
KIERKEGAARD'S METHOD

EDIFICATION AND MORAL GRAMMAR OF

CHRISTIAN VIRTUES

Bojan Žalec*

*University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Theology, Institute of Philosophy and Social Ethics,
Poljanska c. 4, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia*

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Abstract

The author deals with the question of Kierkegaard's method or approach. He argues for two theses: 1) Kierkegaard is an upbuilding and edifying author; 2) Kierkegaard is a moral grammarian and a virtue ethicist. The author explains the specific Christian nature or mark of the two characteristics of Kierkegaard's approach. The aim of the paper as a whole is to show that Kierkegaard is a lucid and penetrating observer of the most concerning phenomena of his and our time. He discloses their deep reasons. He finds them – at the most fundamental level - in a man's inappropriate attitude toward God, and consequently in the wrong way in their personal and societal life. With his writings he wanted not just (theoretically) describe and explain the phenomena, but foremost upbuild and edify people and (thus) help them facing more appropriately the challenges in their personal and social life, and, most importantly, at least from Kierkegaard's point of view, reaching salvation.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, edification, moral grammar, virtue ethics, nihilism

1. Two approaches in Ethics

We can discern two approaches in Ethics and ethical education. The first we can call descriptive (DA), the second edifying (EA). Most professors of ethics at philosophical departments nowadays practice DA, or at least they want to give an impression that they do. DA takes Science, foremost Physics, as an example [1]. The procedure of teaching Ethics according to DA is the following. You present to students an ethical problem. Then you present a map of ethical positions relevant for the problem. This presentation includes introduction and clarifications of relevant concepts and conceptual distinctions and arguments in favour and against the presented positions. You add evaluation of the presented arguments, mostly regarding their logical aspect, soundness, and the empirical evidence for and against them. Usually this is labelled as pros and cons of the positions. You draw the implications of the positions in case, and make a sort of

*E-mail: bojan.zalec@teof.uni-lj.si, Phone: +386 31 00 1300, Fax : + 386 1 434 58 54

their comparative analysis. Then you stop. You leave to the students themselves to decide which position they will make their own. You don't introduce students in the ethical issues by arguing for your own position, trying to convince them that your position is right what implies that you try to convert the students who hold different beliefs and attitudes than you. You don't try to edify students, to shape their personality, to develop their moral virtues. At least you don't do this directly. You just increase students' knowledge, enrich their conceptual scheme, and that makes them more capable to choose – in a finer and more sophisticated and in a sense more reflected way - on their own among different ethical options. Reasons why you don't upbuild and edify are many. One of the main is that you shouldn't moralise. You should ethically educate students but without moralising. Bernard Williams preferred DA because he thought that EA implies an absurd conclusion that philosophers are uniquely competent for ethical issues [2]. We can very clearly present the difference between DA and EA by quoting excerpts from Aristotle and Henry Sidgwick. The last is a partisan of DA, the first of EA. Sidgwick thought that EA hinders the progress of ethical science: "I have thought that the predominance in the minds of moralists of a desire to edify has impeded the real progress of ethical science: and that this would be benefited by an application to it of the same disinterested curiosity to which we chiefly owe the great discoveries of Physics" [3]. A similar statement we can find in Hegel, who writes that "Philosophy must beware of the wish to be edifying" [4]. But DA has a rather disadvantageous effect too often. The result is that students think that ethical questions are rationally undecidable and that ethical analysis, arguments, and knowledge are of little use. The result is at least partly quite the opposite of what Sidgwick aimed to. People come to conclusion that there really is no special science of ethics, no special ethical knowledge, expertise, and sometimes that there is no special ethical education needed. All this is just ideology - produced by some people because of their interests – and waste of time. They land in a kind of subjectivism, relativism, or emotivism, in the sense as the last term is used by MacIntyre in his work *After Virtue* [5]. Consequently, the result of carrying out DA is not the development of ethical science but rather the devaluation of ethics as rationally justified activity, even not considering it a scientific discipline. Ethical attitudes, statements and sentences are just (disguised) expressions of our instincts, affects and emotions that in their essence have nothing to do with rationality. Therefore, no true ethical knowledge is possible, no knowledge about good or bad, and dealing with ethics can't make us better or worse. DA is very problematic also from the point of view of cultivation of dialogue since - as many authors convincingly argue - true dialogue is possible only if its participants are not neutral but rather actually and personally committed to some particular position considered in the dialogue [6]. Contrary to Sidgwick, Hegel and emotivists, Aristotle is - together with Socrates and Plato - a representative of EA [1]. He refuses not only the view that no knowledge of good is possible, but also the disinterested stance in ethics that Sidgwick has argued for. Thus we can read in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: "[W]e are inquiring not in order to know what excellence is, but in order to become

good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use" [7]. According to Aristotle, an ethical inquiry should lead to knowledge about good and should edify, should make people good or at least better [1].

What is Kierkegaard's position in the above outlined context? What comes to mind perhaps first is that Kierkegaard himself designated himself as "the edifying author" [8]. Anyway, on one hand it may seem obvious that he belongs to the EA camp, together with the 'moralists' like Socrates [9-11]. But this is just a very general observation and a nearer scrutiny may reveal that this characterisation of Kierkegaard may be taken very conditionally, and that there are reasons why it could be seriously questioned, if not even refuted. Just remember MacIntyre's interpretation of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* as one of the most important emotivist texts. MacIntyre presented it as one of the crucial moments and manifestations of emotivist morality and moral theory [5, p. 39ff]. Certain delicacy regarding the unconditional and general characterisation of Kierkegaard's writings as belonging to EA camp is due to the variety of Kierkegaard's writings: they belong to different genres, some are signed by Kierkegaard himself and some are pseudonym texts, some he published and some he did not (and were not intended for publication), some use indirect communication and some are examples of direct communication ... I certainly agree that Kierkegaard's work as a whole is very complex, and that it is required caution regarding general judgments. On the other hand I am convinced too, that if we want to interpret the entire Kierkegaard's oeuvre, or at least its majority, as a coherent whole, expressing a coherent basic attitude, we must interpret it as an example of EA. The aims of communication and the means to reach the goal might be different in his various works but his general main aim is the same. Kierkegaard sensed strongly and clearly the deep crisis of Western culture. It was clear to him that this is not something superficial. He believed that its fundamental cause is turning away from God. In his writings, he described its forms and its consequences. But neither he stopped by this nor this was his final and main goal, but he also tried to help the reader to existentially grasp their/our condition and the way out, the 'solution', or the 'redemption', to put it theologically. His attempt was the upbuilding and edification of his readers. He wanted to improve his reader [1, p. 134]. Even if some deny the validity of the characterisation of some Kierkegaard's works as upbuilding and edifying, like for instance *Either/Or*, it is out of doubt that this characterisation is true for his works that he himself explicitly designated as upbuilding. In those works, Kierkegaard took explicitly the Christian position. In *The Sickness unto Death* we can read the following words put in the mouth of Anti-Climacus: "From the Christian point of view, everything, indeed everything, ought to serve for upbuilding. The kind of scholarliness and scientificity that ultimately does not build up is precisely thereby unchristian." [12] What does this quotation show or prove - if it proves anything at all - regarding Kierkegaard's entire oeuvre? Certainly that at least for the works written in the time when the cited Anti-Climacus belief was also Kierkegaard's own, we may say that Kierkegaard intended them as upbuilding and edifying. This doesn't help us much because it

is very hard to answer with a justified certainty to the question when that was his personal belief. I nevertheless agree with Tietjen that we may say that this was Kierkegaard's driving ideal more or less through all his career as a writer, and that makes calling Kierkegaard an edifying author justified: "As an ideal, it is probable that he did not fully realize it in his life and in his authorship. He likely did not have this ideal in view that at the outset of the authorship, and it would not be uncharitable to think there were moments when this ideal wavered in his heart and mind." [1, p. 134] Certainly, there were 'dark moments' in Kierkegaard's life that were hardly compatible with his being a Christian edifier [13]. But despite this constraints, Tietjen convincingly argued that, as he says, "the ideal of the upbuilding or the edifying is an appropriate lens through which one can view the authorship in whole and in part, how it evolves, and how Kierkegaard views it as his own upbringing" [1, p. 134].

2. Nihilism

It is obvious that emotivism and its keens are a very favourable ground for 'flourishing' of nihilism in the sense of ethical levelling. Kierkegaard was one of the first who detected the spread of nihilism in the Western culture of his time. He didn't use the term 'nihilism' but there is no doubt that he detected nihilism as a fundamental evil and that it was one of his main goals to overcome it. In 1936 Heidegger quoted, with consent, Nietzsche's description: "Around the year 1882 [Nietzsche] says regarding his times, 'Our age is an agitated one, and precisely for this reason, not an age of passion; it heats up continuously, because it feels that it is not warm – basically it is freezing. ...' In our times it is merely by means of an echo that events acquire their 'greatness' – the echo of the newspaper." [14] But before Nietzsche, it was Kierkegaard who submitted very akin observations [15]. He warned against lack of passion, non-commitment, anonymity, avoiding of risk and of actual exposition and vulnerability, endless reflection, indecisiveness, phenomenon of all-encompassing public helped by press and (consequential) non-sensibility, legalism and (consequentially) lack of meaning (levelling of everything) as the characteristic features of his (our?) age. In his work *Two Ages* we can read: "The present age is essentially a sensible, reflecting age, devoid of passion, flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence" [16]. This age levels everything [16, p. 84]. That levelling takes its place, a phantom – the spirit of levelling, a monstrous abstraction, an all-encompassing nothing - must be raised first, and this phantom is the public, created with the help of press [16, p. 90-91]. "The public is actual master of levelling." [16, p. 91] The public creates no community [16, p. 91]. "The public is all and nothing, the most dangerous of all powers and the most meaningless." [16, p. 93] Kierkegaard compares the public with a bored Roman emperor [16, p. 94], speaks about superficiality and exhibitionists tendencies, loquaciousness, about the significance of anonymity in our age, about indecisiveness and evasion as its characteristics. Nietzsche's term for such a loss of meaning and direction and for such a levelling of everything is

nihilism. No doubt, we may justifiably conclude that one of the factors of nihilism of Kierkegaard's age, and we may say that also, and even in greater measure, of our age of Internet and social networks [17], is the public in Kierkegaard's sense of the term. However, according to Kierkegaard, the very foundations of nihilism are not the public and the levelling of everything. The public is a very important positive factor of nihilism and of the background that strengthen it, but it is not its fundamental origin. Something similar is true about the levelling of everything. The levelling of everything is very 'tangible,' painful and practically unbearably depressing evidence or manifestation of nihilism, but it is not its root. According to Kierkegaard, its fundamental cause is teared connection of man with eternity. It can take the form of closing to God, avoiding of his call and running away from God, or even of revolt or rising against God [18-23]. In this respect, the essence of the main Kierkegaard's idea was very adequately and in a condensed way expressed by Iris Murdoch in her most important philosophical work *The Sovereignty of Good*. There she argues that for truly ethical life it is of vital importance that we do not turn away from good. She tries to convince us that love is a way, maybe the only one, how to keep our attention upon good [24]. If we substitute the Platonic good that Murdoch has in mind with the Christian God, and we leave out the word 'maybe' we get exactly what Kierkegaard believed and explained in his texts. He thought that love for God is the only, necessary and sufficient foundation for everything what is good. Without this basis, everything is 'at best' just a form of self-love in the negative sense of the term [20, p. 81; 25]. Speaking theologically, without love for God everything is a sin. Therefore, also nihilism is a kind of sin. Further it follows, from Murdoch's and Kierkegaard's position, that one of the most fundamental ethical questions is how to develop and keep love in us, how to cultivate it, because if somebody really wants to know what is right or wrong and be a good man, they must be a person who loves (God).

3. Kierkegaard as a moral grammarian and Christian virtue ethicist

Kierkegaard's writings follow just this line of thinking. His aim is to help reader to understand the importance of love and to help them to be (more) loving. This is for instance the aim of his analysis of the grammar of *Kjerlighed*, a Danish word used by Kierkegaard for what could be called Christian love or neighbour love. He researches the grammar of *Kjerlighed* in the context and network of other (Christian) concepts like duty, debt, emotion, neighbour, God, sacrifice, suffering, forgiveness, reconciliation, hope, faith, revelation, authority, mercifulness, obedience, annihilation, meekness, self-denial, resignation, etc. [26]. Following Roberts, we may call Kierkegaard a moral grammarian. At this point, his work and approach are parallel to Wittgenstein's. Wittgenstein wants to reintroduce people, whom he finds conceptually confused, to the everyday use of language. He doesn't invent or discover anything new, he just reintroduces the reader into something that already exists, into 'tradition' that needs no improvement but which the reader abandoned or alienated from. This

abandonment makes them confused, and in any way it is something wrong or bad. Kierkegaard does something very similar, just that the tradition in his case is not everyday language but Christianity [27]. He wants to reintroduce his reader in authentic Christianity [26, p. 146-147]. One clear example of such grammatical reintroduction and correction is *The Book on Adler* [1, p. 11-14; 26, p. 147-148; 28]. Another such example is *Works of Love*. With it, Kierkegaard wants to help people (in Denmark) of his time - dominated by the form of inauthentic Christianity, i.e. Christendom in the negative sense, and alienated from authentic Christianity - to understand the message of the Bible, find (again) the contact with true Jesus' teaching. Kierkegaard knows that the grammatical confusions are not just of theoretical importance but that they affect one's practical activities, and the way of living their lives and Christianity [26, p. 148]. His final aim is not theoretical, but rather practical. He wants to improve people and their lives. Kierkegaard's philosophy and theology are the grammar of Christianity in the service of Christian edification [1, p. 8ff].

Virtues play an essential role in moral education and in edification. Thus, it is not surprising that Kierkegaard as a Christian edifier gives a central attention to Christian virtues. In fact, we may say that virtues occupy a central place in his grammatical analyses. Kierkegaard belongs to the tradition of Western virtue ethics [1, p. 117]. He is a grammarian of Christian virtues [26, p. 148-155] and correspondingly he devoted a special attention to the grammar of main Christian virtues like love [26, p. 155-159] and faith. Of course, many objections to the thesis that Kierkegaard is a virtue ethicist immediately come to mind [1, p. 118ff]. Let us answer to some of them. The first is that Kierkegaard is often considered to be a "proto-existentialist" [26, p. 148], and as such opposed to the tradition of virtue ethics - including essentialist thinkers like Aristotle - and to classical tradition in general [29]. Such an interpretation is far from truth. There are many reasons to refute it. First, we should mention the important influence of Friedrich Adolf Trendelenburg, the author of the works *Geschichte der Kategorienlehre* [30] and *Logische Untersuchungen* [31], on Kierkegaard [32-37]. Trendelenburg was a teacher of Brentano, so it is no surprise that Brentano's 'classical' mereological ontology of substance and accident is a suitable ontological model for understanding Kierkegaard's grammar of the central Christian virtues, faith and love [38]. Brentano's ontology clearly belongs to Aristotelian tradition. Second, Kierkegaard's anthropology and ethics are in the core clearly essentialist. Thus for instance humans are - according to Kierkegaard - anxious beings by their essence or nature [18, p. 28ff; 22]. Further, for every being there is the image that God intended for the very individual, the image of God, and the main task of every individual is to become that image [38]. Third, it is not true that Kierkegaard is an existentialist in the Sartrean sense of the word [26, p. 150-151] despite the fact "[t]his Sartrean Kierkegaard is the anti-hero of Alasdair MacIntyre's saga of Enlightenment project of finding a rational foundation for morality" [26, p. 148-149]. Quite to the contrary! Iris Murdoch showed that there is a very important similarity between Sartre and logical behaviourists. She convincingly

demonstrated the thesis – which many find surprising – that Sartre in fact neglected the meaning of life because he, similarly like logical behaviourists from the Island, stressed only acts and what is connected to them. He did not take sufficient account of the processes happening in the person that express themselves outwardly. Such existentialist view – in Murdoch's sense of the word that encompasses both continental existentialism (of the Sartrean type) and logical behaviourism [24, p. 26] – easily neglected the importance of love as an important, and in Kierkegaard's case absolutely crucial, epistemic act. No need to say what importance Kierkegaard ascribes to inwardness. The next objection refers to Kierkegaard's sentence that "the opposite of sin is not virtue, but faith" [12, p. 82]. Well, this is just another point where we can see the importance of the correct grammar of virtues. To the correct grammar of virtue belongs not only knowledge about what distinguishes one virtue from another one inside the same tradition, but also distinguishing between virtues of different traditions. What Kierkegaard actually says in this sentence refers to the virtues in the non-Christian sense, for instance in the Aristotelian sense. Such non-Christian view on virtues allows for self-sufficiency of man and their virtues. Being virtuous is something that man can accomplish without God's help. Such an attitude is exactly the core of a sin in the Christian and in Kierkegaard's understanding. On the other hand, there is a long Christian tradition, before and after Kierkegaard, which considers faith as a virtue. In the Christian sense, faith is not independent of God, but rather a result of God's grace. It is God's gift. For Scholastics, it is one of theological virtues, together with hope and love, different from natural virtues. As Scholastics put it, God infuses theological virtues in man [39]. Taken in the sense of theological virtues, faith is a virtue, virtues are opposite to sin, and virtues are of crucial importance for good life and salvation [1, p. 122; 26, p. 151].

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