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The Leap of Faith

One of the main arguments of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* has two premises, stated by Kierkegaard in these words:

[1] The greatest attainable certainty with respect to anything historical is merely an *approximation*.

[2] And an approximation, when viewed as a basis for an eternal happiness, is wholly inadequate (p. 25).[1]

The conclusion, clear enough but not stated so succinctly in the context, is that

[3] Therefore an eternal happiness cannot be based on a (rational) certainty about anything historical.

In an earlier paper[2] I have dubbed this the "Approximation Argument," proposed an interpretation of it, and criticized the argument under that interpretation. I now think another interpretation is possible, which is at least partly liable to a similar criticism, but may lead us deeper into Kierkegaard's real contribution to our thinking about the nature of faith. I do not think it is necessary to choose between the interpretations; both seem to correspond to intentions that are fairly clear in the text.

The interpretations disagree on the reference of 'certainty', and therefore of 'approximation' in Kierkegaard's formulation of the argument. My first interpretation took these terms to refer to the degree to which the belief in question is justified by the historical research that has been accomplished. On this reading, the argument can be restated as follows:

(1a) The greatest degree to which a belief can be justified by objective historical reasoning is only an approximation to certainty (that is, a probability of less than 100 percent).

(2a) A degree of justification that only approximates certainty is wholly inadequate as a basis for an eternal happiness.

(3a) Therefore an eternal happiness cannot be based on objective historical reasoning.

My criticism of this version of the argument focused on premise (2a). (2a) is supported by the contention that for the ("infinite") intensity of a religious person's interest in an eternal happiness, no chance of error is "too small to be worth worrying about," and hence a probability of less than 100 percent cannot justify, for such an interest, the totally unreserved reliance that religious faith requires. My objection to this reasoning is that it presupposes erroneously that the only good reason for disregarding a risk of error is that the risk is too small to be worth worrying about. One would have a good reason of a different sort for disregarding a risk of error that *is* large enough to be worth worrying about if disregarding it were the likeliest way to attain one's chief ends. And on the showing of Kierkegaard's Approximation Argument, it might well be rational for a would-be Christian to disregard the 30 percent chance of error, if objective historical reasoning showed it 70 percent probable that Jesus rose from the dead. For that would be the likeliest way of attaining her chief ends, in that situation, if it was an end of overriding importance, for her, to believe unreservedly in Jesus' resurrection if and only if it really happened.

The other interpretation of the Approximation Argument takes 'certainty' and 'approximation' in Kierkegaard's formulation of the argument to refer, not to the degree of justification of the belief in question, but to the belief itself. The issue, on this reading, is not how close the probability of the belief comes to 100 percent, but how close the belief comes to complete conviction. In this connection it will be useful to look at one of the passages in which Kierkegaard develops the notion of a "leap" of faith:

> What if instead of talking or dreaming about an absolute beginning, we talked about a leap. To be content with a "mostly," an "as good as," a "you could almost say that," a "when you sleep on it until tomorrow, you can easily say that," suffices merely to betray a kinship with Trop, who, little by little, reached the point of assuming that almost having passed his examinations, was the same as having passed them. . . . Reflection can be halted only by a leap . . . When the subject does not put an end to his reflection, he is made infinite in reflection, i.e., he does not arrive at a decision (p. 105).

It would of course be merely ridiculous to say, 'When you sleep on it until tomorrow, you can easily say that Jesus rose from the dead'. But there certainly have been scholars who have aspired to be in a position

to say, 'Probably Jesus rose from the dead'—and philosophers who have been prepared to identify belief in general, and religious belief in particular, with an assignment of probabilities.[3] Kierkegaard's central point, in this passage, is that that is not enough for religious faith. 'Probably Jesus rose from the dead' and 'Probably God is love' are not affirmations of faith. To get from this probability assignment to the simple affirmation of faith, 'Jesus rose from the dead', a transition is needed, which Kierkegaard calls a "leap." This leap from probability assignment to full belief is needed when the probability assigned is high, as well as when it is low (a feature of Kierkegaard's position that often is overlooked). The leap, according to Kierkegaard, must be made by a "decision," which puts an end to reflection.

There are contexts in which a probability assignment is all the belief that is required of us. In some cases, indeed, a careful calculation of the probabilities, a strict proportioning to them of our assent, and a factoring of all the risks and probabilities into our practical decisions are all the belief it is desirable for us to have. This is true of an investor's beliefs about the future prices of securities, and of a doctor's beliefs about the effects of various possible treatments on her patients. If 'Interest rates will probably decline in the next six months' sounds too indefinite in the mouth of an investment advisor, it is because we want a more precise estimate of *how* probable the decline is, not a firmer conviction of the fact of the decline.

But there are also contexts in which more conviction is demanded. 'Probably so', in answer to the question, 'Do you love me?' is not exactly an affirmation of love. In answer to 'Is the moral law binding on us?' it is apt to leave the impression that the respondent is insufficiently committed to morality. To factor into one's investment decisions whatever chance of error one sees in one's estimate of the probable course of interest rates is just what is expected of the prudent investor; but the instant I factor into my practical deliberations a "7-percent chance that morality is just an illusion," I am not living morally but amorally.

Another context in which more decisiveness is required is repentance. 'Probably I was wrong to do that to you' is not much of an apology. And even if I say it only to myself, the 'probably' is apt to express a reservation that is incompatible with true contrition.

Kierkegaard is surely right in placing religious faith in this category of beliefs for which 'probably' is not enough. 'Probably Jesus rose from the dead' is indeed not an affirmation of faith. A "leap" from probability assessment, however favorable, to a different kind of conviction is required.

Against this background we can formulate our second version of the Approximation Argument:

(1b) The strongest belief that can be based on objective historical reasoning is a probability assignment of less than 100 percent.
(2b) Any probability assignment of less than 100 percent is wholly inadequate as a form of religious faith, as a basis for an eternal happiness.
(3b) Therefore an eternal happiness cannot be based on objective historical reasoning.

In the first interpretation the second premise was the object of my attack; here the second premise seems absolutely correct. As I have been arguing, religious faith is more than a probability assignment. (1b), however, may be liable to the same sort of criticism as (2a). Each seems to depend on a questionable assumption about what would be required to justify an unreserved conviction. In the case of (1b), the assumption is that if objective historical reasoning discovers a probability of no more than n percent for a proposition p, then the strongest form of belief in p that such reasoning can justify is a mere probability assignment—the belief that p is n percent probable. But this is an error. Suppose that objective historical reasoning shows it 98.5 percent probable, on the evidence you have, that your past behavior satisfies a description that, on ethical principles to which you are committed, implies that you have seriously wronged another person. Shall we conclude that the strongest conviction of guilt that objective historical reasoning could justify for you could only take the form, 'Probably I seriously wronged him' or 'Almost certainly I seriously wronged him'? No. The moral importance of contrition, and its nature, are such that reasoning that establishes for you that it is 98.5 percent probable that you have seriously wronged someone will also justify the transition or "leap" from that probability assignment to the simple belief or unreserved conviction expressed by 'I have seriously wronged him'.

Similarly, in view of the nature and importance of religious faith, reasoning that established a high probability that God raised Jesus from the dead could also justify a transition from that probability assignment to unreserved belief in Jesus' resurrection. This is not to deny that a "leap" is involved here, from a probability assignment to a belief of a different nature. But it appears that the leap could be rationally justified. Especially if the leap is a decision, as Kierkegaard suggests—a decision to live on the assumption that the religious claim is true, disregarding any chance that it is false—it seems that that decision could be justified rationally by evidence that the claim is probably true and that, if it is true, one can

attain one's chief ends in the matter only by accepting the decision without reservation.

Perhaps the second version of the Approximation Argument can be defended from this attack by another interpretation, this time of (1b). I have treated 'based on' in (1b) as equivalent to 'justified by'. But we could construe it more genetically as meaning 'attained through'. This would be more closely connected with 'attainable' in Kierkegaard's formulation of [1]. (1b) would then be a claim about what is psychologically possible: that the strongest belief that can be reached through a process of objective historical reasoning is a mere probability assignment of less than 100 percent.

This is not a very plausible claim, as it stands. Surely it is psychologically possible, on the basis of objective historical reasoning, to make a leap of the sort that Kierkegaard seems to be demanding—a voluntary decision to live on the assumption of the truth of a proposition rendered probable by the reasoning, and to disregard any risk of error. But maybe Kierkegaard's emphasis on voluntary decision is misleading here. For it is plausible to suppose that religious faith involves something more, something even harder to reach by a process of reasoning. 'Probably so' cannot be turned into an affirmation of faith by adding, 'And I have therefore decided to act resolutely on the assumption that it is so'. What may still be lacking in such a resolution is a deeply *felt* conviction that the proposition believed is true. There is a pattern of emotionality, as well as a pattern of voluntary actions, that belongs to a religious way of life. The ideal of religious faith therefore has an emotional aspect. Peace, joy, gratitude, and the freedom to love are supposed to flow from a confidently held conviction that God is good. In this faith one is to respond emotionally to the divine goodness in which one believes, rather than to the balance of the evidence that one sees for it and against it. Most believers will have some emotional response to grounds that they see for doubting; but ideally, at least, the believer's emotional response to what she believes in faith will be greater than is proportionate to the degree to which objective reasoning or evidence renders the belief probable for her.

Can such confidence "with respect to anything historical" be produced by objective reasoning? Not by objective reasoning alone, I should say. One is not likely to sustain the confidence of religious faith without seeing *some* grounds for one's belief. And it may be possible to argue cogently, on rational grounds, that it is *desirable* in some cases for the confidence of a religious belief to exceed the degree of probability rationally assigned to it. But the confidence itself is an elemental religious phenomenon which at least partly precedes rather than follows rational justification.

That conclusion may not concede very much to Kierkegaard. Can we go farther, and hold that objective rational investigation is incompatible, psychologically, with the confidence of religious faith? Construed broadly, this claim seems to be empirically false. There are surely (many religious) believers who have maintained a strong and steady confidence in their faith while examining with as much objectivity as most of us are capable of, the evidence for and against their religious convictions. But in such an investigation, it is only judgments about the value of various pieces of evidence that are fully up for grabs. The possibility of actually giving up her central religious convictions is felt by the believer as remote.

There is another type of inquiry into the grounds of religious belief, however, in which one feels that one's faith is at risk throughout the process—or perhaps even that faith does not really belong to one until the process is complete. That is in fact the kind of investigation against which many of Kierkegaard's protests appear to be directed, and he would be on firmer ground in holding that while the investigation lasts,[4] the investigator cannot have a fully confident religious faith.

Notes

1. Page references in parentheses are to Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. D. F. Swenson and W. Lowrie (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1941).

2. See chapter 2 in the present volume.

3. Such a view is adopted by Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), chapters 1 and 4.

4. Kierkegaard maintains, of course, that on its own terms, investigation is never complete. Here the second interpretation of the Approximation Argument merges with what, in my earlier paper, I called "the Postponement Argument"—though here it is emotional confidence rather than voluntary commitment that is seen as postponed.