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KIERKEGAARD ON REASONED COMMITMENT AND PURITY OF HEART

Abstract

Soren Kierkegaard (SK) holds that purity of heart is single-mindedly and truly to will one thing, out of reasoned commitment, that is, in itself, an essential rather than an accidental unity, viz. the good, where the model of the good is the God-man Jesus Christ. .

First, SK has what I call a “Transmutation Problem.” He thinks that what “a man . . . wills must remain . . . unaltered in all changes, so that by willing it he can win immutability” (Steere trans., 60). Thus does willing issue in “the personal unity of the religious self” (Connell, 160). Still, if I will and commit to planting a tree, that does not make me more like a planted tree. So not all things I will make me more like the thing willed. One cannot always transmute the nature of the thing willed into a characteristic of the person who does the willing. A defender of SK might respond that if one wills and commits to love God, then one becomes more like God because God is love. Yet will, commitment and action are only baby steps to becoming more like God. By themselves they do not make one substantially more like God.

Second, for SK one must will the good “truly” and “in truth.” Walker (1985) points out that SK draws attention to the opposite side of doing so: self-deception. (29) SK and Walker view self-deception as *impurity of heart*. Although Walker means well in asking for transparency, he goes wrong by cashing out self-deception as always a kind of ignorance. (116) Also, Walker betrays a tin ear for the complexities of the ethics and (ir)rationality of self-deception. He ignores whether self-deception is always wrong or only when it masks or leads to wrongdoing, and whether self-deception about faults of character compounds or mitigates guilt for causing harm. (Martin)