

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

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Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 6

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1-1-1987

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### Recommended Citation

Jackson, Timothy P. (1987) "Kierkegaard's Metatheology," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol4/iss1/6>

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# KIERKEGAARD'S METATHEOLOGY

Timothy P. Jackson

Philosophy and theology have always been, in some measure, a matter of rewriting the past. This can be done with more or less objectivity, more or less insight, however. Of late, the job has not been done at all well with respect to the work of Søren Kierkegaard. His legacy is in danger of being coopted by modern nihilists. I argue in this paper that Kierkegaard's understanding of truth, subjectivity, and paradox promises, in reality, a middle way between the metaextremes of foundationalism and nihilism. He is, in this sense, anti-modern.

## *Introduction*

In a recent article entitled "Metaphilosophy in the Shadow of Kierkegaard," Harold Durfee writes,

Hidden in the heart of contemporary metaphilosophy, in a wide variety of orientations, is a basic dialogue between (1) philosophers who conclude that self-authentication of reason by itself, and thus the bestowal of its own foundations, is possible—a doctrine which Kierkegaard would call immediacy, and (2) the more Kierkegaardian theoreticians, who insist that the task cannot be accomplished and that any such foundation must be "proposal-dependent," a matter of conviction. (1981:115)

Putting option (2) more boldly, some commentators have read Kierkegaard's equation "subjectivity is truth" as a flat denial of objective values and/or empirical facts, the 20th Century heirs of which are various brands of nihilism. Typical of this bold group is Stanley Rosen's lumping of Kierkegaard with Feuerbach and Nietzsche as post-Hegelian "misologists" who merely "replace theory by practice rather than reconciling the two" (1969:202). The technical charge of misology is not as common as that of simple subjectivism. However, even the high road of seeing Kierkegaard's (pseudonymous) authorship as prompted by the complex desire to "do something nonapologetic" (Stout, 1981:143) often slopes imperceptibly into the low road of seeing it as prompted by the more straightforward desire just to "create a sensation" (Fenger, 1980:35). The picture that thus emerges is one of S. K. as romantic egoist, totally unwilling or unable to argue for the choice of one way of life over another—a sort of "dead-end

Werther" (see Fiedler, 1952: 183ff. and cf. MacIntyre, 1972:336-337).<sup>1</sup>

What is perhaps most striking about all such appraisals of Kierkegaard is the fact that they persist side-by-side with directly contradictory views. In *A Kierkegaard Critique*, one of the earliest and best collections of relevant scholarship in America, at least a third of the essays defend S. K. *against* the charge of subjectivism or nihilism. Thus we find John Wild claiming that "[f]ar from being a lapse into subjective bias and irrationalism, [S. K.'s] philosophical work is a triumph of rational description and analysis, an original penetration of reason into deeps of experience long languishing in the dark obscurity of the obvious" (1967:25). In addition, we find Gregor Malantschuk and Regin Prenter attempting to put the widest possible intellectual distance between Kierkegaard's conception of subjectivity and the arbitrary individualism of Nietzsche and Sartre, respectively.<sup>2</sup> *Pace* all of those who would identify such phrases as "subjectivity is truth" and "the leap of faith" with moral relativism and religious fideism, these commentators insist that the Dane's literature preserves a place for both objectivity and reflection in all phases of human life. A more recent scholar has even dedicated an entire book to the thesis that "[Kierkegaard's] shifting of the style of philosophical reflection from the theoretical to the practical did not preclude the possibility, indeed the necessity, of developing an ontology" (Elrod, 1975:10).

It is evident that there is a radical and rather puzzling divergence of opinion as to the significance of Kierkegaard's authorship. The perennial either/or for philosophical reflection generally would seem to be between some form of dogmatism and some form of relativism, and this same dichotomy is writ small in the matter of Kierkegaardian exegesis. The present essay is an attempt to remedy this situation. I wish to explore the broad metalessons to be learned from Søren Kierkegaard's reflections on moral and intellectual excellence. In so doing, I hope not only to contribute to his proper reading but also to isolate and defend several claims relevant to contemporary debates in epistemology. My specific contention is that Kierkegaard's remarks on such notions as truth, will, and paradox suggest a middle way between the current extremes of foundationalism and nihilism described by Durfee. This middle way combines a realist understanding of truth with an anti-foundationalist theory of knowledge, thereby avoiding the unpalatable options commonly associated with modernism.

### 1. *Subjectivity, Objectivity, and Fallenness*

Christian theology inevitably looks to the divine perfections for human moral ideals, conformity of the finite will to that of the infinite (*agape*) being the norm of virtue for the faithful. "Ye shall be perfect even as your Father in Heaven is perfect." Checked by its doctrine of the Fall, however, this same theology usually insists that the ideal of perfect obedience is unattainable in this life in any pure

form. Justification is by faith, not works—by grace, not righteousness before the law. The law killeth, and the overly zealous (from Pelagius to John Wesley to Sun Myung Moon) must forever be reminded that “there is none good but the Father.” Sanctification as growth in godliness is possible to an extent, but the schooling of human *eros* is always and only *in via*. The history of Christian theological ethics is, consequently, a sometimes tragicomic attempt to balance the necessity for creaturely struggle and the importance of human choice with the transcendence of the divine ideal and the ultimate impotence of human effort alone. The Kingdom is, paradoxically, both come and coming, here and not yet.

If divinity is commonly the paradigm for finite wills and affections, it is frequently also such for finite intellects. An emphasis on God’s will (perfect care and conduct) as the standard for human virtue is often attended by an emphasis on God’s intellect (perfect calculation and apprehension) as the standard for human knowledge. Yet where God’s intellect is the ideal, the mitigating influence of the Fall is not as often acknowledged. Augustine and Aquinas inveigh against the academic sceptics of their day, even as they are careful to draw the limits of natural reason. But Spinoza seeks unabashedly to view the world *sub specie aeterni*, and Hegel sums up his philosophical Lutheranism by quoting with approval Eckhart’s claim that the “eye through which we see God is the eye through which God sees himself.” The Hegelian notion of Absolute Thought amounts to an affirmation of the possibility of realizing the intellectual ideal in time, to an identification *a la* Spinoza of the human and divine minds.

It is intriguing but unsurprising that the limitations imposed by the Fall (and finitude generally) are more pronounced and better recognized in the practical sphere than in the theoretical. Until fairly recently, decision procedures for settling disagreements of empirical fact were commonly thought to be determinate and fixed, at least for the natural scientist if not for the natural philosopher. Thus, cognitive relativism was rare. The work of Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, and others has lately shaken this consensus; but even among those who concede that both cognition and volition are involved in any judgment (empirical, ethical, or theological), it still seems plausible to suppose that the potential for delusion and weakness of will is far greater in moral contexts. It is not unusual (however culpable), due either to weakness or perversity of will, to discern one’s duty but fail or refuse to act on it. This does not mean that moral truths are non-cognitive or non-descriptive, but rather that they are descriptive *and more*. Both intellect and will are implicated in most sincere moral and religious claims, in the sense that assertions about what is right or pious or Godly imply (even pledge) appropriate behavior on the speaker’s part. Many such assertions (like promises) have the force of performatives, even if one fails to perform. Satan, to take an extreme example, knows most of the salient realities known by the Son; but the one is disobedient unto damnation, the other obedient unto death.

Søren Kierkegaard offers a corrective to the epistemic *hubris* of Hegel *et al.* by accenting the human unattainability of the divine ideal, both intellectual and moral. He insists that the conformity of thought and being (truth) “is actually realized for God, but it is not realized for any existing spirit, who is himself existentially in process of becoming” (1968:170). As object God can make himself known for exactly who he is; as subject God can know all else for exactly what it is. Both capacities are lacking to human beings, according to S.K. This fidelity to the situatedness and mutability of persons does not spell the end of epistemic realism however. The nature of truth remains for Kierkegaard (and his pseudonyms) correspondence between subject and object, even if its knowability becomes uncertain.

. . . the notion of the truth as identity of thought and being is a chimera of abstraction, in its truth only an expectation of the creature; *not because the truth is not such an identity*, but because the knower is an existing individual for whom the truth cannot be such an identity as long as he lives in time. (1968:176) [emphasis mine]

Truth remains an ideal, an “expectation,” however approximate its realization must forever be for the creature.

One of the most important yet elusive distinctions in S. K. is that between “accidental” (i.e., empirico-historical) knowledge and “essential” (i.e., ethico-religious) knowledge. The former may be communicated directly and is altogether “disinterested,” while the latter may be communicated indirectly and is understood personally in the “passion of inwardness.” The wedge Kierkegaard seeks to drive between these two types is not as wide as he imagines. All knowledge is more or less interested. To argue for this conclusion, however, is not yet to appreciate his positive contributions to epistemology. It remains to see what is right with his analysis of essential knowledge, taking care to note that such insight will in fact be applicable to *all* human knowledge.

Kierkegaard in the person of Johannes Climacus is notorious for contending that “subjectivity is truth” or “essential knowledge is subjective.” This formula has been much misunderstood. The key to interpreting it aright, I believe, is to read it as an analogy of attribution. An analogy of attribution involves either ascribing a property to something or identifying an object with it, because that something is either a sign or a cause of the property or object. Examples include saying that “clear urine is healthy” because clear urine is a *sign* of health in a person, and saying that “God is my life” because God is the *cause* of one’s life. To think that urine is literally the subject of health or that the Deity is identical with one person’s temporal existence is to blunder badly. Similarly, S. K.’s phrase “subjectivity is truth” is to be seen as an epistemological thesis about how we test or discern truth claims (passion), not as a *definition* of truth. Rosen

(1969) and MacIntyre (1972) notwithstanding, it is most definitely not a romantic denial of objective moral and religious truth. The epistemic significance of passion (passion-as-sign) is evident in this passage from the *Postscript*: "The subjective reflection turns its attention inwardly to the subject, and desires in this intensification of inwardness to realize the truth" (1968:175). While the ontological or etiological role of passion (passion-as-cause) is apparent in lines like these: ". . . the spiritual relationship to God in the truth, i.e. in inwardness, is conditional by a prior irruption of inwardness" (219). Failure to appreciate the analogical usage leads to the exegetical confusion adumbrated in my Introduction.

On page 181 of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Climacus writes, "The objective accent fails on WHAT is said, the subjective accent on HOW it is said." And again, "Only in subjectivity is there decisiveness, to seek objectivity is to be in error. It is the passion of the infinite that is the decisive factor and not its content, for its content is precisely itself. In this manner subjectivity and the subjective 'how' constitute the truth." These remarks may indeed seem to commit the McLuhanesque fallacy of identifying the message with its medium, of confusing the sign with the thing signified; and if this is so, the consequences for ethics and theology are precisely as misological as some commentators have feared. There is a plausible understanding of even these "hard sayings" which avoids such extremes, however, and which leaves Kierkegaard's ethico-religious realism intact. In this case the key is to be found, in large part, in the distinction between a sign and a symbol.

## 2. Reality, Belief, and Doubt

The peculiarity of essential knowledge is that it is reflexive, hence passionate inwardness is inseparable from ethico-religious truth in *two* ways. First, as I have suggested, passion is an epistemic prerequisite for the apprehension of moral and religious facts. In *Either/Or*, for instance, the subjective decision to comport oneself *as if there were* a God and real values is seen as a necessary condition for the objective discovery that *there is in fact* a God and real values.<sup>3</sup> Passion is an enabling condition—what I earlier called a "cause"—of insight, thus in the *Journals* Kierkegaard calls subjectivity "the way of deliverance." Second, inwardness is not only the how but also part of the what of essential truth, in that passion is itself a value and a participation in the life of the divine.

. . . truly relating to truth means that all the inner and the outer garments of illusion have to be discarded, and you are brought into touch with truth so that this truth itself becomes your very own existential truth.  
(1975b:364)

Human subjectivity is a sign which participates in the reality toward which it points—that is to say, a symbol.<sup>4</sup> The passionate inwardness of faith is the essential point of intersection between time and eternity; so if you have not faith, for you there is no God. But, according to Johannes Climacus, “within the individual man there is a potentiality (man is potentially spirit) which is awakened in inwardness to become a God-relationship, and then it becomes possible to see God everywhere” (1968:220-221). Anything created can become a symbol for the Creator, but lest we be guilty of the Hegelian lapse we must concede that, however intimate the communion, human faith constitutes a *relationship* not an identity with the Deity. The task is to become subjective, but “[t]he most any man has ever achieved in this respect can serve [only] as an infinitely faint analogy to intimate how God is infinite subjectivity” (1975b:363). Just so, “God cannot be the highest superlative of the human: he is qualitatively different” (1967b:30).

The pathos of human existence is that the objects of observation, evaluation, and meditation are *all*, finally, removed from human subjects. According to Johannes Climacus in *De Omnibus Dubitandum Est* (1967a), the two facets within the consciousness of reality are the immediate objects in the world and the immediacy of sensation and cognition. These two cannot be distinguished within immediacy itself; they may only be posited when “ideality” is contrasted with “objectivity.” A consciousness in immediacy is unaware of the possibility of its being in error about the world, because there is no self to be in error. Everything is real and actual for this immediacy. In objectivity alone there can be no doubt, for doubt implies a recognition of the possibility of suspending immediacy by contrasting thought with being, which, in turn, opens the way for a contrast between subject and object. Only when there is a distinction between myself and the world within self-consciousness can there be a question of the discrepancy between the world and my perception of or reaction to it. Only when the contrast between the world as objects and speech as words enters into consciousness, for example, does knowledge appear as a problem and scepticism appear as a possibility.

When this opposition is recognized, there is a tendency to alternate between a realist epistemology, in which one’s task is to bring thought and action into conformity with realities in the world, and an idealist epistemology, in which thought is seen as the sole arbiter of both reality and truth. On the realist view, one’s perception of the world, which exists independently of this perception, is only reliable to the extent that it prevents prejudice and sloth from distorting objects in it. On the idealist view, the world is only conceivable as a thought and the objectivity of the world is (at most) a necessary construction.<sup>5</sup>

The alternation between an emphasis upon reality and an emphasis upon ideality as the measure of truth can also lead to an alternation between foundationalism (or pure objectivity) and nihilism (or pure subjectivity), yet both extremes forget that consciousness is an opposition which must be mediated. They forget, according to Climacus, that self-consciousness is a third element relating the two opposing terms reality and ideality, object and subject. "Reality is not consciousness, any more than ideality is. And yet consciousness is not present without both, and this opposition or contradiction between reality and ideality is the origin and essence of consciousness" (1967a:149-150). By recognizing the inadequacy of any theory of knowledge that claims to overcome the tension between reality and ideality (e.g., naive realism or Hegelian idealism), one advances to a higher level of self-consciousness. But this "potentiation" of consciousness does not erase the tension from view; it insists on keeping it before one's eyes. Thought and reality are only seen as an opposition (a "collision") from the perspective of self-consciousness. Even "reflection" is not itself aware of the need to bring thought and the world into relation within knowledge or to bring evaluation and the world into relation via action. It is a disinterested awareness of the possibility, what Climacus refers to as an "aesthetic" attitude. Self-consciousness, in contrast, is characterized by "concern."

Foundationalism as complete objectivity hands consciousness over to something inhuman and abstract by forgetting about the subjective features of human nature, such as will and emotion. Nihilism as complete subjectivity leads to aestheticism, however refined and Faustian. Both foundationalism and nihilism are evasions of the demand of self-consciousness "to acquire the Truth [God]" (1974:17). Foundationalism's excess is to read the nature of knowledge as demanding a sure test; nihilism's excess is to read the impossibility of a sure test as implying the nonsensicality of anything objective to test for, anything real to believe in. Both are attempts to eliminate the possibility of doubt by eliminating the subject/object distinction. Belief requires the possibility of doubt, however, and only a believer (in whatever) can be a philalethist, a lover of truth. Love of truth is a passion which must be cultivated, and it is as much a mistake to consider subjectivity superfluous to piety as it is to consider it the (chief) object of piety.

Ethical and religious questions call for passionate choice, but the choice is not arbitrary. Kierkegaard is a realist with regard to ethico-religious truth and a fallibilist with regard to ethico-religious justification; his introduction of volition and emotion into the equation (e.g., *Journals*, 1975b: 351-352) does not spell the loss of objective norms for right behavior. He clearly believes that feelings can be intentional, having objects (such as God's will) just as other modes of perception do, although he insists *contra* Hegel that in all varieties of human knowledge (save perhaps logic and mathematics) there is less that absolute



certainty and the perpetual possibility of self-deception and/or weakness of will. At least one modern philosopher (Bambrough, 1979: 112-116) has noted that there can be weakness of will in both the theoretical and the practical domains, and Kierkegaard would surely have agreed with him that such phenomena presuppose the objectivity of both the physical world and the world of God and values—as well as human freedom. Kierkegaard certainly considered ethico-religious matters to constitute a more pressing personal concern than empirical science (1968:305), and he at times overdrew the contrast with historical knowledge; but the larger lesson to be learned is that “*De gustibus non disputandum*” is no more applicable to ethics or theology than “*De omnibus dubitandum est*” is applicable to epistemology. S. K.’s own best insight is that in any objective discipline (empirical, moral, theological) both the intellect and the will must be schooled by a reality beyond the individual subject.

### 3. On Paradoxes

For Kierkegaard the objective correlate of the formulation “subjectivity is truth”—the other side of the coin, as it were—is the doctrine of “the Paradox.” Not without some justification, this doctrine has also been seen as grist for the mills of those commentators (e.g., Allison, 1972:302) who wish to characterize either him or his pseudonyms as misologist, as irrationalist. It is not difficult to find passages from the *Postscript* in which Climacus, not himself a Christian, suggests that for the believer the eternal is in itself “absurd” (1968:188), that “[w]ith the understanding directly opposed to it, the inwardness of faith must lay hold of the paradox” (201). Here again, however, the story is far from simple. In the *Postscript* the pseudonym criticizes, lampoons, even corrects speculative philosophy’s “understanding” of Christianity as a piece of objective knowledge, insisting that “in connection with the absolute paradox the only understanding possible is that it cannot be understood” (195). None of this translates into anti-rationalism necessarily. Kierkegaard *in propria persona* offers this revealing gloss on his own work:

What I usually express by saying that Christianity consists of paradox, philosophy in mediation, Leibniz expresses by distinguishing between what is above reason and what is against reason. *Faith is above reason*. By reason he understands, as he says many places, a linking together of truths (*enchainement*), a conclusion from causes. Faith therefore cannot be *proved, demonstrated, comprehended*, for the link which makes a linking together possible is missing, and what else does this say than that it is a paradox. This, precisely, is the irregularity in the paradox, continuity is lacking, or at any rate it has *continuity only in*

*reverse*, that is, at the beginning it does not manifest itself as continuity. (1975a:399-400) [first and last emphases mine]

One obvious way of better understanding (if not reconciling) the lines I have quoted is to examine more fully the various senses that can be assigned to the word "paradox." I propose to do so in this section, availing myself of distinctions noted by W. V. O. Quine. Quine distinguishes between three types of paradox, labelled "veridical," "falsidical," and "antinomical." A veridical paradox is "truth-telling" in that it can be interpreted as showing rightly (though in a way which surprises us) either that something is possible or that it is impossible. The paradox that Frederic in "The Pirates of Penzance" can be twenty-one years old having passed only five birthdays, for example, reminds us, upon analyzing it, that it is possible to be born on February 29th and therefore celebrate a birthday less often than once a year. And the paradox that a village barber who shaves all and only those men in his village who do not shave themselves in turn shaves himself if and only if he does not shave himself, convinces us, upon analyzing it, that it is impossible for there actually to be such a barber. Both of these paradoxes are veridical and conclusive, according to Quine; each demonstrates an unusual truth and in this sense only is "paradoxical."

A falsidical paradox, on the other hand, is not truth-telling but false. It is simply an argument or putative proof which is particularly opaque as to its erroneousness but which, nonetheless, involves a fallacious step and a false conclusion. An example from this category would be the paradox of Zeno purporting to show that it is impossible for Achilles to pass the tortoise, no matter how slowly it moves, just so long as it keeps moving. Zeno's argument has three basic steps:

Premise 1: By the time Achilles gets from where he was at time  $t$  to a point  $n$  where the tortoise was at time  $t$ , additional time will have elapsed and so the tortoise will now be at a point beyond  $n$ , namely  $n +$  (tortoise's velocity  $\cdot ((t+1)-t)$ ). Call this new point  $n+1$ .

Premise 2: Since there will again be a lapse of time between when Achilles leaves  $n$  and when he arrives at  $n+1$  (and indeed between when he leaves any point and when he arrives elsewhere), it will take an eternity for him to catch the tortoise.

Conclusion: It is impossible for Achilles (a faster runner) to overtake the tortoise (a slower runner), just so long as the latter keeps moving.

This argument is falsidical, in Quine's estimation, because of its "mistaken notion that an infinite succession of intervals of time has to add up to all eternity" (1977:3). Because of the modern principle that an infinite succession of succeeding shorter intervals need not add up to an infinite period, the first two steps

of the argument do not support the absurd (and false) conclusion that one runner can never overtake another. As Quine puts it, this is merely a matter of “convergent series.”

Quine’s third category, that of the antinomies, is perhaps the most interesting. Antinomies are so intriguing because they “produce a self-contradiction by accepted ways of reasoning” (5). Take Grelling’s paradox: if an adjective is said to be “autological” when it applies to itself (such as “short,” “English,” and “polysyllabic”) and “heterological” when it does not (such as “long,” “German,” and “monosyllabic”), then one is at a loss when asked which kind of adjective “heterological” itself is. If it is autological, then it is true of itself, which makes it heterological; and if it is heterological, then it is not true of itself, which makes it autological. This is clearly a contradiction, but there does not seem to be a way of escaping it similar to that found in veridical or falsidical contexts. We cannot deny the existence of the adjective “heterological” as we denied the existence of the village barber: we have just gotten through defining precisely this adjective. And neither do we seem to be able to cite a fallacious step in the move to contradiction, as we did in Zeno’s Achilles/tortoise case. Thus, Grelling’s is a paradox of a uniquely troubling sort: it indicates radical surgery.

In Quine’s opinion, rationality dictates that we first isolate the principle of thought that is to blame for this contradiction and then either remove it or check its malignancy. What is the offending principle in the above antinomy?—nothing less than that an adjective “x” is true of a thing y if and only if y is x. This notion seems entirely basic and incontrovertible, but Quine maintains that if we are to escape the difficulties that arise when “heterological,” “not true of itself,” and similar locutions are substituted for “x,” then we must no longer countenance the application of the phrase “true of” to itself. Such a self-referential application is to be considered meaningless because not either true or false, and with this semantic reform Grelling’s paradox disappears. It makes no sense either to affirm or deny that “heterological” is itself heterological. Under the new dispensation we can now reclassify what was formerly a genuine antinomy as a *falsidical* paradox, even as developments in mathematics allowed our recent forefathers to reclassify the notorious puzzles which to Zeno were beyond solving. Thus far Quine.

How might Quine’s analysis illuminate Kierkegaard’s comments on paradox? One possibility is that we see the pseudonyms contemplating Christianity as akin to Zeno’s contemplating the Achilles/tortoise example. On this scenario, Christ as the God-man would be for Johannes Climacus a flat contradiction, a genuine antinomy that cannot be explained away by any rational principles, something against reason. The problem with this view, however, is that it suggests that a non-pseudonymous perspective would see that the God-man is a *falsidical* paradox. It suggests that the Hegelian philosopher, say, can discern the fallacious

step in the argument to antinomy. This does not accord with S. K.'s *Journal* remark quoted earlier that the paradox of faith has "*continuity in reverse*." The more plausible reading, I believe, is to identify the pseudonyms with individuals who are mystified by a *veridical* paradox. Quine does not explicitly allow for the possibility of epistemological developments leading us to recognize that what was formerly a genuine antinomy (i.e., insoluble or incomprehensible) is actually truth-telling, but nothing in his analysis rules this out. And what else can Kierkegaard mean by his reference to "continuity in reverse" than that the believer's perspective posterior to the leap of faith permits him or her to see the complex way in which Christ is, in fact, both human and divine? The agnostic pseudonyms can carry rational analysis to its limits and still be faced with a contradiction inexplicable on the basis of recognized principles. S. K.'s point as a Christian author, however, is that there is a faculty *supra rationem*: inwardness. Quine confines himself to developments in epistemology that are cognitive (e.g., the recognition of leap year day or the idea of convergent series); but, as I indicated in the preceding section, Kierkegaard is convinced that some such developments are subjective (e.g., passion).

Kierkegaard's contention is not that there is *no* perspective from which Christianity escapes self-contradiction, but rather that there is *no rational* (i.e., discursively articulable) perspective. Once passion and volition are given their epistemic due as disclosers of ethico-religious truth, it becomes clear that faith does not violate the intellect but rather sets it aside or supersedes it. "All *Problemata* should end as follows: This is the paradox of faith, a paradox which no *reasoning* is able to master—and yet it is so . . ." (1975a:402; emphasis mine). *Pace* Santurri (1977), Kierkegaardian faith does not believe in what it knows to be a self-contradiction; a self-contradiction is necessarily false, so to believe it true would be misologism indeed. In what must be a self-conscious inversion of Kant, Kierkegaardian faith embraces in passionate inwardness what *reason alone* is unable to demonstrate is not a genuine antinomy. Reason is not contradicted, but neither is it given the last word. Even if the leap is a move into the silence of Abraham before Sarah, Eleazar, and Isaac, it is also a move into relationship with God, the Word. In his *Journals*, S. K. drives the salient point home:

The divine paradox is that [Christ] became noticed, if in no other way than by being crucified, that he performed miracles and the like, which means that he still was recognized by his divine authority, even though it demanded faith to solve its paradox . . . . (1975a:401)

Faith "solves" the paradox of Christianity, though the solution outstrips the powers of objective reflection.

Kierkegaard's position is often associated with that of Tertullian, the dictum "*Credo quia absurdum*" being cited in support. It is doubtful that Tertullian

actually ever said this, but if my application of Quinean categories to Danish catechetics has been appropriate, I may conclude this section by exploring the senses in which the quoted phrase is or is not Kierkegaardian. “*Credo quia absurdum*” is usually translated “I believe because it is absurd,” but more must be said of the connective “*quia*” (“because”) if the expression is to be fully understood. “*Quia*” may be identified either with the “because” of logical or moral justification, or with the “because” of causal explanation. The first usage is represented by such statements as “It must be Smith’s car because Johnson owns a Ford” and “We should feed the hungry because their plight is partly our doing.” Examples of the second include “The car exploded because it was struck from behind” and “I stepped on the cat because I was trying, awkwardly, to avoid stepping on the dog.” If the “because” in “I believe because it is absurd” is construed as a justificatory connective, then the entire comment is irrational, and Kierkegaard’s position cannot be identified with it. If the “because” is causal, however, then the comment has the force of “The absurdity accounts for why there is belief and not something else, e.g., knowledge,” and Kierkegaard’s view is quite compatible with it. Whatever Father Tertullian’s sentiments might have been in this matter, in no case may S. K. be made guilty of misologism by association. His leap of faith is not rationally *justified* by an appeal to the paradox, though it may be partly *explained*.

#### *Conclusion: Kierkegaard’s Scepticism*

Søren Kierkegaard insisted that he was indebted to Kant for demonstrating once and for all that thought and being (ideality and reality) are distinct (see Croxall, 1967:29). He thus recognized that at the meta-level scepticism prevails, but he also recognized that one cannot live on the meta-level. Kierkegaard saw that one must act on what one believes to be true, although (1) there is no sure test for it, at least not in the moral and religious spheres, and although (2) even the best of current beliefs is not constitutive of truth. (1) is an epistemological insight *contra* Kant (*contra*, e.g., the categorical imperative, as commonly understood), and (2) is an alethiological insight *contra* Hegel (i.e., his historicism). Richard Rorty has remarked that Hegel kept Kant’s epistemology (of given and interpretation, receptivity and spontaneity) but tried to let go of the thing-in-itself, thus making idealism a patsy for dogmatic realist reactions emphasizing truth as correspondence (see 1982:16). Kierkegaard can be understood to have kept the thing-in-itself but to have let go of the foundational Kantian epistemology, thus preserving realism—but realism without dogmatism, truth without *a priori* certainty. He recognized that irony, humor, and conviction all depend on the presumption that there are objective realities (empirical, moral, and religious). (We cannot be enlightened by fiction if there is no such thing as fact; we cannot

laugh at human folly if there is no such thing as human faithfulness.) But he also viewed the notion of a fully completed ontology as merely comical.

Those who would charge S. K. or his pseudonyms with irrationalism must reckon with the following representative passage from the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*:

That thought has validity was assumed by Greek philosophy without question. By reflecting over the matter one would have to arrive at the same result; but why confuse the validity of thought with reality? A valid thought is a possibility, and every further question as to whether it is real or not should be dismissed as irrelevant. (1968:292)

A clearer endorsement of what might be called "sceptical realism" is difficult to imagine. The essential ingredient leaps off the page: the denial of dogmatism (and idealism is a kind of dogmatism) coupled with the avoidance of nihilism. In such works as *Repetition* and *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard highlights further the epistemic import of passion and imagination, as well as the correlative absence of incorrigible or mechanical means of making critical personal choices; but in the lines quoted above and throughout his authorship he both gives reason its due and scrupulously distinguishes between thought and reality, between knowledge claims and truth. Persistent misreadings on this score suggest, ultimately, either no ears to hear or an intentional will-to-disbelieve. In any case, the rather humble conclusion that "a valid thought is possible" contains an essential philosophical insight; the modern exponents of nihilism, in rejecting this insight, are not Kierkegaardian—whatever else they might be.<sup>6</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Even those like Roger Gottlieb who recognize that Kierkegaard was not technically an emotivist—in as much as he did not *reduce* ethical norms to feelings or desires—still find it difficult to reconcile his emphasis on individual choice with his apparent suggestion that there can be "mistakes" in the subjective life (see 1978:490-492).

2. Additional analyses of Kierkegaard along these lines can be found in pieces by James Collins (1967:148), Cornelio Fabro (1967:160), N. H. Sørensen (1967:209), and Valter Lindstrøm (1967:234).

3. Kierkegaard's pseudonym writes,

If you will understand me aright, I should like to say that in making a choice it is not so much a question of choosing the right as of the energy, the earnestness, the pathos with which one chooses. Thereby the personality announces its inner infinity, and thereby, in turn, the personality is consolidated. Therefore, even if a man were to choose the wrong, he will nevertheless

discover, precisely by reason of the energy by which he chose, that he had chosen the wrong. For the choice being made with the whole inwardness of his personality, his nature is purified and he himself brought into immediate relation to the external Power whose omnipresence interpenetrates the whole of existence. (1972b:171)

Notice that the passage preserves the key distinctions between right and wrong and between the subject and the object of volition.

4. Cf. Paul Tillich (1958). On my view, all symbols are signs but not all signs are symbols.

5. This alteration generates what Hegel calls in the *Phenomenology of Mind* (1967) the various forms of "natural consciousness," which follow upon the loss of "sense certainty."

6. I am thinking here particularly of Richard Rorty, who too quickly appropriates Kierkegaard as one of his "heroes." See (1979:*passim*, but especially 377, note #29). For recent deconstructionist treatments of S. K., see Mark Taylor (1982) and Christopher Norris (1983). Of the two, Norris is more straightforward in acknowledging that he offers a reading "actively *pre-empted* by much of what Kierkegaard wrote" (1983:85).

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