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The Implications of Kierkegaard's Separation of Faith and Reason
by Erin Stevens

Many philosophers have dedicated a significant amount of their time to proving the existence of God through both a priori and a posteriori arguments. However, Robert Adams suggests that Søren Kierkegaard views the efforts of these philosophers to have been in vain, because faith and objective reasoning are not compatible. To see why he asserts this, we will first look at Kierkegaard's conception of both faith and objective reasoning. Then, using these to understand his arguments for why a separation between these must occur, we will then examine the potentially dire implications this may have for society and why, at the same time, this is beneficial to religion.

Before we can examine the aforementioned implications of the separating of religious faith from objective reasoning, we must establish why the two are inherently incompatible. It helps to first identify what Kierkegaard's idea of religious faith actually entails and what he means by "objective reasoning". For him, "faith must be decisive"—the establishment of it should be a resolution, which by definition implies that one does away with any doubts that may have been previously held (Adams 2). And this exclusion of doubt needs to be a conscious, fully informed decision made by the holder of faith—i.e. this believer has to be aware of this chance of error that he or she has chosen to disregard. In addition, he thinks that "in all genuine religious faith the believer is infinitely interested in the object of his faith" and that "the most essential and most valuable feature of religiousness is passion" (Adams 2, 7). From these two premises, the conception of an "infinitely passionate interest" can be formed and according to Kierkegaard, must be the kind of interest one has in religious faith. The nature of this infinite passion can be better understood once we have established that faith and reason are incompatible and thus

will later be explained in further detail on page four. For now, it is important to simply understand that having an infinitely passionate interest in something means that the importance we deem it to have has no limit. Our other concern thus far is the sense in which "objective reasoning" is used. According to Adams, objective reasoning is reasoning with a conclusion that is deemed to be "true or probably true" by "every (or almost every) intelligent, fair-minded, and sufficiently informed person" (Adams 1). This simply means that it has to be sufficiently supported by evidence to the point where it can be clearly and widely accepted as a truth. With the aforementioned background information in mind, we can now look at the arguments that Adams sees Kierkegaard providing for why one cannot reason objectively to confirm religious faith.

For the first argument, which Adams refers to as Kierkegaard's "Approximation Argument", it should be noted that Kierkegaard works under the assumption that "a system of religious beliefs might be objectively probable" (Adams 7). This, of course, is not what he truly believes and is used here "only for the sake of argument" (Adams 7). The argument begins with the notion that all historical facts contain some chance of error and therefore, "the greatest attainable certainty with respect to anything historical is merely an approximation" (as cited in Adams 1-2). This can be better illustrated with Adams' Civil War example. There is, according to Kierkegaard's argument, a very small probability that we are wrong in asserting that the American Civil War occurred. However, we can still say that we do indeed "know" that the Civil War occurred because this possibility of error is so small that deeming it to be a serious concern would be unnecessary. This is the Civil War though, for which, unlike religious faith, we do not have an infinitely passionate interest. When it comes to something we are infinitely passionate about, *any* possibility of error is significant because there is no limit to

how important the matter is to us. If we are now to recall Kierkegaard's conception of faith, we notice that there is a contradiction here—because of our infinite interest in the object of faith, any possible error is significant to us, but faith is a decisive act, which requires us to extinguish these errors. Therefore, in having faith, one is disregarding these possible errors, taking “a 'leap' beyond the evidence” and this leap “cannot be justified by objective reasoning” (Adams 3).

In continuing with the issues that lie in objective historical reasoning that were the basis for the Approximation Argument, we can understand what Adams calls the Postponement Argument. In relation to the idea that all historical “facts” carry some doubt, Kierkegaard says that we are always still tweaking the “answers” that we have thus far for historical inquiries and therefore to try to support or confirm one's own faith with historical facts would be an endless waiting game. There is always the possibility of something that we deem to be true now, changing some time in the future, causing someone to suspend his or her faith forever. This suspension would occur because faith for Kierkegaard must be a decisive commitment—a genuine believer cannot be one who will abandon their faith under any circumstances. Therefore the option of one declaring their belief only to later change it when new evidence surfaces is off the table because this person would not be a genuine believer—they are not “totally committed to the belief” (Adams 6). So from this we can say that one with genuine faith would not abandon said faith under any circumstances. But if the evidence that one is objectively basing their belief on ends up being edited in the future, they would still have to hold to their belief, which now is not based solely on the objective reasoning, for this reasoning has now been revised. According to Adams, this situation tells us that authentic beliefs cannot “depend entirely” on any objective reasoning that has the chance of

being revised in the future (Adams 6). This then seems to point us towards a search for objective reasoning that does not contain such a chance, but as we concluded before, all empirical objective reasoning contains the possibility of needing to be revised in the future. Therefore, we arrive at the conclusion that “authentic religious faith cannot without error be based on any objective empirical reasoning” (Adams 6). Here, just like in the previous argument, Kierkegaard illustrates that faith cannot be based on reason due to the nature of objective reasoning and its constant editing and uncertainty and the practice of authentic faith needing to be a commitment.

With these last two arguments, Kierkegaard was working through them on the assumption that religious faith *can* be based in objective reasoning in order to illustrate all of the technical problems with this idea. However, in this argument, which Adams calls the “Passion Argument”, Kierkegaard argues objective reasoning is not only useless to religion, “but inimical to religion's true interests” (Adams 7). As it was mentioned earlier, Kierkegaard views faith as “the highest passion in a man”, therefore implying that nothing other than this passion is attainable. When we see how one may attempt to utilize objective reasoning to support his or her faith, it seems to be suggesting that something more than this mere infinite passion, i.e. “probabilities and guarantees”, can be attained (Adams 7). But for Kierkegaard, religious belief “ought to be based on a strenuous exertion of the will—a passionate striving”, therefore making objective reasoning undesirable to religion primarily due to religion's necessity for infinite passion (Adams 7). From this, Adams says Kierkegaard would conclude that objective *improbability* must be present in an infinite passion. Because passion is the most important component to religious belief, religious belief therefore necessitates objective improbability. Adams postulates that for Kierkegaard's argument, this objective

improbability that is demanded is that of *at least* one belief that would have to follow or must be true upon the attainment of religious passion (Adams 8).

We said that an infinite passion requires objective improbability and we can examine some more reasons for why Kierkegaard asserts this. For one, if something is objectively improbable, there is great risk in believing it to be true because, objectively, it is most likely not true. Passion, in most senses, is an intense feeling or emotion for something, but since we are talking about an infinite passion, we need some sort of system to measure the intensity of a passion in order to comprehend what an infinite one might be. Using the definition of passion, we would look at determining how intense a strong emotion for something is and the best way to do this is to examine the actions it would produce. Kierkegaard suggests that looking at the amount of risk one takes in achieving something demonstrates the level of passion one has for that something. He would say that someone who risks more than someone else to achieve the same thing would therefore have more passion for that thing. Having established that risk and passion are directly proportional, we can conclude that the highest possible passion, which is needed for authentic religious faith, would be demonstrated by risking as much as possible. To risk as much as possible, there needs to be “the smallest possible chance of success” when one is trying to attain something, and the attaining of this end must involve “the greatest possible sacrifices” (Adams 9). And since this passion is described as being “infinite”, “there is no sacrifice so great one will not make it, and no chance of success so small one will not act on it” (Adams 9). When one is using objective reasoning, one is trying to minimize risk, thus making objective reasoning harmful to the very nature of authentic religious belief, which we have just shown to require the greatest amount of risk.

Going through Kierkegaard's arguments allows us to see why he believes that objective reasoning and religion, in principle, must exist in separate spheres, but what are the implications of this separation? If religion cannot be based on objective reasoning, it seems that it would be based on a passion that is subjective. With subjectivity, we of course lose any uniformity and without any objective or uniform conceptions in religion, we cannot say that anyone's faith in something is incorrect so long as they feel a genuine, infinite passion for this faith. This starts to become worrisome when we consider the immense number of individual minds, which include all kinds of variation in thought processes, level of sanity, and any other factor that is seen in variation throughout mankind. With a large number of different thinkers and a doctrine that claims religious faith is achieved through genuine passion, we have a pretty large probability of this manifesting itself in some dangerous ways. Numerous leaders of cults throughout the past have appeared to be genuinely convinced that they have received a message from God, which many times has been a message that does harm to other people. If we accept Kierkegaard's definition of faith and its separation from reason, can we not protest these harmful views a person might have? It seems that this would have to be the case. This separation of reason and faith appears to be beneficial to religion, for it allows one to cater to what one passionately feels, even if it is slightly different from the ideas of established religion. It can result in a more authentic and personalized form of faith. However, we must not forget that this personalization has the potential to result in some ugly scenarios, so both the benefits it provides to religion and the possible negative consequences for society should both be kept in mind when examining this separation of faith from objective reasoning.

Work Cited

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