

Kierkegaard's media critic*

EGUCHI Satoshi

Abstract

As we see, Kierkegaard was in the first generation of self-conscious and reflective mass media users and critics. In fact Kierkegaard's youth saw the rise of popular journalism, and people energetically discussed about freedom of press. Shortly later he saw the prosperity and rage of yellow journalism, and suffered from the infamous "Corsair Affair". I think his second reflection on society and media changed the direction of his conception of the ethical.

Key Words: Kierkegaard, mass-media, ethics, freedom of press

1 Young Kierkegaard's attitude toward mass media

It is said that Kierkegaard first appeared before audience in 1835, when he was 22 year old, at the student club in his university. His lecture was titled "Our journalistic literature". This lecture was aimed to give a counterargument to the preceding lecture presented by J. A. Osterman, who was in favor of free-speech. (EPW 189 ff.)¹ Osterman's points were as follows: even though popular newspapers at that time were often being vulgar and harsh, (1) they would promote intellectual ability of the general populace by making them interested in reading, (2) they can be spokesmen of those who have little political/economic power, (3) they could point out mistakes of governments and the es-

tablishment, and (4) they would make people more forthcoming and frank by letting them know what others really are, so that, though they may cause some harm, on the whole, freedom of speech promoted larger social good. I find his lecture very well done when we pay due regard to the fact that it was made almost 30 years before J. S. Mill's *On Liberty*.

Kierkegaard's lecture was aimed from first to last to attack Osterman's expression and logic in detail. His point was (1) journalism was run by a few talented persons and many incompetent ones, (2) journalism, in reality, had little part in Denmark's liberalization movement in those days, but, in fact, the king Frederic IV had been a leading character, (3) to import foreign ideas into Denmark would only be a leap and would impede gradual development

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¹The sigla used for citing the works of Søren Kierkegaard in the text and notes, are as follows:

EPW: *Early Polemical Writings*, trans. Julia Watkin, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

COR: *The Corsair Affair and Articles Related to the Writings*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, Princeton Univ. Press, 1982)

EO: *Either/Or*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

FT: *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983

TA: *Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and the Present Age: A Literary Review*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.

that should be desired, and (4) anonymity of newspaper articles would make people irresponsible and spoil the correctness of information.

Osterman had admired Kierkegaard's intellectual ability, but he had an insight that Kierkegaard "had only slight interest in the matter". (EPW 201) To me, ignoring Kierkegaard's lecture was somewhat verbose and crabbed in contrast to Osterman's clear-cut one was understandable. While Osterman's argument paid enough attention to middle and long-term utility of free speech, I have an impression that young Kierkegaard's view was one-sided, and of short-range. If Osterman had had the "desire to engage with an opponent", he would be able to reply to him successfully. While Osterman's lecture re-appeared in a newspaper *Vædelandet*, it is not sure that Kierkegaard's lecture had a strong impression on the audience. I think we may have to say he lost. In successive years he also challenged other major characters of free speech movement, esp. Orla Lehman and Johannes Hage. As far as I read the materials (EPW), Kierkegaard didn't achieve a great success.

What should we learn from these earliest activities of Kierkegaard? I would like to recall that in this stage he might be only an ordinary young man (at least to his fellow people's eye), who had some ambition for literary success. It is not impossible that he wanted to show off his literary talent and ability.

In fact, his opponent Johannes Hage ironically wrote:

Anyone knowing the editor of *Kjøbenhavnsposten* will be unable to deny him zeal in gathering materials, industry in working them up, a high degree of discretion and deep respect for truth without petty, egotistic motivation — qualities that we for our part place high above wit and dialectical skill when these are not matched by a love of truth but serve only to glorify one's own little self. (EPW 144)

We can see young Kierkegaard in fact had these tendencies from his method of arguments. He seemed not to try to put forth some substantial affirmation, but only explode his opponents' assertions.

It is possible, however, that he placed his hope for developing mass media from these polemics. The main targets of his attack was consistently ambiguous conceptions and rhetoric of his opponents, and irresponsible attitude of anonymous writers. His attack to mass media and its supporters was not wholesale.

... here [Fædrelandet] we have a happiest situation. After withstanding the storm over the David trial, Fædelandet got on its feet with rejuvenated energy and especially of late has achieved a vigorous and sound existence. Fædelandet seems to have found the direction in which it wants to move and in a frank and honest editor a hand that will prevent every kind of eccentricity. It seems to have understood that myth ... about the battle of freedom of the press in this country, from which one learns among other things to investigate more closely what freedom of the press there is before sounding the alarm. (EPW 52)

While Kierkegaard kept his eye on vulgarity and irresponsibility of anonymous articles in newspapers, he admitted that newspapers were useful for enlightening people, and kept trying to contribute not a few articles to newspapers. Young Kierkegaard seemed to believe in enlightenment and gradual development of their society, though in a very conservative way.

2 The Corsair Affair and *Two ages*

Later Kierkegaard found himself and his way to be a philosophical author, and left this field of debate on free speech. From many of his journal entries,

however, he must have been watching and reflecting on the press. After finishing *Postscript*, as you know, he reopened the fight with the vulgar press, though this time the opponent was much more low-brow, harsh, relentless, and malicious. Kierkegaard got his honor to be one of the earliest victims of yellow journalism. I think I do not need to go into the detail here, but only suggest that I think the war with the Corsair was started by Kierkegaard himself (not P. L. Møller) and it was due to Kierkegaard's misunderstanding of Møller's article.

In any way, this incident made him reflect on his society and mass media again. In one of the earliest passages of "The Present Age" in TA, which was written in the period, he sonorously declares that "[T] he present age is essentially a *sensible, reflecting age, devoid of passion, flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence*. (TA 68) According to Kierkegaard, we are in an age of reflection, and its sickness and symptoms are leveling, disinterestedness, anonymity, chattering, superficiality, formlessness, philandering, dependence on how-to-manuals and negligence of true knowledge. I shall not go far into the detail here, though it is extremely important, as all of you must know all of his points much better than I (I'm sure some of you can even recite them).

But here I will try to point one easily overlooked point. I would like to put forth a hypothesis that at this stage of his lifetime, Kierkegaard began really to appreciate the ethically positive value of silence. He was one of the earliest writers that became aware of the importance of inner life, in a sense contrasted to public life.

3 Abandoning the ethics as the disclosed

Before the Corsair affair, Kierkegaard in EO and FT regarded the essence of the ethics as the manifest, the open to other people and public. For example, in EO Judge William, the spokesman of the ethical, says:

... honesty, frankness, openness, understanding — this is the life principle in marriage. Without this understanding, marriage is unbeautiful and actually immoral ... (EO II, 116)

and in FT, Johannes *de silentio* declare that

The ethical as such is the universal; as the universal it is in turn the disclosed. The single individual, qualified as immediate, sensate, and psychical, is the hidden. Thus his ethical task is to work himself out of his hiddenness and to become disclosed in the universal. (FT 82)

In light of these definitions, the aesthete A is supposed to remain in aesthetic sphere because he kept his inwardness entirely secret to everyone, and Abraham is supposed to be ethically guilty to have concealed his intention to sacrifice his son from his family.

But cannot we really have secrets or inner life, which we may be shy of or hesitate to speak of to others, in order to be ethical?

For some of our eyes, Judge William may seem to be only a shallow worldling, and no doubt A apparently seems a more attractive figure.

It is because Agamemnon in FT tried to hide his intention from Iphigeneia and he himself suffered from it, that he looks a fascinating tragic hero. If we see a person who can talk about her anything to anyone, we would regard her not as an ethical person, but as really a shallow being. Not only can we see too frank a person as a separate individual, but also we ourselves may not be able to see ourselves as ourselves if we have no secrecy or isolation.

No need to say, Kierkegaard himself had been noticed that secrecy and silence are essential for our life. Johannes *de silentio* says:

Despite the rigorousness with which ethics demands disclosure, it cannot simply be denied that secrecy and silence make a man

great simply because they are qualifications of inwardness. (FT 88)

But, in the early works of Kierkegaard, silence is dangerous and may be immoral.

The tragic hero, who is the favorite of ethics, is the purely human; him I can understand, and all his undertakings are out in the open. If I go further, I always run up against the paradox, the divine and the demonic, for silence is both. Silence is the demon's trap, and the more that is silenced, the more terrible the demon, ut silence is also divinity's mutual understanding with the single individual. (Ibid.)

We have to choose *either* to be hidden and silent and remain in the aesthetical sphere, *or* to be disclosed and go into the ethical sphere, though it is suggested that there may be the third hidden sphere, that is the religious.

This contraposition between the importance of one's own secret/inwardness and the ethical as the disclosed, forms the unique tension that marks Kierkegaard's earlier works.

The problem for Kierkegaard was, that in some special situations, we cannot communicate our reasons for actions to other people, or if we do, we may not be understood. Take an example from FT.

Abraham remains silent — but he *cannot* speak. Therein lies the distress and anxiety. Even though I go on talking night and day without interruption, if I cannot make myself understood when I speak, then I am not speaking. This is the case with Abraham. He can say everything, but one thing he cannot say, and if he cannot say that — that is, say it in such a way that the other understands it — then he is not speaking. (FT 113)

But I think it is a bit hard for us to take this in-

sistence at face value. Abraham was in fact required to kill his son, and as a knight of faith, he was willing to do it. He overrode a general duty to protect his child with God's particular command. In this, in one sense, I find no *logical* problems, as Johannes alludes. Indeed, even if Abraham had told his intention to his people, he would never have been understood. People would have seen him as somewhat tempted or corrupted by a demon, or of a evil character. But it is because God's direct command rarely occurs and that God requires people to sacrifice one's son is really hard to believe. But this is a practical difficulty and not a logical one. If, as Johannes suggests, Abraham cannot communicate to other people because his situation is "particular", not universal, we cannot understand the whole story or Johannes' speculation itself. Then, if Abraham cannot speak, it is because he cannot explain his situation *practically, not theoretically or logically*. At least, another knight of faith can understand Abraham's situation and would want to admit he was right.

If one believes his action or decision is ethically justified, he must somehow *be able to* explain reasons to do it. This is the logic of justification, which most of us will accept. However, it is hard to see even in a very special situation like Abraham's, one cannot be justified only because one cannot *in practice* tell his reason to others. Suppose Agamemnon had not told of his will to sacrifice his daughter because of some practical difficulty, for example, because of lack of time. It would not make his decision wrong or unjustified. He would have said, "I might be misunderstood, and, in practice, some surely will blame me, but after deliberation, I believe I ought to do it, and I will be justified in the most important sense." If so, from my point of view, we have to say that the analysis Johannes gives us misses the point of ethical justification.

His later works such as *Christian Discourses* or SD, however, I think the concept of the ethical as open to public seems almost abandoned. Rather, the characteristic of the ethico-religious is seen as incognito and its imitation, which other people have

nothing to say about. From this point of view, it is one's dissonance of inwardness and outwardness that show where he is in several spiritual stages, and the depth of one's despair (and one's dialectical nearness/remoteness to salvation). Far from disapproving silence and isolation as immoral, they are positively (though in his dialectical way) valued. First, take some passage from TA.

... Only the person who can remain essentially silent can speak essentially, can act essentially. Silence is inwardness. (TA 97)

The law manifest in poetic production is identical, on a smaller scale, with the law for the life of every person in social intercourse and education. ... An author certainly must have his private personality (sin private Personlighed) as everyone else has, but this must be his adyton [inner sanctum], and just as the entrance to a house is barred by stationing two soldiers with crossed bayonets, so by means of the dialectical cross of qualitative opposites the equality of ideality forms the barrier that prevents all access. ... The inward orientation of silence is the condition for cultured conversation ... (TA 98-9)

I think it is obvious that here and other similar passages in later works Kierkegaard changed his conception of the status of silence. No longer did he hesitate to admit the importance of silence, and had felt no tension between the inwardness and the ethical.

Now we can imagine why his change happened. If the ethical of early Kierkegaard is the disclosed *in practice* to public, and if, after the Corsair affair, he came to see the public as corrupted and untruth, he had to throw away either the ethical as disclosed

or the inwardness. Of course this second reflection on media and society made him abandon the ethical as disclosed in favor of inwardness. We are rather required to keep our inwardness and ourselves from the chattering "public" in order to be authentic ethical agents.

4 Toward a critical appraisal of Kierkegaard's media critic

Now We have to re-appraise his earlier concept of the ethical from our contemporary view. But apparently "the ethical" in EO and/or FT is too demanding and might overlook the point of private life. I would like to suggest that his difficulty rises from the too simple dichotomy of openness/disclosure (private/public).

Let me introduce how 20th century philosophers threw lights on the issue in haste. As communication media get popular, the problems of communication media and privacy became, and has been, one of the hottest subjects of contemporary philosophy. Many philosopher have had to reflect seriously on media why privacy is important.

Legal philosophers like Stanley Benn², Jeffrey Reiman and others suggest that we need private inner life for our autonomy. For us to be a autonomous person, we have to be able to plan our own lifestyle freely for ourselves, and try it ourselves. Because we in turn need our inner freedom. In short, we need our somewhat closed and opaque inner life in order to be ourselves. I think this line of arguments, that hidden inwardness has the greatest importance for us, has a strong affinity with Kierkegaardian thinking. Rather, we should say they are strongly influenced by Kierkegaard and other existentialistic philosophers. Now we are sons and daughters of Kierkegaardian existentialism tradition, and he must always be one of the best resources of our discussion in this field.

²Stanley I. Benn, "Privacy, freedom, and respect for persons", 1971, and Jeffrey Reiman, "Privacy, intimacy, and personhood", 1976. Both are reprinted in Ferdinand Schoeman (ed.), *Philosophical Dimensions of Privacy: An Anthology*, Cambridge University Press, 1984

Besides this type of arguments, there's another way. In his seminal essay titled "Privacy", Legal philosopher Charles Fried³ argued that we have to have privacy to have relationships of intimacy and trust. If we want special intimate relationship with particular people, we must create domains of privacy. James Rachels⁴ also has argued that people need to control information about themselves in order to maintain a diversity of relationship. For them one's inner life and secrets are far from immoral, but necessary means for us to have intimate and various relationship with others. There are no secret/disclosure dichotomy in our daily (also spiritual) life, but how we exchange our inner feelings, emotions and thought depends on how we and other people have what relationship. I think it is this point of view that earlier Kierkegaard could not reach at in his own struggling life and authorship.

Kierkegaard's criticism of mass society and mass media has not lost its impact. His theory of inwardness has been one of the main resources of our self-understanding in our age. I dare to say without further discussion that our important concepts of "individual", "inwardness" or "privacy" as we now understand them emerged in mid-19th century bourgeois culture. Like J. S. Mill, Edgar Allan Poe, and Gustave Flaubert, Kierkegaard himself lived in and reflected on mass society, and made an archetype of our self-understanding. One field of his greatest impact on general readers may be in this field, and maybe it is greater than that in Christianity. No doubt we can learn much more from his works about communication and media since we already share his insight about the modern age but are in our —maybe a much more reflective, passionless, superficial, and always chattering— IT age.

³Charles Fried, "Privacy", 1968, reprinted in *Philosophical Dimensions of Privacy: An Anthology*

⁴James Rachels, "Why privacy is important", 1975, reprinted in *Philosophical Dimensions of Privacy: An Anthology*