

On the importance of Kierkegaard's vision of Socrates for the modern world

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XXI century is a digital age, the age of sophisticated technologies. Human race is more powerful than ever before. A lot of dreams of the past came true. High-speed train delivers us from London to Paris in less than three hours. Aircrafts make it possible to have breakfast in Berlin and dinner in New York City. Yuri Gagarin made a journey into outer space, Neil Armstrong walked on the Moon. Curiosity rover is exploring Mars when you are reading this text and it is remotely controlled from Earth.

It looks like that the old promise - 'ye shall be as gods' [1,3:5] is hold. Can we learn anything from the *wise men of past*? What part of this definition should be stressed today - are they more *wise men* or *men of past*? This essay is focused on two thinkers - Søren Kierkegaard (1813 - 1855) and Socrates (469 BC - 399 BC). The goal is to show the connections between these figures and how their ideas can address the problems of modernity.

Socrates was a pagan philosopher who lived in classical Greece and described himself as a gadfly of the state [2]:

sort of gadfly, given to the state by the God; and the state is like a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life.

He was not interested in the outer world as earlier Greek philosophers. Instead, his focus was on the inward dimension trying to understand what does it mean to be a human being [3]:

I must first know myself ... to be curious about that which is not my concern, while I am still in ignorance of my own self, would be ridiculous. ... I want to know not about this, but about myself: am I a monster more complicated and swollen with passion than the serpent Typho, or a creature of a gentler and simpler sort, to whom Nature has given a diviner and lowlier destiny?

Socrates never answered this question himself. He was questioning the persons who pretended to know the answers showing to them that their views are contradictory, mistaken and can not be counted as a truth. To achieve this Socrates used his famous irony - pretending that he knows nothing and his interlocutor is a great expert in the question under discussion. This approach became very famous and was used (and is used now) by the variety of thinkers in the later generations.

Søren Kierkegaard is one of the most famous representatives of the Golden Age in Danish culture. He lived more than two thousands years after Socrates and was a Christian. What did Kierkegaard learn from the pagan philosopher? It's not possible to fully answer this question in scope of the short essay. Hence, let's limit the discussion by the two major aspects here.

First of all, Kierkegaard shared with Socrates the focus on the inward dimension. He presented Christianity not as a doctrine but as *an existence-contradiction and existence-communication* [5,p.383]. Young Kierkegaard wrote in his journal in 1835 [6,p.19]:

What use would it be to be able to propound the meaning of Christianity, to explain many separate facts, if it had no deeper meaning for myself and my life?

As we see, he was searching for the subjective truth. Exactly as Socrates.

Second, Kierkegaard was critical on the understanding of Christianity by his contemporaries. He saw his mission in the XIX century Copenhagen as Socratic [4]:

The only analogy I have before me is Socrates; my task is a Socratic task, to audit the definition of what it is to be a Christian. I do not call myself a Christian (keeping the ideal free), but I can make it manifest that the others are that even less.

Socrates' invention, irony, was Kierkegaard's weapon to undermine the beliefs of the time which he considered to be wrong. He traced the usage of irony from Socrates to XIX century in his Master's thesis - 'On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates' and used this tool extensively in the later writings.

Are these issues still relevant for our time? Human power is very impressive in our age. But do we know ourselves? Is a human a monster more complicated than Typho or a creature of a gentler sort? Can we answer this question which was raised five centuries before Jesus Christ was born?

In my opinion this question is of extreme importance for our age. Devil promised that human would know good and evil [1,3:5]. Do we have this knowledge in our age? And even more important - if we have this knowledge, what do we do with it? Development of Philosophy and Science only increased the complexity of the problem. Philosophy killed the God (as Nietzsche famously told), Science delivered to us a lot of new machinery to dominate over the world and other human beings. Let's discuss the outcome of the advances in these two areas in more detail.

Science. Michel Foucault (1926 - 1984), one of the leading thinkers of Postmodern, describes the era of modernity as the time when the person invents himself constantly [7]:

Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself.

Science gave us a lot of new possibilities for inventing ourselves and the world around us. We can change a lot more than in the past - from making oases in the desert to changing person's gender. We also have very advanced technologies for mass destruction and murder as it was demonstrated by the last two World Wars. The central question is how to use these powerful new toys properly?

Philosophy. Enlightenment project led to the separation of church and state. Importance of the religion decreased for the individuals. And a lot of people found themselves in a problem of lacking the meaning. Relativism and nihilism started to spread. This problem was studied by Kierkegaard in his analysis of the German Romanticism movement. He depicted the logical end of such a life using example of Lisette, the heroine of Schlegel's "Lucinde" [8,p.299]:

Lisette ends her life as she had begun it ... by committing suicide seeks to attain the objective of all her endeavors-to be rid of herself. She preserves her aesthetic pattern to the end ... her last lines, spoken ... in a loud voice .. "Lisette must perish, perish now: that is the will of an iron fate" kind of dramatic idiocy that for someone who had earlier been an actress in a theater and later became one in life would be quite natural.

What are the limits of our self-invention? Should they be set and how? What are the criterias? All these questions are of central importance for the modern life.

How can we answer these questions? It looks like that it is the common point for the pagan philosopher Socrates, Christian author Kierkegaard and German philosopher Kant. Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804) was thinking on the definition of Enlightenment project and came to these words [9]:

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one's own mind without another's guidance. Dare to know! (Sapere aude.) "Have the courage to use your own understanding," is therefore the motto of the enlightenment.

Kierkegaard and Socrates put the focus to the inward dimension of the person. In my opinion human race is still very far from completing the goal set by them and shared by Kant. A lot of people in our age and in the XX century were seduced by the simplicity of different doctrines which promised happiness of different kind to the people without the need to use their own mind. They were focused on the society rather than on individual responsibilities. It's always simpler to follow the crowd rather than think on your own.

Human civilization made a tremendous progress on the way of technological knowledge. But technology in the hands of human who does not understand himself can become dangerous for the

civilization. It's time to reflect now and decide what do we want to do with the technologies we have.

To start this process we need to accept the old statement of the wise man of past: *'I know one thing: that I know nothing'* which is the beginning of any real knowledge and is very close to the virtue of Humility in Christianity. It's extremely hard for the modern world because of the amount of knowledge and technological power we have [5,p.383]:

To understand that a human being is capable of nothing ... is just as difficult for a remarkably endowed king as for a poor, wretched person, perhaps even more difficult, because he is so easily tempted by being capable of so much.

This is another lesson from Kierkegaard and Socrates which our age should learn in order for our civilization to continue its existence on Earth.

References

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