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A REVIEW OF JACOB HOWLAND'S *KIERKEGAARD AND SOCRATES*

A Review of Jacob Howland, *Kierkegaard and Socrates: A Study of Philosophy and Faith*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xii + 231 pp. \$80.00 (cloth). ISBN: 0-521-86203-5.

Jacob Howland's reflections on faith and philosophy, in a volume preoccupied with such elusive themes as time, eros, sin, redemption, reason, revelation, eternity, and difference, are remarkable in their insightful clarity. His style can be appreciated for its attentiveness to detail *and* its honest approach to issues relevant not only to scholars and academics but anyone with a "capacity for wonder" (2). In the following pages, I will trace Howland's examination of the role of paradox from the Socratic practice of philosophy as divinely inspired to Kierkegaard's poetic elaboration of subjectivity as the "highest human manifestation of eros" (197). My final thoughts and questions at the conclusion of this review are intended merely to expand upon Howland's reading of Kierkegaard, and I hope they will not be construed as a divisive form of criticism.

In the Socratic view, philosophy is a project of uniting thought and eros. Insofar as we desire to understand ourselves we must possess the truth by passionately pursuing it. This, undoubtedly, is a paradox. Socratic wisdom becomes truth and ignorance, transcendence and immanence, reflection and doubt. According to Kierkegaard, there is no systematic resolution of such a paradox: we are necessarily and perpetually afflicted by our deepest questions. We cannot answer them with reason alone. To unite thought and eros, then, is perhaps an impossible task. It is certainly one requiring the greatest patience and the utmost devotion. Comparing religious and philosophical approaches to truth, Jacob Howland focuses on the subjective aspects of this task. In both cases, for Kierkegaard and Socrates, the passion of desire is a fundamental presupposition. But this raises an immediate question: how is it exactly that religious faith and philosophy take up the same issue in the same way without losing their separate identities? It can be argued that they are both very much concerned with a paradoxical relationship to truth, and that this relationship is fraught with subjective ambiguities, but there must be more to it than that. Our answer will be found in a certain condition of truth, the same condition of truth which provides us with a philosophical source of recollection.

In his third chapter, "Platonic Interlude: Eros and the God," Howland explains the Socratic condition of truth as an intermediate kind of passion. The reason why it is called intermediate is because of its intrinsic ambivalence between human and divine regions of being. The ultimate condition of truth, as a

principle of recollection, is an essential part of us: it expresses our inner longings for harmony and completeness. But it is moreover an extension of something beyond the merely human: something divine, absolute, and unchanging. Here, then, is the paradoxical condition of philosophy: "Philosophy has two roots: it is answerable to, and authorized by, the god, but also by what Socrates calls eros. It is possible for philosophy to spring from both roots simultaneously, because both work together in such a way that neither has priority: while the god arouses eros, it is eros that opens the soul to the god" (59). Socratic philosophizing, as distinguished from modern notions of subjectivity, is motivated by a higher truth than its own projections. Socrates, as noted throughout *Kierkegaard and Socrates*, is inspired in his quest for self-knowledge by the god at Delphi. Philosophy so conceived is an equivocal affair, for it is not only grounded in itself in its own task of self-reflection, but this task is inextricably bound to its exterior side, to the mysteries of oracles and daimonic impulses. The passion of desire as a condition of truth should therefore be seen as a project of self-discovery as well as divine openness and receptivity.

If our paradoxical relationship to the truth is marked by openness, and faith shares this with philosophy, then we cannot say at this point how it is that reason and faith should be distinguished. Excepting that philosophy which determines itself as purely factual or objective, the ultimate course of thinking returns us to an unknown destination, namely, a realm of transcendent immortality. But within Socrates' theory of recollection one can see a structure of eros that necessarily leads beyond itself, and it does so in a very specific manner. The subjectivity of this structure, its passion and its openness, relies upon the truth of its own reality. Self-knowledge, in other words, begins with a certain truth of the self or the soul which cannot be totally undermined. Philosophy begins with doubt, but it also begins with truth, and this fundamental truth is within each of us. The truth of the outside and the truth of the inside are intimately bound together, so much so that it could be said they are the same absolute truth. It seems to follow, then, that the project of uniting thought and eros is an expression of natural affinities: "The soul is erotically drawn to 'that which truly is' as its natural end and complement. The soul's encounter with being leads to pregnancy, and issues, after a period of labor, in the virtue of intelligence (*nous*) and in truth, which together make it possible both to know what truly is and to live in harmony with this knowledge" (72). The receptivity of the soul to wisdom is a function of eros in such a way that knowledge is a necessary assumption: we do not think of the truth without first presupposing its existence. Philosophy is a project of paradox and passion, but the relationship between the soul and reality is supported by a structure of existence that facilitates their expected unification. In sum, the philosopher's search for truth begins with himself.

But in faith, too, the essential nature of paradox is reflected in each of our lives. It is impossible to completely separate ourselves from its contradictory reality, and all of our actions reveal its ultimate authority. Thought and eros come together, in the domain of philosophy, only insofar as they are naturally compatible. The inner structure of eros thereby opens up to divine thought in its

paradoxical quest for knowledge, and it does this in hopes of resolving the paradox. Relying upon the principle of recollection, the project of Socratic philosophy therefore assumes a vital truth, and this truth can be discovered within every soul. But Kierkegaardian faith also articulates a position on the reality of the self that cannot be confined to particular historical circumstances. As Howland discusses in chapter 6, "Self-Love and Offense," it is in the nature of self-assertion to betray its dependence on paradoxical relationships (133). The most defiant resistance to divine love, to the finite incarnation of God, is simply another means of testing the highest truth and proving its authority. In Kierkegaard's words, "The one offended does not speak according to his own nature but according to the nature of the paradox, just as someone caricaturing another person does not originate anything himself but only copies the other in the wrong way."¹ Even as the one who lives defiantly also lives without the condition of truth, or at least turns away from it, this moment of turning away is nevertheless an instantiation of divine connectedness. But if our denials of the absolute paradox have no power other than reaffirming its claim upon us, then once again the question arises as to the difference between philosophy and faith: in each case, it seems, the truth pervades our existence as both an interior and exterior relationship.

As stated before, the daimonic structure of eros that animates Socrates' principle of recollection is grounded in truth in a very concrete, specific manner. It is therefore implied and argued that every human possesses the truth. The condition of truth exists within each of us. The role of the teacher is merely to remind us of that which we already know. To the Socratic philosopher, then, the paradox of passion binds together ignorance and wisdom, eros and thought, in the sense that such opposites are natural complements. Our desire for truth is a subjective passion, not because concrete reality is reducible to personal appetites and impressions, but according to the project of philosophy as an attempt to understand ourselves. Truth belongs to at least two worlds, and the search for it begins with a paradox of thought that opens itself to an outside reality that is somehow hidden deep within us. This way of formulating the paradox, as Howland observes, is not exactly the same as Kierkegaard's.

One mode of truth is equivalent to an objective uncertainty matched by philosophical doubt and subjective passion, while the other is entirely absurd. It is absurd for two essential reasons: objectivity and subjectivity. The Socratic truth is uncertain, and thus it requires a passionate desire, as opposed to a purely intellectual system, to overcome its difficulties. The paradox of thought pertains only to the thinker's predicament and not to what is good and beautiful in itself. In faith, however, the paradox is infinitely multiplied and refracted: "Whereas Socrates sought to bring into relation to his existence a truth that, considered in itself, is unparadoxical, Christianity seeks to bring into relation to one's existence that which is intrinsically absolutely paradoxical – namely, the unity of absolute difference and absolute equality in the incarnate god" (203). An intellectual or

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 51.

cognitive approach to this inconceivable truth is bound to fail, for it cannot be thought through. According to the religious hypothesis, as put forth by Kierkegaard, the paradox of passionate existence takes place not only in relationship to an infinite power but also *within that power itself*. This implies, in turn, that the truth of religion cannot be discovered by our own devices: the truth of the outside, as opposed to the philosophical assumption, is not to be discovered through either introspection or dialogue. Our greatest efforts fall infinitely short of comprehending that which cannot be comprehended by any of us. So despite the fact that all of our actions attest to an absolutely paradoxical love, these actions have no authority on their own basis. The project of uniting ourselves to the truth can therefore be distinguished in at least three fundamental ways: 1) according to whether or not the truth is inherently paradoxical; 2) in respect to how we see ourselves as conditions of that truth; and 3) by the assumption that thought and eros will likely culminate in a resolution of paradox.

The last of these assumptions is actually a consequence of the other two: the principles of intelligible truth and philosophical recollection hold out the hope of a dialectical synthesis of opposites. If it is believed, instead, that the absolute truth expresses an incomprehensible contradiction of terms, then this hope seems to be diminished. In the final pages of *Kierkegaard and Socrates*, Howland elaborates on this distinction between dialectical certainty and subjective inwardness. It is apparent that Kierkegaard, despite his profound respect for Socrates as a passionate thinker, believes that the paradoxical nature of eros is inevitably sublimated by the Greek philosopher: "In the last analysis, Socrates falls short of the subjectivity and inwardness involved in Christian faithfulness" (198). Devotion to the ultimate truth, as expressed by the impossible incarnation of God, demands the perpetually uncertain repetition of that truth within our selves. The project of faith is a never-ending practice of uniting the finite with the infinite, and the temporal with the unchanging (197). Throughout the last chapter and the epilogue, Howland provides several key insights as to why this distinction may be either false or misleading. He concludes by suggesting that the boundaries between philosophy and faith are even less rigid than Kierkegaard imagined: "In any case, there is good reason to question Climacus's characterization of faith as a passion even more difficult to sustain than Socratic eros. Such judgments are likely to tell us more about the one who makes them than about the intrinsic nature of either philosophy or faith" (217-18). Perhaps a final question to be raised is one of definition: if the passionate truths of philosophy and faith are to be sustained in a ceaseless unfolding of paradox, then what exactly does it mean to say that we have faith in an outside, transcendent reality? Doesn't the absolute infinity of an incomprehensible, nameless power exceed all of our structures of faith and reason? This line of questioning can be pursued only so far: the nameless "object" of either philosophy or religious faith is by its own definition *beyond* definition. But if this object or power nevertheless exists, as a truly unknown possibility, then it would seem that the intrinsic nature of every paradox is resolved by its openness to an outside that reduces thought and eros alike to one effortless reality.

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