their arguments. Kierkegaard’s writing is the original source and is analyzed trough two secondary authors who have opposite opinions about Kierkegaard and his philosophical arguments about subjectivity and his whole understanding about it. Like already mentioned, I am going to argue for Hughes’ view of Kierkegaard because he understands the philosopher’s way of thinking and does not try to put him down as a follower of the Kantian theory like Friedman does. But my consideration goes also out to Friedman because I want to show his misunderstanding in Kierkegaard. It is understandable to get Kierkegaard wrong and take an approach which does not serve the philosopher or his philosophical theories. That said, I will continue with my essay and go more deeper into it.

Kierkegaard’s philosophy is influenced by Christianity and is visible in his philosophical approach about his opposition towards objectivity which he denies with the uttermost passion. He states, “If I am able to apprehend God objectively, I do not have faith, but because I cannot do this, I must have faith” (207). Kierkegaard believes that we cannot understand God in a way, we can understand a worldly manner because we need to experience God deeper and not just stay on the surface with our finite mind. God needs to be understood with the attributes of a whole human being not just mind but also feelings, emotions, and soul. To have faith in God, mind and body need to be completely submerged into the trust we have in God, and we need to let go of any doubts in him because we cannot objectively prove that he received us. Objectivity denies us this possibility because it demands facts and is not based on faith which over time would distance us from God. Faith is only apprehended through subjective trust in God and our belief in him which Kierkegaard recognizes, and it is the essence of existence.

Since Hughes recognizes Kierkegaard’s struggle with objectivity, especially when it comes to faith, and even then some individuals think how absurd it is to believe only in subjectivity and trust. He states in a quote, “Kierkegaard opposes the way of objectivity because it is the way of indifference which diminishes the intensity of existence to which all human beings are called, undermines the quality of volitional acts by undercutting the possibility of decisiveness, and leads to a forgetfulness of inwardness, whether through habit or bad faith” (197). Good faith can be only experienced through voluntary belief in God and his goodness because we need to be interested in him to believe in his presence. If we believe in him out of pure ethical reasons and facts, we exercise bad faith because we prefer morality over the love for Christ which lets us forget spirituality and turn the faith in him into something which is limited by ethical and moral standards. Those standards and not the subject become the focus which limits our passion for inwardness because we cannot feel like we want to feel about God and the whole existence, and this is objectivity. Human beings want to feel free from any obligations which could limit their experience of existence in any way. Nobody wants to feel obligated to believe in something, just because it is the right thing to do or wants to act in a certain way because everyone acts like this, and the necessity comes up to do the same. Subjectivity is the only way to find to God and to trust him because we must show interest in him personally before we can put faith in his existence which lets us also believe in our existence, and we can become one with him without being limited by finite standards.

Since Friedman is convinced that Kierkegaard’s philosophy is a continuation of Kant’s theory, it does not wonder when he sees a connection between Kantian ethics and Kierkegaard’s belief in faith. According to Friedman, “Ethics becomes not merely a guide to human conduct but a statement about the world, about reality itself. In this way, in keeping with Kant’s revolutionary view on this matter, ethics becomes metaphysics and religion” (161).It is already established that Kant is a self-conscious and rational thinker which is the opposite of Kierkegaard’s subjective way of thinking, but there are still philosophers like Friedman who do not seem to recognize this. Kantian ethics is driven by duty to live a life through good moral actions which are resulting from voluntary actions, but those actions have to be ethically and morally good that they can be followed by everyone. This has nothing to do with Christianity in the way Kierkegaard receives it because he is genuine and without any obligations interested in God and religion which goes from his individual approach towards God to his inner passion for Christ with passionate inwardness. This inwardness is experienced differently by everyone and is not a uniformed standard how to believe and receive God because it is based on trust, and trust is subjective. Means, Friedman’s misunderstanding does not seem to consider the philosophers’ personal characteristics either, because I think that Kant’s and Kierkegaard’s personalities are completely different which should be considered, just to make sure we are looking at it from every point of view.

Kierkegaard’s mention of Socrates should not come as a surprise to us because he is agreeing with the Greek philosopher in the following way, “Viewed Socratically, subjectivity is untruth if it refuses to comprehend that subjectivity is truth but wants, for example, to be objective” (209). Socrates and Kierkegaard see truth from a subjective point of view because truth seen objectively is wrong because the inwardness, which is only associated with subjectivity, is lost, and truth is limited to an objective world which is depending on facts and rational thinking. The question comes in mind, what is wrong with facts and rational thinking which supposedly be enough. It is not enough because it reduces our own existence to pure visible features without any spirituality and emotional characteristics which would be necessary to feel as a complete being. Subjectivity is also about a free will to make choices which we are responsible for without following a certain guideline which tells us how to behave and act to manipulate our inner us which would be lying to ourselves and others. Objectivity puts limitations on truth because this truth is depended on so-called factual information, and this information could be false which should be considered.

Hughes’ analysis also considers Kierkegaard’s admiration for Socrates which is not shared by every author who writes about Kierkegaard, but this fact is going to be established later in the paragraph. First, we start with an explanation who Climacus supposed to be, Climacus is Kierkegaard’s synonym name in the *Postscript* which can be confusing, if it is quoted without any comment. According to Hughes, “For Climacus, Socrates ‘passionate inwardness makes him the paradigm of the pre-Christian thinker who arrived at the highest stage of inner truth (immanence) without the aid of revelation. He is great by reason of his passionate allegiance to the philosophical call” (203). Socrates’ thinking is for Kierkegaard the ultimate form of inwardness, it cannot be received in any higher constellation because the objective world in which we live, is completely shut out and does not exist anymore. The only thing which is in existence is the inner truth which cannot be shaken by any influence from outside sources. The individual in this stage, if it would be God, has reached a divine stage which is only influenced by its own calling and destiny. Let us rephrase it and say that the Socratic inwardness is the highest form of subjectivity. Friedman would not agree with this discovery because his thinking is influenced by Kantian thoughts which leave not much room for subjectivity. Kant rejects subjectivity because it would deny him to be a rational thinker who is self-conscious with the objective world.

On the end of Kierkegaard’s reading, there is quote which is associated with Aristotle and describes the difference between subjectivity and objectivity in a unique sense. Kierkegaard seems to sway away from his usually religious topic to a genre which circles around history and poetry. He states, “Aristotle remarks in his *Poetics* that poetry is superior to history, because history presents only what has occurred, poetry what could and ought to have occurred, i.e., poetry has possibility at its disposal” (215). History is a social science which deals with actual events and people who are influence by those events. It is objective through visible facts which can be proven by written documents, and witnesses who experienced it firsthand, but this also limits it to such proofs. On the other hand, poetry is open to all kinds of possibilities and interpretations which makes it subjective in its approach. Its limitations are disappeared by the writers and readers of poetry because what is written and how is it red depends on the person who does it. In poetry, every individual is entitled to its own subjective truth and that makes it superior.

Faith like poetry is subjective in the same way how Hughes describes it in his quote, “Faith is a new form of inwardness and a new mode of appropriation. It requires the most intense form of subjectivity and is therefore the highest form of truth” (208). Of course, faith is higher than poetry, but the basics are the same because both of them are matters of subjectivity and let room for individuality and personal truth. Faith is the belief in God and is only possible through passionate inwardness, a person has for the divine appearance. It would be easy, if we could see God, but this is not possible, so we have to put our uttermost belief in him which is done with greatest passion involved. Objectivity is no use because than we do not believe in God, just in the facts we have been delivered, and that is not having trust in God. Only through subjective truth, we can have trust in God which shows ultimate faith. To make my own remark, I wish everyone would think about God like this, but unfortunately there are a lot of individuals who think that faith is an ethical obligation.

Friedman thinks about Kierkegaard that he is the last Kantian and has nothing to do with existentialism, which is actually against all general belief of Kierkegaard, but this lets actually Friedman look like a subjective thinker himself. I quote his claim, “The leap of faith is a transition from the ethical . This framework, as I have argued, is essentially Kantian. If this is borne in mind, Kierkegaard is correctly understood not as the first existentialist philosopher but as the last Kantian” (170). Since it is already established that Kant is a thinker who receives the objective world in a self-conscious way, it is hard to understand how one would receive the subjective thinking Kierkegaard in the same way. Everything in Kierkegaard says, I am a subjective thinker because I receive the world through passionate inwardness, and it is also the only way I can receive and trust God. Kant would probably answer, my ethical views are reason enough for me to live a life of god moral meaning which I can apply also to others. Those two expressions could not be different and should be interpreted not together but separate like objectivity and subjectivity.

In the conclusion of this essay, I express again that I argue for Hughes which lets me also argue for Kierkegaard and his philosophy. Hughes understands Kierkegaard and his passionate inwardness, especially when it comes to God. He knows that the philosopher cannot talk about God in an objective and factual way because it diminishes the relationship to God in a way where only facts would matter and not God as an individual. God is not like an object which can be made visible like objects in research where the trust in the object lay in its facts and visible attributes. Only subjective love for God can make us belief in him which ends up in deep faith and trust for Christ even that he is not visible. But he does not have to be visible that we know he is there, and that is the truth which is subjective because only in subjectivity is truth and trust. A fact Hughes understands and values which cannot be said for Friedman who compares Kierkegaard with Kant. I do not think that Kantian ethics are the basics for faith or religious belief , especially not in Kierkegaard’s philosophy which is grounded in personal choices and inwardness and is far away from another person’s matter. Kant, on the other hand, wants to turn his good moral choices into law for everyone which is something completely different. Friedman’s research on Kant and Kierkegaard are based only on Kantian ethics which he applies to Kierkegaard and so misunderstands the philosopher. This essay was remarkably interesting to write because I had the subjective feeling that it educated me a lot about the different facets in philosophy from Kierkegaard’s subjectivity over objectivity to Kantian ethics.

Works Cited

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