

SOCRATES OR CHRIST

An analysis and critique of the Kierkegaardian position

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In the *Philosophical Fragments*,¹ Kierkegaard argues that "between man and man the Socratic relationship is the highest and the truest. If the God had not come himself, all the relations would have remained on the Socratic level" (F, 68).² To be able to advance further than Socrates, which he thinks Christianity does, one must show that it is preferable to the Socratic position. If this can be done, Christianity provides human beings with the highest values, for its true rival is the Socratic view of life. My

¹ The opinions I attribute to Kierkegaard are based primarily on the pseudonymous works, *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. The question of whether the views of Johannes Climacus represent Kierkegaard's on all issues is controversial, and the discussion of this problem is beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, when I refer to Kierkegaard's views, I merely intend to offer an interpretation of what I believe to be the position in the respective works.

² References to Kierkegaard's works will be made in the text by an abbreviation followed by the page number. The following abbreviations are used:

- CD Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).
- CUP Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F., Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).
- E/O Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 2 vols., trans. Walter Lowrie (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1959).
- FT Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and the Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).
- F Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments or A Fragment of Philosophy*, trans. David F. Swenson, rev. trans. Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).
- POV Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author and My Activity as an Author*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).
- TC Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

paper, then will examine this fundamental Kierkegaardian alternative, either Socrates or Christ.

1

In examining the Kierkegaardian alternative, either Socrates or Christ, it is helpful to begin with the *Philosophical Fragments*. In this work, he raises the Socratic question, "How far does the Truth admit of being learned?" In answering this question, he contrasts the approaches of Socrates and Jesus to teaching.

Socrates plays the role of an intellectual midwife, and Kierkegaard praises his maieutic function as the loftiest of human ideals (F, 12–13). The possible success of this method is based upon his belief in the doctrine of recollection, and this presupposes that the truth is potentially known by all human beings (F, 14–16). Thus, the condition of knowledge is in the learner (F, 38). The teacher is only an "occasion" for helping the student to rely upon his own resources by first recognizing his own ignorance. The art of Socratic teaching is the occasion for both the teacher and the learner to understand themselves. Socrates' professed ignorance is an expression of both his love of the learner and his "sense of equality" with him (F, 37). Socrates' goal is to help the learner to become self-sufficient (F, 77; cf. F, 38).

Jesus' position differs from Socrates' in the following ways: The truth is not immanent; thus, recollection is impotent to determine the truth, even with the aid of Socrates. Only God, as the Savior, can give a person the "Truth" (F, 19–21). Thus, Christ is not, like Socrates, an occasion for learning; He must, himself, provide both the condition for learning and the Truth itself. God, then, creates a new person who owes God everything (F, 38). Finally, for the Socratic approach, the historical is merely accidental, since it provides only an occasion for learning. But for Jesus, the historical is essential, for the Absolute Paradox (God becoming man in time) is necessary as a condition for knowing the Truth.³ As Kierkegaard says, "the object of Faith is not the *teaching* but the *teacher*" (F, 77).

³ According to Kierkegaard, God-man, the Incarnation, is the absolute paradox because there must be an absolute difference between God and human beings. Moreover, he argues that the "absolute unlikeness" between God and human beings cannot be comprehended by human reason (F, 55). God is infinite and eternal, but human beings are finite and bound to time (CUP, 195).

A development of the Socratic and Christian approaches to their respective objects—their respective “truths”—requires a discussion of the relative importance of philosophy (reason) and poetry in learning. I shall begin with the Socratic position.

“The genuine ‘quarrel between philosophy and poetry’ (607b5–6),” says Leo Strauss in commenting on Plato’s *Republic*, “concerns, from the philosopher’s point of view, not the worth of poetry as such, but the order of rank of philosophy and poetry. According to Socrates, poetry is legitimate only as ministerial...to the king (597e7) who is the philosopher, and not as autonomous.”⁴ Strauss argues that, according to Socrates, the poets understand the nature of the passions, but are unwilling to be directed by the philosopher’s wisdom. The Platonic dialogue is an excellent example of poetry subordinated to philosophy.⁵ Strauss’ position has merit and if we accept it, we may ask how Kierkegaard’s position compares with Socrates’.

In Kierkegaard, the bent toward both the poetical and the dialectical is clear. The question arises as to whether one or the other, both, or neither play a central role in determining the nature of Christianity? In the *Postscript* he says, “If thought speaks deprecatingly of the imagination, imagination in turn speaks deprecatingly of thought; and likewise with feeling. The task is not to exalt the one at the expense of the other, but to give them an equal status, to unify them in simultaneity; the medium in which they are unified is *existence*” (CUP, 311). Thus, for Kierkegaard, reason is not higher than imagination and feeling, and therefore, philosophy cannot be higher than poetry. As Socrates subordinated poetry to philosophy, Kierkegaard subordinated his talents both to understanding and defending Christianity (POV, 73). Let us examine, then, what Kierkegaard believes to be the roles that both reason and poetry play in learning about God.

Socrates assumes that we have the condition for self-knowledge (the doctrine of recollection), but recollection did not help Socrates to know the truth; his questioning helped him to recognize his own ignorance. He helped others as a midwife, but he, himself, could not “beget” the truth (F, 13). Kierkegaard recalls that Socrates, who diligently studied human nature, “had not yet been able to make up his mind whether he was a stranger monster than Typhon, or a creature of a gentler sort, partaking of

⁴ Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*, (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1964), p. 136.

⁵ Strauss, pp. 136–37.

something divine (*Phaedrus*, 229e)" (F, 46). Kierkegaard seems to be implying that if this ideal of rationality, in both an intellectual and a moral sense, was not able to achieve self-knowledge, what hope is there for reason, even given the powers of Socratic recollection, to know the truth. No wonder Chapter III of the *Fragments* begins with a discussion of the limits of reason.

The passion related to reason pushes it to its limits; in Kierkegaardian language, it "will[s] its own downfall." (F, 46). "The supreme paradox of all thought is the attempt to discover something that thought cannot think" (F, 46). Let us, he suggests, call this unknown, God although it cannot be proven to exist as God (F, 49). If we accept the principle that like knows like, which Kierkegaard does, the unknown or God is, to use his term, "absolutely unlike"; it is "absolutely unlike" anything that is rational (F, 55). It is with this that "the paradoxical passion of the reason" comes into "collision" (F, 55). To reason, then, "the unknown (the God) remains a mere limiting concept," but imagination could suggest any number of possibilities for its content. Pagans, he suggests, could do this well. However, one knows that such content is an arbitrary projection of the imagination (F, 55–56). "The reason has brought the God as near as possible, and yet he is as far away as ever" (F, 57).

But there is one important consequence that follows from this analysis of the limits of reason, and we have mentioned it above. "If man is to receive any knowledge about the Unknown (the God) he must be made to know that it is unlike him, absolutely unlike him" (F, 57). But reason, itself, cannot understand an absolute difference between God and human beings (F, 58). God is required, as a teacher, to teach human beings the consciousness of sin, i.e., the unlikeness between human beings and God that they have brought upon themselves. God-man ("the eternal made historical"), as the Absolute Paradox, negatively reveals this unlikeness as sin, but positively attempts to negate this unlikeness. The following is a succinct statement of the Paradox: "In order that he may have the power to give the condition the Teacher must be the God; in order that he may be able to put the learner in possession of it he must be man. This contradiction is again the object of Faith, and the Paradox" (F, 77). Although reason has taken us to the point of positing an absolute unlikeness, it can neither discover, conceive nor understand the Absolute

Paradox (F, 59).⁶ Reason “desires its own downfall,” but this is what the Paradox also desires (F, 59).

Although reason cannot understand the Absolute Paradox, Kierkegaard seems to imply, in what he says, that there is a sense in which it can be understood. Human beings are more than reason. We have seen that Kierkegaard demands parity between imagination and feeling, on the one hand, and reason, on the other. More than this, he demands that they be “unified” in existence. It is poetry, as the master of imagination and the expression of feeling that gives substance to the Paradox, and thus, unites itself to reason by picking up where reason leaves off. (Dialectic, however, is of some help to poetry.)⁷

God must be totally self-moving, and if this is the case, He cannot be moved by some need. Therefore, He must be moved by pure love (F, 30). But how can God make Himself understood, given the inequality that exists between God and human beings? His love of the learner, it would seem, is doomed to be an unhappy love (F, 31). However, it would seem that once reason reaches its limit, the poet in Kierkegaard takes over (F, 32). The lover understands the desire for equality with the beloved, and, as Kierkegaard says, poets are “the spokesmen of love” (F, 48; cf. CUP, 237). He imagines a king who loves and wishes to marry a “humble maiden,” but recognizes that the inequality between them is so great that his beloved will live in pain at the thought that no gratitude on her part would be sufficient (F, 32–34). How much greater, he thinks, must God’s grief be at the thought of the gap between himself and human beings which obliterates any possible human understanding of God (F, 34–35). Now that the problem is set, he openly invites the poet to attempt to solve it (F, 35). But his discussion is not devoid of dialectic, for he dismisses certain possibilities. (The dialectic, however, must be coupled to an understanding of love.) He eliminates the “elevation of the learner” by God and God revealing Himself to the learner as unsatisfactory to the “teacher” (F, 36–37). “Love does not alter the beloved, it alters itself” (F, 41). Kierkegaard says that we must recognize the contradiction in God’s

⁶ In the *Postscript*, however, Kierkegaard argues that dialectics is a “benevolent helper”; it assists in discovering “the absolute object of faith” by recognizing ignorance and its object—objective uncertainty. This objective uncertainty nurtures faith (CUP, 438).

⁷ Mackey says, “A theory, a doctrine, a statement of fact purport to say something about realities. A poem gives insight into possibilities by fashioning them in words.” Louis Mackey, “The Poetry of Inwardness,” in *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Josiah Thompson (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972), p. 96.

sorrow. "Not to reveal oneself is the death of love, to reveal oneself is the death of the beloved" (F, 37).

If a satisfactory relationship between God and man cannot be achieved by elevating human beings, it would have to be established by God descending to the human level (F, 39). Thus, God must become man, and if we understand the nature of love, we recognize that God must take on the appearance of a humble servant. At this point, he paints what he calls a "poet's picture" of God's love for human beings— his care, gentleness, concern and infinite suffering (F, 39–42). "The love which gives all is itself in want" (F, 40).⁸

The Paradox is "offensive" to reason. But possibly the poet, who understands love, can again help us. The narrow meaning of self-love entails self-centeredness. But as love develops, love for another person, the "paradox of self-love" reveals itself; love is transformed into the opposite of narrow self-love (F, 48, 59). Analogously (although Kierkegaard admits that the analogy is not exact) reason, conceived narrowly in a stance of defiant pride, finds the Paradox offensive, but like the "paradoxical passion of self-love," its paradoxical passion wills its own downfall; that is, it wills to become the opposite of itself. Therefore, "if the Paradox and the Reason come together in a mutual understanding of their

⁸ The fact that the poetic is an essential ingredient in Kierkegaard's explanation of Christianity should not be confused with the position that poetry, per se, and religion are always compatible. Kierkegaard argues that the sphere of the subjective thinker is not identical with that of the poet. The former is preoccupied with existence, the latter with the "fairyland of the imagination" (CUP, 319–20). In allying poetry and religion, there is tendency to reduce poetry to aesthetics. "Religious pathos does not consist in singing and hymning and composing verses, but in existing" (CUP, 348). A religious poet may paint a picture of eternal happiness "in all the magic colors of the imagination," but this reduces the religious to the aesthetic (CUP, 349). More specifically, one cannot understand Christianity without understanding suffering, but poetry provides one with an escape from suffering, in a "happier order of things" (CUP, 397). Thus, the aesthetic personality is far removed from the religious character. It should be clear, however, that this "aesthetic" use of poetry is quite different from one which truly serves the needs of Christianity. In the *Postscript*, he suggests that the knight of faith, in *Fear and Trembling*, is a "poetic production." Creating what he calls a "psychological-poetic-production" brings the image as close to reality as possible (CUP, 447n.). Moreover, poetry pertains to the possible. (See n. 6.) "To ask with infinite interest about a reality which is not one's own, is faith" (CUP, 288). But Kierkegaard also argues that "I can lay hold of the other's reality only by conceiving it, and hence by translating it into a possibility" (CUP, 282). Kierkegaard says that from both an intellectual and a poetic standpoint, possibility is higher than reality (CUP, 282), but the Absolute Paradox repels reason. We, therefore, require the poetic to approach it.

unlikeness their encounter will be happy, like love's understanding, happy in the passion to which we have not yet assigned a name [faith]" (F, 61)⁹

It is important to understand the potency of the offense, for even from a Socratic point of view, what Kierkegaard calls the Moment (God becomes man) is a "jest" or a "folly" (F, 64). However, from a modern perspective, what is strange about reason's judgment is that Christ, as God-man, is *revealed* as a paradox, and therefore, far from being discovered as such by reason, it was deliberately imposed upon reason (F, 65). Moreover, the practical import of the Paradox again suggests that Socrates is the most formidable rival to Christianity. The *Philosophical Fragments* begins with the problem of whether the truth can be known, but for Socrates, knowledge should have practical import, i.e., should tell us something about *eudaimonia* or the good life. But the knowledge gained from Christian revelation purports to be practical; indeed, for Christianity, the historical existence of the Paradox is the condition for the eternal happiness of human beings. It is important to see, however, that since the practical import of the truth for Socrates (*eudaimonia*) is different from the practical import of the truth for Jesus (eternal happiness), there is a sense in which the contrast between their approaches is not particularly useful. But the comparison is helpful, not only in contrasting two methods of teaching, as Kierkegaard does, but in contrasting two ways of life. Socratic and Christian values offer alternative approaches to the way in which we ought to live our lives. Therefore, having compared Socratic and Christian "learning" (according to Kierkegaard), and the respective roles played by philosophy and poetry in such learning, we should analyze Kierkegaard's argument for Christianity.

2

Kierkegaard connects the inquiry in the *Postscript* with that of the *Fragments* by maintaining that he will attempt to go further than Socrates (CUP, 183). Again Socrates is presented as paganism's "greatest hero" (CUP, 329).¹⁰ He reminds the reader of the "moral" of the *Fragments* (F,

⁹ The factor which unites the "setting aside" of reason and the "bestowing" of the Paradox is faith (F, 73). The Paradox, however, provides the condition for the possibility of faith.

¹⁰ "It [the *Fragments*] took its point of departure in the pagan consciousness, in order to seek out experimentally an interpretation of existence which might truly be said to go *further* than paganism" (CUP, 323).

139). In the "moral," he argues that a person must first understand Socrates before he can claim to have advanced beyond him (CUP, 183). Moreover, although "the projected hypothesis" does go beyond Socrates, this fact does not entail that the hypothesis, itself, is necessarily true (F, 139).

In the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard distinguishes between objective and subjective truth, and he insists that only the latter properly applies to ethics and religion.¹¹ He attempts to show that Socrates is a subjective thinker, but there is more truth, in the subjective sense, in the truly Christian way. Thus, in the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard's version of being a Christian purports both to go further than Socrates and to be a "truer" way of life. Let us, therefore, see how he understands Socrates, in the *Postscripts*, and how he resolves the alternative—either the Socratic or the Christian way—in favor of Christianity.

We have seen, in the *Fragments*, that Kierkegaard presents a choice between the approaches of Socrates and Jesus to "teaching." We saw that, for Socrates, according to Kierkegaard, the truth is potentially in human beings, and the teacher is an occasion for actualizing this potentiality (a view that is diametrically opposed to that of Jesus). To go beyond Socrates and towards Christianity, one must deny that Socratic recollection yields the truth. According to Kierkegaard, recollection revealed to Socrates a recognition of his own ignorance. The *Postscript* develops this problem more thoroughly than does the *Fragments*.

In the *Postscript*, the Platonic and Kierkegaardian positions are presented as complementary. "The only consistent position outside Christianity is... the taking of oneself out of existence by way of recollection into the eternal" (CUP, 203).¹² He maintains that the Platonic theory of recollection develops this concept in terms of "speculation." I imagine he means that the philosopher attempts to determine the nature of Platonic forms, and the recollection of forms makes knowledge, including practical knowledge, possible (CUP, 184, 184–85n.). He argues, however, that Socratic recollection entails a movement away from speculation.

¹¹ He argues that "all essential knowledge relates to existence," and therefore, to that which is inward. He concludes that "only ethico-religious knowledge has an essential relationship to the existence of the knower" (CUP, 176–77).

¹² Allison correctly expresses Kierkegaard's point when he says, "From the Christian standpoint a man is born in sin and as a sinner. Thus, in contradistinction to the Socratic man who has access to the eternal by way of recollection, the Christian is profoundly aware of his alienation from the eternal." Henry E. Allison, "Christianity and Nonsense," in *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 301.

Indeed for Kierkegaard, Socrates is an "*existing* thinker"; therefore, Socratic recollection is said to be a movement toward inwardness. According to this doctrine, as Kierkegaard interprets it, existing, as a "process of transformation to inwardness," is the truth, and the struggle involved in this process constantly negates "the possibility of taking oneself back into eternity through recollection" (CUP, 184). Kierkegaard's distinction between Socratic and Platonic recollection is idiosyncratic and demands comment, but I shall first attempt to develop Kierkegaard's argument.

If recollection does not yield eternal truth, then, contrary to what Kierkegaard says above, we are left, not with Christianity, but with the view that some kind of subjectivity is truth. But he recognizes that there are other types of subjectivity or inwardness besides Christianity (CUP, 251). His thesis is that "subjectivity, inwardness is the truth," the maximum of which is Christianity. But the Greeks, most notably Socrates, demonstrated that it is possible to live in inwardness outside of Christianity (CUP, 248). Therefore, Kierkegaard must show the superiority of Christianity to the position of its arch rival, Socrates.

The following is Kierkegaard's contrast between objective and subjective truth. Objective truth entails that the knower is "in the truth" if he grasps a true object. Subjective truth pertains to the "nature of the individual's relationship; if only the mode of this relationship is in the truth, the individual is in the truth even if he should happen to be thus related to what is not true" (CUP, 178). The subjective emphasizes the "how" not the objective "what." The "how" pertains to one's striving which finds its impetus in passion (CUP, 182). For example, with reference to knowledge of God, objectively we are concerned with whether our "object" is the true God, but subjectively we shall be concerned with whether the relationship is a proper God-relationship, i.e., one which manifests "the infinite passion of inwardness" (CUP, 178). Socrates' life is an illustration of subjective truth. Socrates examines the question of whether the soul is immortal, but, in spite of his uncertainty, he embraces his belief with passion and courage; he conforms his life to his beliefs (CUP, 180).

Socrates is the model of the existential thinker (CUP, 184). His equation of wisdom with a recognition of one's own ignorance entails an awareness of the importance of existence, and Socratic truth was the highest that paganism attained (CUP, 183). "The Socratic ignorance gives expression to the uncertainty attaching to the truth, while his inwardness in existing is

the truth" (CUP, 183). Evidently, the subjective thinker should accept the Socratic conception of wisdom because his mode of existence is becoming (CUP, 77). "An existing individual is constantly in process of becoming" (CUP, 79). Because of this, human existence is essentially uncertain. Socrates, who represents subjective thinking at its best, is comi-tragic; his mode of existence is pathetic when viewed in terms of the impossibility of ultimate knowledge, but comic when one attains a correct perspective on the contingency of existence and what one knows (CUP, 82–83). His way of life, which represents a persistent striving for the truth and constant learning, reveals his ethical view of life (CUP, 110–11). Indeed, Socrates represents, in this sense, the model ethical person, for his infinite interest in the quality of life produces "infinitely accentuated ethical knowledge" (CUP, 281).

But how can one go further than Socrates? Kierkegaard argues as follows: Socratic ignorance is analogous to the category of the absurd, but this category entails less objective certainty than does Socratic ignorance. Second, objective uncertainty repels reason, but the category of the absurd is infinitely more repellent. Because of this, the category of the absurd creates an "infinitely greater tension" in one's inwardness than does Socratic ignorance. "Socratic inwardness in existing is an analogue to faith; only that the inwardness of faith, corresponding as it does, not to the repulsion of the Socratic ignorance, but to the repulsion exerted by the absurd, is infinitely more profound" (CUP, 184).

Socrates, according to Kierkegaard, recognized the impossibility of using recollection as a "back door" for the speculative grasping of the truth (CUP, 187). When eternal truth is related to the temporal individual, it becomes uncertain (a paradox), for eternal truth cannot be understood in the contingent terms necessary for existential understanding. Because of the consequent objective uncertainty and Socratic ignorance, the thinker withdraws into inwardness. But such truth is not, in itself, paradoxical. Thus, its power to cause a withdrawal toward inwardness is limited. The degree of inwardness or faith is based upon the degree of objective uncertainty or risk. The way to inwardness is made possible by blocking the way to truth through recollection, but this inwardness or faith is intensified by the truth being intrinsically paradoxical (God-man); more than this, the Absolute Paradox is capable of producing maximum inwardness or subjectivity. Since truth, as it pertains to ethics and religion, is subjectivity, and the depth of one's subjectivity is related to the depth of one's inwardness or passion, Christian subjectivity is deeper than Socratic

subjectivity. That is, Christianity is the deeper or higher truth.¹³ Thus, Kierkegaard's argument resolves the alternative—either the Socratic or the Christian way—in favor of Christianity. But is his argument correct? In the next section, I shall attempt to show that his argument is weak.

3

We have seen that central to Kierkegaard's alternative—either Platonism (speculation) or Christianity—is a rejection of the Platonic theory of recollection, and a reduction of it to an ingredient in subjectivity, Socratic subjectivity. I shall argue that there is little reason for making a distinction between Socratic and Platonic recollection. But more important than this historical point, I shall attempt to show that his arguments against Platonic recollection are weak.

Kierkegaard says that Platonic recollection is speculative, and I take this to mean that, for Plato, knowledge is based upon recollecting Platonic (objective) forms. But in the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*, Socrates is the spokesman of the theory of recollection, and it is tied to the Platonic forms. In the *Meno*, where Socrates is, again, the spokesman for recollection, it is related to determining objective truth.

In the *Phaedo*, Cebes suggests that the doctrine of recollection is a favorite theory of Socrates (72e), and Socrates relates this belief to the theory of the forms; that is, it is possible to recollect the absolute, eternal, immutable forms (74a–77a). In the *Phaedrus* myth (246a–256e), Socrates describes the gods' contemplation of that which is beyond heaven, i.e., the Platonic forms, where they receive "proper food" for the soul. The human soul, at best, is only able to see some of what exists as real (while following the Gods), and can only recover knowledge of the forms through recollection (249b–c). Finally, in the *Meno* (81a–86b), the doctrine of recollection is invoked to show that one can learn the (objective) truth about all things, and not just about geometry (85e).

¹³ Socrates is capable of achieving what Kierkegaard calls Religiousness A. But this lacks the "higher pathos" of Religiousness B. Christianity represents this highest type of subjectivity, higher even than that which Socrates' attained. Taylor correctly notes that "many of Kierkegaard's arguments try to define the peculiarity of Christian religiousness by contrasting it with religion A as represented by Socrates." Mark C. Taylor, *Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship: a Study of Time and Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 251.

We are left, therefore, with Platonic recollection, but before I consider Kierkegaard's objections to this theory, one may note that the *Phaedrus* myth, mentioned above, can be used to contrast a Platonic version of divine truth with a Kierkegaardian version. The forms are principally the objects of divine knowledge, and only secondarily of human knowledge. What, then, are Kierkegaard's objections to Platonic speculation?

Kierkegaard thinks that philosophy, as objective speculation, cannot solve the problems of existence, e.g., the question of whether eternal happiness exists, for in philosophizing, "he must proceed in precisely the opposite direction, giving himself up and losing himself in objectivity, thus vanishing from himself" (CUP, 55). He thinks that the attitude of the objective thinker is "wholly indifferent to subjectivity, and hence also to inwardness and appropriation" (CUP, 70). But this is not relevant to the problem of whether objective practical knowledge is possible; that is, whether there are objective truths that are applicable to ethical and religious behavior.

Kierkegaard's notion that "the inwardness of understanding" is a private and personal matter, and that each person must gain understanding by himself or herself makes understanding subjective (CUP, 71–72), but only in one sense. According to Kierkegaard, Socrates recognizes the truth of the above view and this is why he uses a method of indirect communication, his maieutic method (CUP, 74–76). But Kierkegaard, I think, misrepresents Socrates' position. Certainly, Socrates had great integrity; he was passionately committed to his principles. But he was concerned with teaching students the skills of dialectical inquiry, and the goal of such inquiry is the truth in an objective sense. However, he evidently believed that this skill can best be imparted in an indirect way. Socrates would not have accepted the Kierkegaardian contrast between "the truth as inwardness" and "the truth as knowledge" (CUP, 226). Louis Pojman correctly argues that "disinterestedness or impartiality is not necessarily opposed to subjectivity (qua passionate interest)."¹⁴ Indeed, is not Socrates a clear example of this? Therefore, Kierkegaard's exclusive dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity is confused. Moreover, what I say about Socrates is clearly compatible with Kierkegaard's view that the art of communication is the art of "taking away," i.e., in order to achieve *X*, impediment *Y* must be removed (CUP, 245–246n). The Socratic

¹⁴ Louis P. Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity: Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion* (University, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press), pp. 48–49.

art of purgation, which parallels this view, is for the sake of gaining "truth as knowledge."

A second Kierkegaardian argument can be formulated as follows: Recollection cannot be used as a "back door" for speculatively determining practical (ethical and religious) truths, because, as we said, for Kierkegaard, human beings are in a constant state of becoming, and therefore, human existence is replete with incompleteness and uncertainty. What possible application, then, can speculation or objectivity have for existence?

Both Plato and Aristotle recognized a distinction between being and becoming, and a parallel distinction between knowledge and opinion. However, although our opinions about existence qua becoming cannot be as certain as our opinions about existence qua being, this does not entail that a knowledge of the forms, or a comparable type of objective knowledge, is inapplicable to practical matters. Aristotle is particularly clear about this. For example, in ethical matters, we can say something objective about human behavior, i.e., ethical decisions entail a choice of a mean between extremes with respect to actions and passions. But such a mean is relative to us, and therefore, must be applied, by each person, to himself or herself. The mean, in a sense, is objective but, in another sense, it is subjective (precise knowledge is not possible in ethical matters). Indeed, Aristotle ties the imprecision, and therefore the "incompleteness and uncertainty," of ethical knowledge to the variability of its subject matter. Similarly, Plato, in the *Republic*, defines justice in terms of people doing what their capacities suit them for. But different people, having different capacities or abilities, must apply this (objective) norm differently. Again, as Aristotle would say, the principle is relative to us. It would seem that the Platonic-Aristotelian view is considerably more balanced than the Kierkegaardian theory.

It might be argued that Kierkegaard's position can be presented in a more sympathetic way. Indeed, I do think that his belief that truth is subjectivity has some validity. He contrasts the speculative (objective) and subjective approaches by arguing that the former emphasizes knowledge, while the latter emphasizes appropriation (CUP, 182). But what is interesting about this contrast is that the alternatives are not mutually exclusive. Appropriation, Kierkegaard thinks, leads to greater knowledge.

Ethical and religious truth, according to Kierkegaard, pertain to the way we appropriate our beliefs, and not to their content (CUP, 178–80). Subjective truth becomes a species of ethics; a true way exhibits courage

and integrity in actualizing one's ideals (possibilities). (See CUP, 302). One "incarnates" a reflection of the eternal whose truth must, from an existential human standpoint, remain uncertain. Socrates is a model of such courageous risk-taking and integrity. The term "truth" can connote honesty and integrity as well as sincerity, and therefore, it can pertain to the manner in which one's conduct conforms to one's principles. One may also argue that the person who, in a Socratic manner, instantiates his ideals has the most profound understanding of them. For example, he clearly understands what benefits accrue to living such a life, and what must be compromised. From an existential standpoint, then, Socratic subjective thinking incorporates a type of testing procedure for one's ideals or principles. There is some validity, then, in Kierkegaard's view that "knowing the truth is something which follows as a matter of course from being the truth" (TC, 201).¹⁵

We are left with Kierkegaard's defense of Christian subjectivity as somehow superior to Socratic subjectivity. I must admit that I find his defense difficult to understand. I do not see that the quantity of inwardness or passion proves that Christian subjectivity is superior to Socratic subjectivity. One would have to show that it is qualitatively superior. I think that Kierkegaard believes this to be true, and he also believes that this evaluation has an ethical dimension. As mentioned above, Kierkegaard thinks that subjective truth is a species of ethics. If this is the case, one may wish to argue, for example, that since the risk in Christianity is greater than the Socratic risk, the Christian form of courage is superior. One may also want to argue that since it is more difficult to accept the paradoxical nature of the Christian God than to accept the objective uncertainty of Socratic ignorance, Christian integrity is more difficult to attain than Socratic integrity, and therefore, superior. A similar argument can be offered for sincerity, and possibly for other virtues. The above arguments, I should think, make Kierkegaard's position interesting, but I do not believe that it can withstand criticism.

Socrates would argue that the risk entailed in being a Kierkegaardian Christian necessitates foolhardy or rash, and not courageous, action. Indeed, doesn't Kierkegaard admit that, even from a Socratic point of

¹⁵ Kierkegaard also denies that the converse is true, but this position is not Socratic. Socrates believed that knowing the truth about the good, in an objective sense, is a necessary and sufficient condition for being good. It is clear, then, that Socrates attributed the most positive practical import to knowing ethical truths.

view, the Absolute Paradox would be a folly? Similarly, the integrity of a Kierkegaardian Christian, for Socrates, would be based upon irrationality, and therefore, could not possibly be a virtue.¹⁶ It would seem, then, that his defense of Christian subjectivity is based upon little more than an interesting personal preference, and therefore, it is not a valid defense at all. How can Kierkegaard prove that his conception of the virtues, e.g., Christian courage and integrity, is preferable to the Socratic conception? To satisfactorily answer this question, Kierkegaard would have to *show* that the goodness entailed in his view of Christian virtue is higher than that entailed in Socratic virtue. But I do not see how he can do this.

4

I have argued that, for Kierkegaard, the alternative—either Socrates or Christianity—is central. But, for Kierkegaard, there is another sense in which this choice is basic. I shall, now, examine this issue.

In the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard argues that the difficulty with the ethical position presented in *Either/Or* is “that the ethical self is supposed to be found immanently in the despair, so that the individual by persisting in his despair at last wins himself” (CUP, 230).¹⁷ He thinks that although I can put myself into despair, I cannot, by my own aid, get myself out of it. The ethical itself, as Kierkegaard says many times, becomes the temptation. “When the ethical relationship to reality is the maximum for the individual, then temptation is his highest danger” (CUP, 238).¹⁸ This is best seen when the ethical conflicts with the religious. To be a paradigm is to be a pattern that everyone ought to follow, i.e., the universal, and although this fits the ethical, the religious paradigm is the opposite; it expresses the particular and the exceptional. Thus, Abraham, although completely capable of

¹⁶ In the *Meno* (87d–89a), Socrates argues that all virtue is grounded in knowledge, and therefore, he would argue that Christian virtue, based upon faith in the Absolute Paradox, cannot be virtue.

¹⁷ The ethical person believes that “every life view which hinges upon a condition outside of itself is despair” (E/O, II, 240). Such a person chooses himself as the absolute and this constitutes his freedom. Judge William emphasizes the view that one should not be bound by that which is beyond the control of the individual.

¹⁸ In spite of the fact that the ethical person expresses the universal, he exhibits the sin of pride. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard calls this defiance. The ethical person prides himself on what is freely accomplished by his own work.

realizing the ethical, was tempted by something higher, which transformed duty into a temptation. (See *Fear and Trembling*.)

The crucial point is that there is a basic difference between depending upon one's own resources and faith. Since being ethical entails the former notion, and Kierkegaard acknowledges Socrates to be the model of the ethical person,¹⁹ the alternative—either Socrates or Christianity—takes on added significance. Kierkegaard argues that the relationship between man and God is characterized by the fact “that the individual can do absolutely nothing of himself, but is as nothing before God” (CUP, 412).²⁰ He emphasizes the point that there is everything at stake in giving up on our own capacity for guiding our lives. In absolutely depending upon God, we have no guarantee whatsoever that He will give us what we want or even ask of us what we consider reasonable or good. From rational standpoint, it is possible that everything is lost if we depend upon God. But if we have faith, we believe nonetheless. The teleological Suspension of the Ethical is not an expression of the fact that Christian revelation and the principles of morality conflict; it is rather a vehicle for helping us to draw out the implications of what it means to absolutely depend upon God. No wonder Kierkegaard describes Abraham's life as a trial.

One might argue that if God is infinitely perfect, one can seriously doubt, given the fact that there is an infinite gap between what is infinite and what is finite, that God will relate to human beings as Christianity stipulates.²¹ The question is, then, why should we opt for Christianity? If we attempt to answer this question by offering a rational justification for Christianity as a system of revelatory doctrine, we will be involved, as

¹⁹ In *The Concept of Dread*, Kierkegaard argues that “ancient ethics” is based upon “the assumption that virtue is realizable,” but this is contradicted by the concept of sin (CD, 16–17).

²⁰ Kierkegaard says that “only when the individual has evacuated himself in the infinite, only then is the point attained where faith can break forth” (FT, p. 80). Kierkegaard thinks that, in opting for faith, we see ourselves as empty or nothing and God as standing against the view that man creates his own destiny. As an ethical person we are always “against” God. The religious person, then, believes that all good things come from God rather than from himself, and although God's claim on him is absolute, he has no claim whatsoever on God.

²¹ Christianity, says Kierkegaard, “proposes to bestow an eternal happiness upon the individual man, thus presuming an infinite interest in his eternal happiness as *conditio sine qua non*” (CUP, 19). But, as he suggests, isn't such an emphasis on one's “petty self” an incredible display of “egotistical vanity”? (CUP, 19). Why should human beings be more important to God than sparrows? (CUP, 369).

Kierkegaard says, in attempting to rationally justify that which is inherently unjustifiable, i.e., that which is rationally absurd. Kierkegaard is successful in showing that the Christian does not get faith at a bargain price, but if he is to provide a more substantial defense of faith, he must argue against the rationalistic emphasis in Socratic ethics. I shall conclude this paper with a possible defense of the Knight of Faith along what may be called Kierkegaardian lines.

Kierkegaard presents Socrates as a Knight of Infinite Resignation, i.e., "his ignorance is infinite resignation" (FT, 79). Only when one has reached this Socratic pinnacle and has emptied himself of his false pride in his own capabilities is faith a possibility. Socrates stood, par excellence, for the position of rational morality. The unexamined life is not worth living. Reason is the only legitimate guide to the happy life, for even true opinion must be grounded if it is to be secure. If, however, this exemplary moral person was led to the position that he was wise because he knew that he was ignorant, what hope is there for human beings, guided by their own reason, to find the truly happy life, far from determining the nature of eternal happiness? If this is the best that human reason can do, then human dignity is reduced to a humble recognition of human impotence. If human beings cannot turn to themselves for guidance, it would seem that one's only hope is to turn to God. But if religion presents God's revelation about salvation as rational, why should religion be an option for a person who believes that reason cannot fathom the truth about salvation? Moreover, why would we need religion to tell us about divine truths, if God's revelation is rational? In this case, we should depend upon our own reason or, at best, the reason of our best thinkers, e.g., philosophers, to determine religious truths. Therefore, if one accepts the Kierkegaardian position regarding the impotence of human reason in religious matters, religion is an option if it presents itself as unfathomable to reason, for this is the way the "Truth" would appear if it were the case that reason is impotent to know the Truth. Of course, we still would not know that it was the truth.

Regardless of whether this argument is imbedded in Kierkegaard's discussion, the fundamental question seems to be this: Why should we reject the ethical standpoint as the highest? Why shouldn't we maintain that human beings ought to be masters of their own destinies, that it is within one's power to do so, and that the ultimate guide is reason? Since Kierkegaard does not prove (to my satisfaction, at least) that the ethical viewpoint is not the highest, he can, at best, maintain that the choice

between the ethical and the religious standpoints is a matter of which "object" of faith we choose, for either point of view is a matter of faith.

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates shows his deep disagreement with Kierkegaard by expressing his faith in rational ethics.²² We remember that Socrates, on his death-bed (the *Phaedo*), argues that we should not give up on reason just because it is difficult to discover the truth. There is everything to lose—a knowledge of the good life—if we blame reason instead of ourselves. "We must not let it enter our minds that there may be no validity in argument. On the contrary we should recognize that we ourselves are still intellectual invalids, but that we may brace ourselves and do our best to become healthy" (*Phaedo* 90e).

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²² Fabro, in discussing Kierkegaard's conception of man, says, "Certainly a faith exists and one may even speak of faith in the sphere of pure nature. It is the Socratic faith ('faith in the wide sense,' Kierkegaard says), which is defined as 'an objective uncertainty held fast in...the most passionate inwardness.'" [Cornelio Fabro, "Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard's Dialectic," in *A Kierkegaard Critique*, ed. Howard A. Johnson and Niels Thulstrup (N.Y.: Harper and Brothers, 1962), p. 165.] This faith, however, as Stack suggests, is an ethical rather than a religious faith. George J. Stack, *Kierkegaard's Existential Ethics* (University Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1977), p. 121.