

THANKSGIVING AS A SYNTHESIS OF THE TEMPORAL AND THE ETERNAL

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The centennial of Soren Kierkegaard's death brings into conjunction two things which are incommensurable. On the one hand, it evokes our personal and corporate gratitude for this man, a gratitude which is nonetheless real for all its intangible subjectivity. On the other hand, it marks an exact measurement of temporal succession, which is nonetheless significant for all its impersonal objectivity. Apart from our indebtedness it would not occur to us to number the years. Apart from chronological transience we would not be reminded of time-transcending indebtedness.

This conjunction of two incommensurable and yet inseparable factors has reminded me that on both sides we stand at some distance from the thought of S. K. himself. The contour of his thanksgiving is quite different from ours, as is also his appraisal of the significance of temporal succession and measurement. It may therefore be worth our energy to explore together his understanding of gratitude and its relation to time. The justification of such an enquiry depends primarily, of course, on whether thanksgiving was in fact of decisive importance to S. K. himself. That it was is a firm conviction of mine.

Another conviction is this: that the interpretation of S. K. has suffered from a neglect of such categories as gratitude. Often the historian of ideas goes astray most radically when he ignores what was actually the inner passion of a particular thinker. And this is what has usually happened in studies of S. K. Nothing is more constitutive of Kierkegaard's self-awareness than his thankfulness, yet few things are treated so seldom in books about him. His thought was in constant motion away from and back toward this magnetic pole. The very center of his thought was the awareness of God-relatedness as constitutive of the self. And to him no activity was more creative or revealing of the self than the act of gratitude. I am convinced that a more discerning appraisal of this act leads to an enhanced appreciation of his mind and spirit.

Let us begin by paying heed to his own testimony:

"I have had more joy in the relation of obedience to God than in thoughts that I produced. . . . My relationship to God is a reflection-relationship, is inwardness in reflection, . . . so that even in prayer my *forte* is thanksgiving." (PV 68f)

Why should S. K. have had more joy in his relation to God than in anything else? Surely because to him life itself is constituted by God-relatedness. Existence as a person is impossible apart from this relationship. Nothing is more native to true selfhood, therefore, than prayer. If life is God-relatedness, then nothing creates and sustains life more directly than prayer and in nothing is life more fully embodied than in prayer. The man who reflects about this life until his relationship to God becomes "a reflection-relationship" will naturally move in the direction of giving thanks.

To S. K., therefore, thanksgiving was not the minimal act, the introductory step, the glib opening of a conversation which immediately gives place to more pressing concerns of petition, confession, absolution or intercession. It was the end as much as the beginning, the saturating medium of petitions and confessions, the deepest fountain of forgiveness and intercession. As in his praying, so too in his living and thinking, the external visible actions were but the outward side of this inward relationship to God, a relationship dominated by gratitude.

But some will protest, "Have you forgotten the constant tension, the bitter controversy, the unremitting melancholy in his story? Are these the marks of a man whose consciousness was oriented inwardly by gratitude?" The apparent incongruity here may stem from differing ideas of what thanksgiving really is. To S. K. giving thanks is not an easy response of the heart, but one of its most difficult movements. Prayer springs not from an unreflective self but from the self concentrated in intense reflection and double-reflection. To be empowered to give thanks at all times and for every circumstance is a seal of redemption which lies on both sides of strenuous effort and profound suffering. The enemies of gratitude are most implacable, devious and deceptive, and these enemies already hold a beachhead in man's own mind. The ingratitude of Adam can be named and exorcized only by the gratitude of Christ. Only by the strength which is made perfect in weakness can a person become victor in a subtle struggle with Satan wherein the ultimate decisiveness of victory is completely hidden by the unobtrusive silence and the misleading triviality of the battlefield. In short, the *telos* and consummation of God's entire "training in

Christianity" is nothing less than the full release of praise to God for his inexhaustible bounty.

It is easy for us to treat gratitude as a response of men to men, which only for the religious man and at his option is gradually extended to include God as its object. This makes it all too natural for us to treat thankfulness as relatively non-essential in defining man's selfhood. But for S. K. thanksgiving is authentic only when it expresses man's total being, i.e., his God-relatedness. God is never the third party in an act of giving thanks (CUP 61). From Him alone comes every good and perfect gift. From him come *nothing* but good and perfect gifts. It is quite impossible to grasp in any paragraph the wealth of S. K.'s discourses on this theme. This wealth lies nearest to the surface, perhaps, in his expositions of the Bible, whether he is dealing with Job (R 110ff; ED II 7ff) or with James (ED I 35ff; 11 27, 45ff; FSE 228ff), whether he is meditating on the apostle Paul (ED I 139ff; III 95ff; GS 125ff) or the disciple Judas (CD II 284ff), whether he is analyzing the sin of Adam (ED II 27ff; GS 59; CoD 81) or the obedience of Christ (GS 44ff; CD 228ff).

The overwhelming and inexhaustible wealth of God's gifts surely lies behind the choice of a motto for *Point of View*:

“What shall I say? My words alone
Do not express my duty.
O God, how great thy wisdom is,
Thy goodness, might and beauty.” (Brorson)

To S. K., however, God does much more than place man in his debt and then wait for him to return thanks. God is the subject as well as the object of thanksgiving. It is He who is active in the movement of the grateful heart. His Spirit is vocal in the *Abba*, in inexpressible deep yearnings, and in the whole process of reflective inwardness. Gratitude articulates simultaneously the nothingness of man and the sufficiency of God, who is at work in man to create something out of nothing. To give thanks is an expression of inwardness, and inwardness is “the determinant of the eternal in man” (CoD 134). “If every man does not essentially participate in the absolute, then the whole game's up” (CoD 102).

This participation in the absolute, however, preserves the qualitative distinction between the thankful man and his God. Kierkegaard recognized that the apostle's rhetorical questions must be answered in the negative:

"Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Who has been his counselor?
Who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?"
(Rom. 11:34 . . . cp. CUP 124f; J 369)

On the other hand, S. K. realized that although we cannot repay God's gift, we can respond to God's gift of himself in his gift. Man can stand in fear and trembling, in trust and surrender, in repentance and reverence. These responses to God are forms of gratitude, forms in which the God who is active in the giving of thanks is one and the same God as the God to whom thanks are given.

Man can never act, even in the giving of thanks, without dependence on God who has given him not only the gifts but also the power to thank God. This is why S. K. found a childish delight in offering his whole work as a spy in gratitude to God. He handed his entire authorship back to God "with more diffidence than a child when it gives as a present to the parents an object which the parents had presented to the child". He was diffident, but he was joyful because he knew that God would not be so cruel as to take the gift back and to say "This is my property" (PV 88-90 note). Man's thanks are genuine only if he makes "an honest effort . . . to do something by way of compensation, without shunning any sacrifice or labour in the service of truth" (PV 7, 8). To be thankful is to be faithful, but this faithfulness will always fuse together inward seriousness which glorifies God with an inward jesting which destroys any self-importance (CUP 124f). The more earnest a man's response, the more must he appropriate humor to protect the God-relationship.

This welding of earnestness and humor is imperative if the grateful man is to avoid the twin traps of absolutizing the relative and of relativizing the absolute. Genuine gratitude relates a person simultaneously to the absolute and the relative, to the universal and the particular, to God and to the men he meets on the street. Without seriousness and humor, gratitude easily becomes the occasion for getting lost either in the infinite or in the finite. These were very real dangers for S. K., dangers which made genuine gratitude one true antidote to "the sickness unto death". He overcame despair by an activity of thankful faith, in which every particular gift was the expression of the one incalculable gift, every discrete happenstance was related to divine governance, and the relationship to every person was a particular instance of relationship of both persons to God.

Although Kierkegaard never allows us to forget that gratitude is

God-relationship, neither does he forget that this relationship embraces all of man's other relationships. In teaching a man to be grateful God employs not only the lilies of the field but also the cup of water and the neighbor. And there was one neighbor for whom S. K. was especially grateful: "that individual whom with joy and gratitude I call my reader" (ED I 5). We recall that S. K. addressed many of his discourses to this individual. We recall, too, that his Danish public found these discourses neither witty, clever, nor of great theological or philosophical significance. They took with great excitement what he held out with his left hand, but scorned his right. We must concede that in New York as much as in Copenhagen, in 1955 as much as in 1855, these discourses in his right hand are still virtually ignored. Yet S. K.'s word remains true. He is grateful for anyone who takes gratefully what he holds out with his right hand. S. K. insisted that this *reader* contributes more than the *author*. Now I am sure that among us there should be at least one who qualifies as "that single individual". This individual would say: "No, the author contributes more than I do. I am indebted to him." Both of these statements, of course, can be true at once—in fact, both are always true where gratitude works its miracle of abundance. Each person is convinced that the other's contribution is the greater. Thanksgiving celebrates a relationship which destroys *quid pro quo* logic and creates a qualitative increment of debt in some sort of infinite proportion to the reality of gratitude. By thanksgiving for one another, men participate in the infinite beneficence of God and in the mysterious process by which the prodigal Father imparts everything to sons who have nothing.

Gratitude, then, is a miraculous event wherein God's abundance becomes available for all and human cups run over in glorifying God. This event demonstrates how intrinsic is the interplay of subjective and objective factors. The act of thanksgiving is genuine only to the degree that it is fully subjective, only when it is the act of the real self, at the very roots of its selfhood. Any retreat from subjectivity is as destructive of gratitude as it is of the self. Only as it is my deepest embodiment of deepest indebtedness is it gratitude at all.

But the more fully subjective I become in recognizing this debt, the more fully I recognize that it is a debt owed to Another. Thanksgiving at its deepest level turns the most reflective self outward toward its source and its sustaining power. The pervasive joy of the grateful heart is joy over Another's amazing grace and unwearied faithfulness. The subjective act breaks the bonds of self-centeredness and frees the

self to obey the first commandment. Both the reflection and the double-reflection become inherently dialectical, so long as they spring from gratitude and produce gratitude. It is before God that *an* individual becomes *the* individual, and *the* individual before God is most fully himself, most fully realizes the divine image, most fully appropriates his vocation and his destiny, when he gives thanks to God.

It is my conviction that we are in the habit of undervaluing the ontological weight of this gratitude. We assume that a man has the option of giving or refusing to give thanks, and that whichever option he chooses he remains the same person. His choice has little to do with his existence, with the issue: to be or not to be. But Kierkegaard recognized a genuine ontological reality in gratitude. A man does not exist and then become thankful. Rather, in and through his thankfulness he becomes a man. In gratitude, his God-relationship gives birth to a self-awareness and a neighbor-awareness which together constitute him as a self.

Between man and God there is at once an infinite qualitative distinction and an unbreakable bond. The prayer of gratitude appropriates and preserves both the relationship and the distinction. The acknowledgment of total indebtedness is a simultaneous recognition of dependence and distinction. The grateful self discovers that the synthesis of relationship and distinction is the source not of confusion and of disorientation but of order and reorientation, the very substance of selfhood. Gratitude discovers that the relation to the God who is qualitatively different is a relation which constitutes the self as a self. Prayer discloses the spirit as the bond which unites the temporal and the eternal in man, because the prayer of thanksgiving is the act of this spirit (CUP 145).

Existence is bifrontal. To be as bifrontal as existence requires an existing spirit. Always giving thanks to God means that a person is becoming this existing infinite spirit. Reflective prayer is the supreme activity of "the subjective existing thinker" (CUP 75, 83).

An alternate way of stating this is to recall S. K.'s definition of the self as a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal. By his gifts to man God participates in temporal things. The gifts are temporal, but God gives himself wholly in all of his gifts. The incarnation and the atonement constitute the measure in which he is present in all of his gifts. Between each of his temporal gifts and his eternal life there is an infinite qualitative difference and yet an unbreakable intimate relationship. His creative works glorify Him as their Creator. None of these

works is more fully qualified to glorify Him than is the creature made in his image. Man, shaped in his image, "becomes himself" by the gratitude expressed in praise and obedience. His gratitude signals the fusion in the spirit of infinite poverty and infinite riches. The cry of thanks is the birth-cry of a person who is created out of nothing. At this moment he becomes conscious of his own mysterious, miraculous existence as a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal. The act of acknowledging his dependence on God is the initial act of self-recognition.

By its intrinsic nature, therefore, the act of thanksgiving defeats various tendencies in the self to escape its rootage in either the eternal or the temporal (CUP 239). On the one hand is the tendency to treat the temporal as insignificant and to desire "in time to be merely eternal". But if a cup of cold water is a divine gift, if a moment of suffering yields an eternal weight of glory, then it is sinful for a man to make himself temporally as light as possible so that the weight of his eternal self may be heavier. This is a movement away from gratitude, away from selfhood, and toward a fantastic existence (CUP 54). Gratitude makes it impossible to equate the temporal with the sinful, for everything temporal becomes good when it is received with thankfulness (ED I 47; I Tim. 4:4). In a similar fashion the act of gratitude destroys all despairing views of time as the infinitely vanishing succession of present moments into the oblivion of the past.

On the other hand, the grateful heart will reject every temptation to escape the eternal by obsession with the temporal. It will not tolerate a worldliness which defines man wholly by temporal categories or limits man's horizons to temporal process. Nor will it accept the removal of the eternal to an abstract, distant boundary which impinges at no point on daily decisions or on the progress of universal history. Thanksgiving celebrates the presence of the eternal within the confines of the temporal (CoD 135). It relates man immediately to the eternal (CoD 102). It articulates the truth that there is more joy in heaven over one individual who relates himself inwardly to God than over a universal history which is related only externally to the eternal (CUP 116). Thus is man freed from enchantment either with the temporal or with the eternal because he knows himself to be a synthesis of the two.

Although gratitude thus prevents any destruction of the synthesis, it does not permit man to determine precisely the boundary between the separate elements. The act of thanksgiving so unites the temporal

and the eternal in man that only God is in a position to determine precisely the points where they meet. When a person tries to dissolve the synthesis he is destroying himself. He is seeking to form a conception of God in his own likeness rather than allowing God to re-form him in God's likeness. This is why a man can never trust his own ability to separate good gifts from bad, his infinite indebtedness from his immediate debts. The measure of gratitude is whether man thanks God at all times and for everything. To be thankful in these terms requires a teleological suspension of the finite understanding. This, at least, was S. K.'s experience

"In my God-relationship I have to learn to give up my finite understanding, and therewith the custom of discrimination which is natural to me, that I may be able with divine *madness* to give thanks always" (CUP 159).

This madness, however, is a *divine* madness, because it is a mark of man's willingness to live in the only element which provides the proper air for his lungs. It marks the transition of the self into "the true liberation from finitude". This liberation is so amazing that the freed heart will forget its desire to dissolve the synthesis. Because the synthesis is realized through the giving of thanks, it will be preserved better by respecting the dialectical boundaries of earnestness and humor than by curious efforts of the speculative mind to assign to the two elements in the synthesis a quantitative weight.

The truth of this may become more apparent if we think for a moment of the links between thanksgiving and love. Both love and gratitude are finite expressions of an infinite indebtedness. Both are expressions of the self as a synthesis. Neither can be etherialized into the eternal or smothered in the temporal. Both recognize that "God has the first priority" and that "everything which a man owns is pledged as security for this claim" (WL 121). To both "the pure heart is first and last a bound heart . . . bound illimitably to God" (WL 120). The infinitely bound heart is the infinitely free heart. It is bound and free to give itself away. He who loves is in debt to the beloved. By loving he comes into the relation of infinite debt (WL 143). Christianity begins with what every man must become:—the free indebted lover. Love grounds man's selfhood in God's eternal *telos*. Listen to the parable:

"When a fisherman has caught a fish and wishes to keep it alive, what must he do? He must at once place it in water. . . . Why? . . .

Because water is the natural element of fish. . . . The natural element of love is infinity, inexhaustible, immeasurable. If therefore you wish to preserve your love then you must take care that by the aid of infinite indebtedness, ensnared by liberty and life, it remains in its element" (WL 146).

Gratitude, love, freedom—these have an ontological density as constituting the very being of those who participate in the eternal history. Where the self remains in this native element of indebtedness, liberty and love, there takes place the teleological suspension of the historical. For the historical restricts life to the life-span, restricts love to one's immediate neighbors, restricts human freedom and human gratitude to temporal categories alone. But when by thanksgiving and love the heart is bound to God, it shares in an "eternal history" which does not end with the grave. The span of earthly love constitutes only "a very little section within that eternal history" (WL 121). The debt binds the debtor into a teleological history which includes the temporal and simultaneously transcends it. One measure of the teleological suspension of the historical is the transformation in the meaning of the past, the present, and the future. Let us consider the *tense* which was so central in Kierkegaard's own experience: the future. . . . To him, the future is the mode by which the eternal has chosen to have dealings with the temporal (CoD 80; CUP 271).

Apart from its relation to the eternal, the future does not really exist. Yet this non-existent future confronts man as the realm of the possible, the inscrutable, the manifold, the indeterminate. This future generates anxiety and dread. This dread, in turn, creates a false self, a self which considers itself dependent upon the contingent. Obsessed by the future, the self restlessly seeks "to force or to coax from the mystery its explanation" but in vain (ED I 8). It becomes more and more enslaved to the temporal, less and less capable of gratitude to the eternal for the temporal. The self moves farther and farther away from itself, i.e. from the synthesis of the eternal and the temporal.

But when in faith the self accepts itself as God's creature, the future is overcome. This victory over the future is the source of freedom and love. It is celebrated by the act of giving thanks. The recognition of total gratitude transforms the self and the self's relation to the future. One's coming days remain crammed with manifold possibilities; but these contingencies are subordinated to the reality of God's promise. Expectation of the future becomes the point where the eternal meets the self in redemptive creation. The self is reconstituted and liberated.

Its preoccupation with the future is replaced by the freedom of gratitude. Thankful to God for His future, the self becomes itself in the present act of obedience and love.

How this happens may be seen if we recall that gratitude recognizes that the gift of life always moves in one direction only—from God toward man, the man who faces forward. The future owes nothing to the self; rather the self owes everything to the eternal (i.e. the future). Man has no claim on God; God's claim on man is absolutely prior and total. To the grateful man, therefore, the future is not the occasion of sin-producing dread, but the point where God's gift prompts man's gratitude. The door through which the eternal seeks to enter is not the nameless, boundless future, but the very real tomorrow. This tomorrow condenses the spatialized conception of the future into one Day, which is near enough to demand urgency and distant enough to demand patience. The eternal future (which embraces the whole of time) thus produces a teleological suspension of all temporal futures. God's *tomorrow* subordinates the temporal and redeems it by filling the time with its proper content: "the eternal history of love". By gratitude man lives out of the resources of this eternal history where time is filled by eternity. By gratitude man "enters eternity forwards", and this is what S.K. means by repetition (CoD 80). Repetition is to give thanks always.

By disclosing a new future, the activity of thanksgiving discloses as well a new present and a new past. Having conquered the future, the grateful self comes to understand how that vanishing atom of time—the present—can become as well an atom of eternity, and how the past is preserved, not in the present but in the eternal.

Perhaps the best example of how thanksgiving sublimates past, present and future into the eternal is offered by Kierkegaard himself. Every day, according to the Point of View, he "ascertained and convinced (himself) anew that a God exists". Every day was repeated, "my prayer of thanksgiving for the indescribable things He has done for me, so infinitely much more than ever I could have expected." By his grateful prayer he voiced his amazement "at God, at His love and at what a man's impotence is capable of with His aid." S. K. had no fear that eternity might be tiresome, "since it is exactly the situation I need so as to have nothing else to do but to give thanks" (PV 66, 67),

And at the end, as he looked back over his personal story, with its offences against God, its travail and its fruit, he wrote,

"... one thing concerns me absolutely, is more important to me than the whole authorship, and lies closer to my heart, namely, to express, as sincerely and as strongly as possible, what I can never be sufficiently grateful for, and what, when once I have forgotten the whole authorship, I shall unalterably and forever remember—how infinitely much more Providence has done for me than I ever had expected, could have expected, or might have dared to expect." (PV 154)

We must bring to an end a task which is endless because its theme is endless. My study has strengthened my conviction that thanksgiving was so central to Kierkegaard that no one is qualified to interpret him who does not enter into his understanding of gratitude. The study has increased my indebtedness to him by making me especially thankful for his depth-analysis of thanksgiving. It has made me realize more deeply how the present commemoration of his life and death, as a temporal item in our own God-relationship, may also contribute to that synthesis of the eternal and the temporal which is the substance of our very being.

ABBREVIATIONS OF WORKS IN ORDER OF CITATION

- PV—The Point of View for My Work as an Author (Trans. by W. Lowrie, Oxford, 1939).
- R—Repetition (Trans. by W. Lowrie, Princeton, 1941).
- ED—Edifying Discourses (Trans. by D. F. and L. M. Swenson, Augsburg, 1943-46).
- FSE—For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourselves (Trans. by W. Lowrie, Oxford, 1941).
- GS—The Gospel of Suffering (Trans. by D. F. and L. M. Swenson Augsburg, 1948).
- CD—Christian Discourses (Trans. by W. Lowrie, Oxford, 1939).
- CoD—Concept of Dread (Trans. by W. Lowrie, Princeton, 1944).
- CUP—Concluding Unscientific Postscript (Trans. by D. F. Swenson and W. Lowrie, Princeton, 1941).
- J—Journals (Trans. by A. Dru, Oxford, 1938).
- WL—Works of Love (Trans. by D. F. and L. M. Swenson, Princeton, 1946.)



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