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KIERKEGAARD AND EXISTENCE COMMUNICATIONS

John H. Whittaker

Kierkegaard occasionally mentions a type of belief which he calls an "existence communication," and his discussion of such beliefs parallels his discussion of subjective truths (in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*). Existence communications include religious beliefs. I suggest that it is less misleading to focus on this term than it is to wrestle with the difficult and overworked notion of subjective truths; ultimately, his view of religious beliefs can be seen more clearly.

His view does not fully emerge, however, without the assistance of some other concepts. My thesis is that existence communications are comparable in their resistance to objective forms of adjudication to *first principles*, and comparable in their "self-involving" characteristics to *teleological* principles about the "raison d'être of existence.

This account not only helps to clarify Kierkegaard's discussion, but it also offers two important hints about modern problems regarding religious belief. It suggests that religious claims may indeed be truth claims, and it suggests that there is more to the justification than comes out in a consideration of *evidence*.

One of the most puzzling things that Kierkegaard ever said was that "subjectivity is truth." The chapter on this dark idea in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is almost impossible to understand. It seems to express an idea which, if not obviously false, is counter-intuitive and easily criticized. For how can the passion—the "subjectivity"—involved in the affirmation of a belief vouch for the truth of that belief? Subjectivity has to do with persons, but the truth or falsity of a belief depends on the way the world is; and it is hard to see how Kierkegaard could have connected personal characteristics with facts about the world. Yet at the same time, the idea that subjectivity is truth informs a whole range of insightful observations about the nature of religious beliefs. Religious beliefs are not tentative affirmations of hypotheses, they cannot be confirmed solely by "the facts," their affirmation requires decisiveness, and their adoption brings with it a whole new way of life—these are all genuine insights. And because of them, Kierkegaard's discussion of subjectivity and truth retains a lingering fascination for philosophers of religion, who return to this chapter in the *Postscript* time and again. *Something* in his thinking seems to be right; and it seems worthwhile to dig it up, dust it off, and hold it up to view.

In any case, I would like to take up the question of subjective truth once again. But instead of beginning with the difficult ideas presented in the section of the



Postscript entitled "Truth is Subjectivity," I would like to begin elsewhere. The starting point that I have in mind is Kierkegaard's discussion of "existence communications," a term which he uses to describe religious beliefs in the latter portion of the *Postscript*. In some ways, this later discussion of religious beliefs is just as complicated as his earlier discussion. Many of the same concepts—dialectical pathos, historical and eternal truths, objectivity, etc.—occur in both sections. But alongside these concepts appears a new one, the notion of an "existence communication." And this concept, though still difficult, is plainly designed to convey the same thoughts which he previously discussed under the heading of subjective truths. Unlike the former term, however, the notion of existence communications does not conjure up associations with arbitrary judgments, emotive expressions, private fantasies, irrational convictions, and the like. It should therefore afford us a fresh look at the heart of Kierkegaard's view of religious claims.

(1)

Kierkegaard introduces the term "existence communication" to help distinguish Christian teachings from speculative doctrines.

"Christianity is not a doctrine but an existential communication expressing an existential contradiction. If Christianity were a doctrine it would *eo ipso* not be an opposite to speculative thought, but rather a phase within it. Christianity has to do with existence, with the act existing; but existence and existing constitute precisely the opposite of speculation"¹.

For the moment, we need not worry over the "existential contradiction" that Kierkegaard mentions in this passage: the important thing is the effort to contrast Christian claims with philosophical doctrines. Such doctrines are defined by the fact that they are "not relevant to existing"². They are to be "intellectually grasped and speculatively understood," whereas existential communications are to be "realized in existence"³. Indeed, the only involvement of philosophy in this matter does not consist in understanding Christian claims as speculative hypotheses but in clarifying the reasons why they cannot be so understood. Toward this end, Kierkegaard chooses to call Christianity an existential communication, "in order definitely to indicate its heterogeneity with speculation"⁴.

Explaining what Kierkegaard meant by "existence communications," then, means explaining why he thought that Christian beliefs could not be justified as philosophical hypotheses. This is not an easy thing to do, especially in view of the fact that philosophers have for centuries tried to interpret and to defend the central teachings of the faith by justifying theism on speculative grounds. My

sympathies lie with Kierkegaard on this point; but this does not mean that I think Christian claims are senseless or irrational, that faith is an arbitrary affair, or that nothing at all can be said for Christian belief. I don't believe that Kierkegaard did either, but perhaps we should let him speak for himself.

In contrasting Christian teachings and speculative doctrines Kierkegaard does not deny the obvious fact that Christianity is set forth in doctrinal propositions. Existence communications, in other words, are doctrines *of a sort*. They are *beliefs*, for the term "existence communication" does not refer to the act of communication but to the content of what is communicated, just as the term "belief" can be used to refer to a proposition rather than to the act of believing. Thus, Kierkegaard sometimes speaks of Christian doctrines, and uses this phrase interchangeably with "existence communications," but only when there is no danger of confusing Christianity with speculative theories⁵. His point is to distinguish Christian doctrines *in kind* from philosophical doctrines; and though he does not do this very systematically, it is still possible to trace the main lines on which this distinction is drawn.

He calls Christian teachings "existence communications" because they confront the individual with the challenge, not of interpreting Christian doctrines speculatively, but of *existing in* these beliefs⁶. They are to be "realized in existence"⁷. The "appropriation" of Christian claims is even said to be more important than the abstract question of their truth⁸. Kierkegaard's point here, which he undoubtedly overdramatized, is that philosophical doctrines can be believed without the believer determining his life "in conformity therewith"⁹. But religious doctrines must be adhered to as personal guides if they are to be believed at all. The form of assent which acknowledges religious truths but does not express this acknowledgement in personal transformation simply is not *religious belief*.

One might well interrupt here to ask what is wrong with breaking religious belief down into two steps: first, the justification of beliefs on philosophical grounds and then the adherence to them as guides for one's personal life. This may seem like the most prudent way to picture belief, but Kierkegaard's entire discussion of faith's logic is intended to show that this view distorts the nature of faith claims. For one cannot understand Christian claims without understanding them in relation to oneself; and if one foregoes this personal approach by attempting to construe these claims impersonally, as if they concerned only the world and not oneself, then he winds up with a caricature of faith. That is why Kierkegaard makes fun of philosophers who have three proofs for immortality but who do not live in the ways that one would expect this belief to entail. It is not simply that such philosophers do not practice what they preach; Kierkegaard's complaint is that immortality cannot be impersonally confirmed to begin with. Even Socrates knew this, for Kierkegaard credits him with doubting his own arguments for immortality—for saying "if" there is an immortality—and then

dying with remarkable courage. He did not *first* justify the belief in immortality and *then* abide by it; the manner of his death embodied his faith, which did not exist in a prior, unembodied, form, as if it had been independently confirmed¹⁰.

The type of thinking which belongs to speculative issues—abstract interpretation, the adducing of evidence out of reflection, the attempt to demonstrate comprehensiveness—does not fit the peculiar requirements of existence communications. Speculative claims are “objective” assertions, which are to be judged dispassionately in abstraction from one’s existential concerns as a concrete individual. Consequently, the truth or falsity of a speculative claim depends on *evidence* of some kind; for that is how the world reports its verdict about the truth of an objective belief—in terms of evidence. But an existence communication cannot even be understood, let alone justified, on the basis of evidence. The *point* of an existence communication only emerges in relation to one’s inmost concerns as an individual, so that it is inevitably misunderstood if it is approached dispassionately in the absence of such concerns. This, though, is precisely what happens when existence communications are treated as philosophical doctrines and judged “objectively.” The burden of responsibility for judging their truth is passed from the individual to the evidence, so that the would-be believer waits until the evidence becomes decisive, all the while abstracting oneself from the issue. This abstraction, involved in the dispassionate judgment of an existence communication, prevents its point from properly emerging.

Gathering evidence of a philosophical or historical nature, therefore, is not a strategy that one should expect to produce Christian faith. A more fitting approach is to understand Christian beliefs more and more in relation to one’s inward concerns.

“ . . . one does not prepare oneself to become attentive to Christianity by reading books, or by world-historical surveys, but by immersing oneself deeper in existence. Every other propaedeutic must *eo ipso* end in a misunderstanding, for Christianity is [an] existence-communication . . .”¹¹.

By “immersing oneself deeper in existence,” one’s existential “pathos” increases, so that one becomes more sensitive to the meaning of one’s suffering, more distraught over one’s guilt, and more aware of the need for a contented resignation to finitude¹². Grasping the point of religious claims presumes this deepened sensitivity, without which they cannot be appreciatively understood.

All this may become clearer if we consider Kierkegaard’s reasons for criticizing childish Christianity. Presumably, a child might be clever enough to understand the historical evidence for Christianity, to follow the logic of the “proofs” for God’s existence, and to appreciate the force of other speculative arguments. But the thought that a child might *believe* in Christianity fills Kierkegaard with

contempt. A “child has no decisive use of Christianity”¹³. A child lacks the sin-consciousness which develops only in maturity and which is a *condition* for Christian understanding¹⁴. Consequently,

“the Christianity which is taught to a child, or rather which the child pieces together for itself when no violence is used to force the little exister into the most decisive Christian determinants, is not properly Christianity but idyllic mythology”¹⁵.

Having no sin-consciousness to be relieved by the concept of grace, the child’s belief is innocent; but it is also distorted. Here Christian claims do not serve their proper purpose, and the child’s pointless understanding of the faith is a mere fantasy. Similarly, the philosopher who treats Christianity dispassionately as a theoretical doctrine, also misses its point. His picture of the faith is also distorted, and he judges something that amounts to a mythology—although it is called something else, such as theism, or Christian philosophy.

Now, if it were possible to bracket one’s existential concerns while judging Christianity dispassionately, then there would be nothing essentially wrong with childish belief. Then it would make sense to say, “after we have settled the truth of Christianity, then we can worry about our personal relation to it.” And the only fault of the child would be that it would have to wait until some time after it had affirmed the truth of Christianity to give it room in a mature life. But again, the notion that one can separate one’s affirmation of a religious teaching from its incorporation into the domain of inward, personalized, understanding is the root of the difficulty. Kierkegaard thought that such impersonal affirmations of Christianity (or of other religions) simply were not possible. Belief under such circumstances is pointless, and the pointless beliefs thus upheld are not the *same beliefs* as those of proper believers.

One of the things that this view of religious beliefs means is that faith must involve greater decisiveness than the affirmation of speculative hypotheses. For one cannot leave the issues posed by existence communications to the facts (or the speculative arguments) to decide, while postponing one’s working relationship to the beliefs in question. The facts, as it were, never speak that loudly, certifying the truth or falsity of an existence communication so that one can confidently allow the weight of one’s life to rest upon it. Religious claims, that is, are not *knowledge* claims; for the possibility of *grounding* a belief—which applies to knowledge claims—does not apply to religious claims¹⁶. One can never wait until an existence communication becomes a *known* truth before resting any confidence in it. For if there are any such beliefs, they can only be inwardly held fast in faith, never known on the basis of argumentative grounds.

Because religious beliefs require a decisiveness that grows out of inwardness or existential pathos, faith entails a transformation in a person’s self-understand-

ing. The objective uncertainty of the issues must be resolved with a personal commitment; and this commitment can take only one form—*abiding* by the beliefs that one affirms. This doesn't mean that one has to follow all of the practical injunctions of a religion to be a believer. Rather, one's *thinking* must conform to the outlook which the faith represents.

When Kierkegaard was engaged in a bitter attack on the Danish church, this was the heart of his criticism: the Christians which he criticized thought that they could express their beliefs without expressing them in their lives. They professed belief, but lacked any of the inward changes that one would expect in their lives. The problem was not that they sinned by failing to live up to the moral ideals of Christianity; that kind of failing is only too common. The problem was that they did not *think* of themselves as sinners, or feel sinful, or regret their inadequacy, or do *anything* that one would expect someone to do who thought of himself as a fallen creature of God. "What any religion in which there is any truth aims at," he said, "is a total transformation in a man, to wrest from him through renunciation and self-denial all that, and precisely that, to which he immediately clings."¹⁷ But Kierkegaard's fellow Christians showed no evidence of having undergone any such transformation; for the shape of their lives was indistinguishable from the life of unbelievers. They did not affirm Christian claims by thinking of themselves in Christian categories, by ruing their sins and thanking God for his grace, or by reminding themselves of how far short they fell of the example of Jesus. Neither their thoughts nor their practice reflected the beliefs that they professed.

By contrast, those who do show their faith in the shape of their self-understanding become *witnesses* to the faith that they affirm. This witness makes an impression on people, particularly if believers must make dramatic sacrifices to sustain their faith. Kierkegaard calls this the "proof" that is advanced for Christianity—the fact that believers have suffered for their faith¹⁸. Obviously this "proof" has nothing to do with evidence, but the example of such witnesses has a persuasive power that helps to make up for the lack of compelling evidence. So the faith that cannot be justified objectively on argumentative grounds can at least be illustrated on a personal level, where people are moved by the example of others whose lives testify to the value of their beliefs.

All of these points about existence communications could be elaborated further, but perhaps I've said enough to provide a rough understanding. Such teachings must be brought into relation with mature personal concerns if their import is to be appreciatively understood, and they cannot be judged by postponing all personal reliance until a convincing case is made for them on argumentative grounds. Thus, they require considerable decisiveness for their affirmation, since the responsibility for judging them cannot be deflected to the "facts" for a decision. The commitment that one makes in believing them should, moreover,

entail a transformation in the way that one understands oneself, and this transformation should be reflected in a person's life. Finally, the power of one's personal example in abiding by such claims, filling them out with the substance of one's own self-understanding, should provide the persuasive appeal that is needed to convince others.

(2)

In sum, the distinction between existence communications and speculative doctrines is the same as the distinction between "subjective truths" and "objective truths." But like subjective truths, existence communications are decidedly peculiar, so peculiar that one might well object to Kierkegaard's point. Perhaps subjective claims are not as distinctive as Kierkegaard makes them seem; perhaps they are ultimately subject to the same general form of justification as other beliefs. After all, if personal concerns are needed to understand existence communications, then why could not such beliefs be *understood* personally (by immersing oneself in existential concerns) and *justified* like speculative doctrines—on grounds. Such grounds would not have to be overpowering for the beliefs that rest on them to be reasonably held. Inasmuch as *proofs* would not be available, one would still have to venture a certain amount of faith to believe them; but there is no reason why this faith could not be both reasonable and personally transforming.

Nevertheless, I think that this interpretation of Kierkegaard's distinction is wrong. Yet it is almost impossible to say *why* it is wrong by appealing to the same concepts that Kierkegaard used. Existence communications are not *hypotheses*, I want to say. They cannot be left for evidence to decide or to justify, as if they might be evaluated in the light of speculative arguments or independent evidence. Rather, they are regulative assertions, which play a different role in one's thinking about the world. And they are truth claims, despite their resistance to adjudication on logical grounds. If all this seems odd to say, it is because we have forgotten to notice a familiar category of similar beliefs—principles. This is the best way to restate Kierkegaard's view in more commonplace language. For in describing some of our beliefs as "principles," we implicitly recognize a difference between them and other truth claims; and beneath this implicit distinction lie many of the same insights which led Kierkegaard to formulate his distinction.

Actually, the term "principle" is used in several different ways, but I am thinking of one of its more restricted uses, often indicated by speaking of "first principles" or of "fundamental principles"¹⁹. Principles are *first* or *fundamental* inasmuch as they have a peculiar relation to justification. Because they define the *form* of explanation or description wherever they apply, they resist adjudica-

tion according to *other* principles defining *other* types of relevant evidence. The evidence which applies to a principle, in other words, is already conceived in a way that presumes the truth of the principle in question. So the attempt to base matters of principle on independent evidence produces only circular arguments.

Fundamental moral principles, for instance, cannot be justified on *prudential grounds* because the *point* of the moral principles is to displace self-centered reasons for behavior with moral evaluations of it. Thus, one cannot answer the question "why be moral" by citing the selfish benefits of moral behavior—one cannot do this, that is, and justify a moral principle *as such*. A fundamental moral principle—e.g., the claim that we owe others the same consideration that we show to ourselves—aims to override prudential reasoning with a whole new manner of thinking, *moral* reasoning. And the *form* which such reasoning is to take is defined by the principle itself. Moral reasoning is to turn on the *balancing* of people's separate interests, not on guarantees that a selfish interest is served. So the fact that a person may profit in selfish ways by acting morally has no relevance for the justification of moral principles.

This means that *believing* in a moral principle can only be a matter of adhering to it in the way that one thinks—e.g., by subjecting acts of human behavior to evaluations based on moral grounds. One who does this shows that he accepts the principles on which one's handling of various questions—in this case, questions about human behavior—depends. One cannot *show* that one believes, in other words, by showing knowledge of the evidence, or by arranging putative evidence in the most favorable way. Rather, to believe in a principle one has to *abide by* it; and one has to abide by it because there is no such thing as resting the responsibility for judgment on the facts. Factual evidence will not bear the weight of the true/false decision, and so one cannot leave questions of principle to the facts to decide, nor can one show that he accepts a principle by citing the facts which supposedly ground it. This impossibility of transferring the responsibility for judgment to the facts, or of letting the truth or falsity of a principle be determined by facts, is one of the most outstanding points of commonality in principles and existence communications.

But the likeness between these two types of assertion does not end there. Since one must abide by a principle to believe in it, one's belief must be filled out with the example of compliance in one's life. This means that one must conform the *manner* of one's thinking to the principles that one believes, letting them serve as guides for the kind of judgment that one makes. One adjusts the *form* of explanation to the pattern suggested by the principle, and this affects the way in which evidence is conceptualized in the principle's domain. Hence, the adoption of new principles, like the affirmation of existence communications, necessarily entails a transformation in a believer's thinking. A child who comes to accept moral principles *thinks* in a new way about his or her behavior. A

psychologist who abandons the principles of psychoanalysis for those of behaviorism alters the kind of explanation envisioned in the study of human behavior. And a primitive animist who comes to believe in scientific principles changes the estimation of what counts as relevant evidence for the defense of natural hypotheses. All these are fundamental changes in outlook brought about by changes of principle.

As for the defense of truly fundamental principles, rather than being derived from any more certain premises, they are simply *displayed* in the thinking and living that goes with them. In the lives of those whose thought is transformed by them, they reveal their forcefulness by revealing the capacities that attend their understanding. One could even say that principles, like existence communications, are defended by being *witnessed*, or by being illustrated *in vivo*. If they further one's understanding of problems in the relevant field, reducing the number of anomalies by providing workable explanations of existing puzzles, their credibility will be much enhanced. But there will be no way to convert this success into independent grounds for belief, since the success of a principle is defined in ways that also presume its truth. So here, too, there is no difference between fundamental principles and existence communications: the credibility of both depends on the persuasive power of their embodiment.

This preliminary sketch of the logic of principles should help us to see the close similarity between existence communications and principles. But can this comparison stand up under closer scrutiny? One of the puzzling things that Kierkegaard said about existence communications was that the amount of passion involved in their affirmation was inversely proportional to their philosophical intelligibility. The more sense that a doctrine made philosophically, the less passion it would take to believe it, and *vice versa*. A doctrine that was *wholly* unintelligible philosophically, or absurd, would arouse the greatest passion and require the greatest "inwardness" for its affirmation. Thus, the maximum passion required by Christianity corresponds to a teaching that is philosophically senseless. The doctrine that the infinite God became incarnate in the finite man Jesus is absurdly paradoxical; it resists speculative attempts to comprehend it absolutely, so there can be no question of defending this doctrine on speculative grounds. To believe in this doctrine at all, one has to believe it *in spite* of its philosophical unintelligibility.

Is there anything comparable to this in the logic of principles? Are any fundamental principles paradoxical? The answer, surprisingly perhaps, is "yes." There are principles, and not foolish principles, which cannot be understood or justified philosophically; and many of them occur in familiar areas of discourse.

Consider, for example, the basic principle of Freudian psychology—that is, the claim that the human psyche has three parts, the ego, the id, and the superego. According to this principle and its development, psychological difficulties are

the result of a kind of hiding that takes place between the id and the ego, a hiding that is accomplished by the superego. The ego is kept unaware of the desires of the id by the superego, but the superego allows the powerful desires of the id to be satisfied in a disguised manner, so that the true nature of these desires is never realized by the ego. The result is behavior with misunderstood motivation—compulsions, obsessional neuroses, hysteria, and so on. In the treatment of people's psychological problems, this theory has had some success. Perhaps it has not always informed successful therapies, but I do not want to deny the usefulness of Freudian principles altogether. Depth psychology arose on this foundation.

Yet from a philosophical point of view, the theory that the psyche consists of three parts, the id, the ego, and the superego, is incoherent. The purpose of this theory is to present psychological difficulties as arising from deception. A person deceives himself or herself by hiding from view certain subconscious facts, facts which can only be expressed in ways which prevent the ego from realizing the true content of one's thoughts. The deception involved, in other words, is self-deception. *But the theory itself presents these problems as if they were instances of ordinary deception—as if one person, the superego, were deceiving another, the ego, about the content of the id.* The theory, that is, uses *fictional* selves to present cases of *self-deception* as if they were cases of ordinary lying. This makes it easier to handle such cases therapeutically, but it fails utterly to explain how *self-deception* is possible. How can one and the same person lie to himself? As an answer to this question, the theory that a person is really three persons, one of whom lies to the other, is absurd. It does not answer the question at all; it simply bypasses the difficulty in favor of providing a *working* way to conceptualize psychological illnesses.

Thus, one should not assume that *working principles* must be intelligible from a theoretical, or philosophical, point of view. The principles of Freudian psychoanalysis are not aimed at abstract philosophical questions, and they do not even attempt to answer the purely intellectual question of how self-deception is possible. They are geared instead to the business of therapy, and in this connection they function fairly well. Perhaps the wave-particle "theory" of light is another example; this "theory" functions well enough in the workaday business of physics, but from a purely speculative point of view it is exceedingly difficult to understand how light can be both a wave and a particle. The mistake is to suppose that such principles, if they are to be reasonably believed, *must* be intelligible from a purely philosophical point of view. That simply is not the case.

The implication of these remarks in relation to Kierkegaard should be obvious. The fact that Christianity's claim that God was in Christ is paradoxical—i.e., that it resists philosophical understanding—does not mean that it cannot be a credible principle.

(3)

Nevertheless, I can imagine someone objecting to this comparison between existence communications and principles on other grounds. For principles do not have to be *edifying* in the way that existence communications must. A Freudian can be committed to the principles of psychoanalysis without being personally edified, or without having his existence transformed in any fundamental way. He need not undergo any *moral* transformation, for example; and neither must he change his *spiritual* outlook as a consequence of adhering to his psychological principles. So the adoption of such principles does not seem to make any *existential* difference to a person at all. Yet the principles of Christianity, or of existence communications in general, *must* make a difference. At least, they are *intended* to make a difference, and that is the reason why they are called *existence* communications. Their affirmation should make a difference in the way one copes with the existential problems of being a human being, and consequently, a difference in self-understanding.

Without trying to elaborate the differences between principles which are edifying and those which are not, let me simply admit this point. Not all principles are existentially significant; most of them have little or nothing to do with the spiritual problems of self-understanding or personal growth. But this does not mean that the comparison between existence communications and principles is off the mark; it simply means that existence communications are comparable only to certain kinds of principle. Instead of throwing out the comparison between existence communications and principles, therefore, we need to say more exactly what *kinds* of principle bear the life-transforming consequences of existential communications.

Once again, the rudiments of an answer can be found in Kierkegaard's pages. As he often said, human beings have an absolute *telos* in life, and religious claims are plainly connected with the understanding of this end²⁰. Indeed, I don't think that I can find a better term for characterizing the kind of principles that faith involves: religious beliefs are *teleological* principles. They are claims which define one's orientation to ultimate ends, making the pursuit of ultimate happiness conceivable. They can be understood, therefore, as claims about the ultimate purpose of life, the value of all that is, or the final point of any of our struggles. That is why religious beliefs are so often said to concern the meaning of life; believers reassess themselves and their purposes in the light of an enlarged conception of life's true ends. In so doing, they change the way they understand their suffering, for example. Or they change the way they think about their fate. These changes are, in effect, changes in the meaning that life has for a person, and they follow from the adoption of teleological principles—whose *point* is to

enable just this kind of self-reflection.

Let me try to clarify these remarks by discussing some of these changes in greater detail. Adopting a religious principle bears implications for the way in which a person understands and pursues true happiness—his absolute *telos*, as Kierkegaard says. And this being the case, the belief in the Christian paradox should entail a changed view of one's prospects for happiness. But surely it does. For Christian faith is expressed not simply in the claim that God was in Christ, but in the claim that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. To believe in the Incarnation is to *count* oneself a recipient of God's act of reconciliation; it is to believe that God somehow acted through Christ to extend forgiveness to everyone, including oneself. So if people's belief is to the point, they will adhere to *this* aspect of the teaching. They will *count* themselves forgiven.

Counting oneself forgiven, in turn, affects the orientation which one has to his absolute *telos*, ultimate happiness. Instead of supposing that this happiness depends on the fulfillment of *conditions*, or instead of making self-acceptance depend on the satisfaction of requirements, believers take God's forgiveness as their right to affirm themselves despite the fact that these prior conditions have not been met. They affirm themselves in spite of their inadequacy in measuring up to the standards which they set for themselves. And they do this without having earned the right through their own efforts. This does not mean that believers cease their efforts to improve themselves; the only change concerns the way in which this effort of self-improvement is understood. No longer does it represent a task which must be completed before one can fully approve of himself; it represents a task through which he or she expresses thanksgiving for having already received the highest good. Thus, believers reside comfortably within themselves in trying to be good people. No longer must they struggle with themselves to *prove* themselves worthy. Their worth, they trust, is already assured. God, they believe, told them that in becoming incarnate.

Happiness, in short, ceases to be an end that one can pursue by manipulating means. Rather than being an achievement for which one might congratulate oneself, it is thought of as a gift for which one gives thanks. According to all *prudential* strategies for acquiring lasting happiness, this idea makes no sense. Indeed, the idea of simply receiving the right to approve of oneself without having to live up to any prior conditions is absurd. We tend to think of happiness as something which we must attain for ourselves, something which we must work at, or earn. So it sounds crazy to us to suppose that ultimate happiness is not an achievement for which we are responsible. But such is the foolishness of the Christian faith, which will always be a stumbling block to those who do not realign their thinking with teachings of grace.

To take one more example, consider the belief about God as the creator and

sustainer of all that is. I think that it is a misunderstanding of this belief to affirm it and *not to entrust one's own well-being ultimately to God*. This is not a theological point for doctrinal debates; it is a logical point about the nature of the claim in question. For the claim that God in his wisdom sustains all things is a teleological principle, and as such it provides a refuge for the ultimate hopes and fears of individuals in doubt about the direction and purpose of their lives. Believing in God, in other words, means evaluating oneself in a cosmic perspective. It means trusting in a power that exceeds anything that we know. It means thinking in terms of *providence*. That is the perspective that one inherits along with the belief in God. For God, who sustains all things, also sustains the believer; and to acknowledge this is *eo ipso* to bring one's concerns about fate under the thought of God's care. Here the point that I want to make is that one cannot affirm a religious teaching and *not* bring one's personal thoughts into accordance with the evaluative pattern that it suggests. The reason for this is that these teachings are not only principles (to be affirmed as guides for thinking) but *teleological* principles (to be affirmed as guides for thinking *about the ultimate purposes that make our lives worthwhile*). If this were more clearly understood, one could not affirm religious beliefs without also accepting their implications, which apply to our personal existence, where questions about happiness, just deserts, and the meaning of suffering weigh so heavily upon us.

In short, the fact that the affirmation of an existence communication inwardly transforms one's life is not difficult to understand if existence communications represent principles governing teleological assessments of life. For in such assessments, various beliefs about the purpose of cosmic life become the means of evaluating the purpose of one's own life; various beliefs about the suffering of the world become the means of coping with one's own suffering; various beliefs about the true end of mankind become the means of grounding one's own hopes of fulfillment; and various beliefs about the sustenance of God become the means of searching for providence in one's own life story. All these general beliefs find their application in the context of individual existence, where the *telos* to which they are all related turns out to be the absolute *telos* of concrete human concern.

(4)

I'd like to think that this account of existence communications not only helps to make sense out of Kierkegaard, but that it also makes it easier to address the complex questions of analytic philosophy which have followed in the wake of the *Postscript*. Though I can do no more than to sketch the implications of what I've said, I would like to close by drawing attention to two of the most important.

One modern question is absolutely basic to the philosophy of religion, and it

concerns the logical status of religious beliefs, or existence communications. Are these beliefs genuine truth claims, or are they merely “emotive” expressions which serve to articulate the passions of those who believe in them? Can religious paradoxes be true, or are they simply devices for eliciting certain attitudinal dispositions?

Much of what Kierkegaard has to say about religious beliefs in the *Postscript* seems designed to favor an emotivist account. Attitudinal changes *do* follow from the adoption of existence communications, for such beliefs are supposed to reform one’s inward life. Yet one can never show that these changes depend on the affirmation of truth claims, since the truth or falsity of an existence communication is generally not demonstrable. That is why these beliefs are comparable to principles—their “firstness” makes them impossible to base on prior evidence. But this does not mean that existence communications are merely devices for the expression of attitudes, nor does it mean that they cannot be truth claims of an indemonstrable sort. It does not even mean that paradoxical claims cannot be true. The paradoxes in question could be only apparent, or the belief in them could be *true enough*, practically speaking, to be relied on as a working assumption. So for Kierkegaard to dwell on the inward changes that faith entails does not necessarily mean that religious beliefs are purely emotive expressions.

But how might such claims be true? They might be true or false in the same way that any principle can be true or false. That fact that such principles are indemonstrable, either empirically or logically, does not count against their status as truth claims. It does not count against it, that is, unless we are willing to allow the same logical priority to count against the cognitive status of principles in general—and there are too many principles to allow us to do this. There are scientific principles (e.g., the claim that the future will be like the past), moral principles (e.g., the claim that we ought not to harm others), psychological principles (e.g., the claim that all human behavior is a response to genetic inheritance and stimulus-response conditioning), and many others. How can we say that all of these claims are pseudo-assertions? Each of them *informs* the kind of thinking that follows from it, telling us, in effect, that the world will yield insights to those who adopt the perspective which it defines. Thus, the principle that nature is uniform tells us that the natural world may be understood by pursuing natural law explanations, and the principle that we owe others the same considerations that we give to ourselves tells us that human behavior requires moral evaluations. But religious principles do the same kind of thing; they tell us that the search for wisdom can be furthered by conforming the judgments which we make about our existential problems to the standards they suggest. This may or may not be true; but if there is any truth to it, it will be learned in the way that the truth of any indemonstrable principle is learned. It will be learned, that is, from growing capacitated by a new form of understanding.

This shows, I think, how *formal* the notion of a truth claim is. Scientific and moral and religious truths may be utterly different from one another, so different that one could not assume that religious truths share any part of their nature with empirical truths, for example. Too often we assume that true propositions state facts, and that facts contrast with values, so that all potentially fact-stating claims have nothing to do with evaluation. But if there are moral truths, then they state moral facts, and if there are religious truths, then they state religious facts. In this larger sense of the word “fact,” factual judgments no longer contrast with evaluations; facts are simply the truths which make true propositions true. In this sense, and only in this sense, might we say that religious principles state facts. But then, the facts that true religious assertions state would be facts about the purposiveness of life, about the meaning which the world has, and about the sense of worth in which people are able to find themselves. They would not be facts of a sort that contrast with values; they would be understood in the same formal sense in which truth claims should be understood²¹.

The philosophical concern about the logical status of religious claims is obviously related to a religious belief’s possible justification. If religious claims, or existence communications, are not truth claims to begin with, then we need not worry about their rational justification. The fact that religious beliefs may help people to understand their lives, and to make sense out of their fate, will not have anything to do with their truth value. At best, the help rendered by such beliefs will consist of therapeutic aid in steadying one’s emotions, managing one’s fears, and living more comfortably in a psychological sense. Some of Kierkegaard’s interpreters think of this emotional steadying as the subjective interest out of which believers manufacture their faith. But if religious claims are truth claims, then their affirmation must be connected with something more than fear, need, idiosyncrasy, whimsy, or cultural inertia. Their truth value must be connected with the way the world is. The illumination, or problem-solving power, that grows out of a religious view of life can be taken as the sign of that connection. This “power” cannot be turned into objective evidence, but it is nonetheless a relevant factor in the judgment of principles, and should be just as relevant in the case of religious principles.

Thus, the fact that Kierkegaard divorces existence communications from objective evidence and connects their affirmation with subjectivity need not mean that questions of faith are to be decided arbitrarily, or in accordance with one’s personal idiosyncrasies. It means only that logic holds out a place for beliefs which are not to be tested evidentially. The mistake is to think that beliefs which cannot be tested against the evidence can only be arbitrarily adopted; indeed, to think that they cannot be genuine truth claims at all. But there are factors other than evidence which bear on the adoption of religious principles. The nobility of a religious outlook, the impression made by those who exemplify it, the

promise of new understanding which it seems to contain—these are all relevant to the affirmation of the principles which underlie it. Most importantly, there is the fit between concepts of a religious view and the shape of one's life. Factors like these can make the commitment to principles appropriate, even though they do not in any strict sense constitute evidence. As one grows more deeply aware of the seriousness and pathos of human existence, one becomes more conscious of the need to understand life teleologically, and more open to the influence of religious conceptions. This deepening pathos spawns sensitivity, and as one becomes more sensitively attuned to the deep things of life, he or she may find in religious concepts the ready-made expressions for profound sentiments. To feel as if the concepts of a religious outlook are ready-made for one's feelings is not yet to believe, I know. But it is to have the *disposition* to believe; and if this disposition is not checked by intellectual reservations, it may eventually expand into full-fledged faith.

In any case, the suggestion that existence communications might be understood as teleological principles bears two important implications. It suggests that these beliefs might be truth claims despite their resistance to adjudication on independent grounds, and it implies that there might be more to the problem of their justification than comes out in a consideration of objective evidence. These two points, I think, need to be upheld in contemporary debates about the nature of religious claims. And if existence communications are comparable to teleological principles, then Kierkegaard can be read as an ally in this cause.

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NOTES

1. Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. by Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 339.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, see the footnote.

4. *Ibid.*, see also pp. 505-6.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 339.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 338.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 339.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 178-80.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, p. 497.

12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, p. 523.
14. Soren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon Christendom*, trans. by Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 213.
15. *Postscript*, p. 523.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
17. *Attack*, p. 221.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 271.
19. What follows is an unfortunately brief account of the logic of principles. A much fuller account can be found in my book, *Matters of Faith and Matters of Principles: Religious Truth Claims and Their Logic* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1981), chapter II.
20. *Postscript*, pp. 353 and 497.
21. See *Matters of Faith*, chapter IV.