SELF AND KNOWLEDGE

In the previous chapter, I explained why, according to Kierkegaard, we have to obtain a relationship to God. I shall now examine the contention that the individual’s development reaches its termination in an epistemic situation, that of faith. Yet, I shall attempt to explain how Kierkegaard’s claim—that he is the arbiter of truth—does not render truth relative.

The exegetical work done so far requires analysis. We must analyze Kierkegaard’s strategy by confronting the tension between his subjectivism and seeming realism. We shall see how Kierkegaard’s emphasis upon the subjectivity of truth can be reconciled with his realism, for example, in his belief that there is a God.

MYSELF

Kierkegaard wants to bypass the debate between realism and idealism. He is apt to regard the realist debate as abstract, whereas truth is something we are willing “to live and die” for. Kierkegaard depicts realism in this way:

There is a truth, the greatness and grandeur of which we are accustomed to praise by saying admiringly that it is indifferent, equally valid, whether anyone accepts it or not; indifferent to the individual’s particular condition, whether he is young or old, happy or dejected; indifferent to its relation to him, whether it benefits him or harms him, whether it keeps him from something or assists him to it; equally valid whether he totally subscribes to it or coldly and impassively professes it, whether he gives his life for it or uses it for ill gain...

In his polemic, he perhaps mistakenly assumes that realists are, in their defence of objectivity, personally “unconcerned” about truth. Nonetheless, he does make a point to emphasize the importance of truth to our lives.

He maintains that “objective truths” differ from “concerned truths,” which have to be discovered by the individual. (They cannot be passed on as facts in a textbook.) Johannes de Silentio remarks:

Each generation learns from another, no generation learns the essentially human from a previous one. In this respect, each generation begins
primitively, has no task other than what each previous generation had, nor does it advance further, insofar as the previous generation did not betray the task and deceive themselves.  

Some types of knowledge—for example, the truths of mathematics—can be passed down. The task of becoming ourselves, however, requires learning the hard way. Kierkegaard's use of the first person, whether his own or that of his pseudonyms, can be understood as a way "to get men a bit more accustomed to hearing discourse in the first person...to make a turn away from inhuman abstraction to personality—that is my task."  

Johannes remarks, "I never reason in conclusion to existence, but I reason in conclusion from existence."  

Johannes Climacus says, "This is quite in order, precisely because decision is rooted in subjectivity, essentially in passion, and maximally in the infinitely interested, personal passion for our eternal happiness."  

The extent to which he goes to emphasize subjectivity, however, is equal to the length to which he goes to make it clear he is not pursuing a relativistic line of thought. For instance, he is very critical of the idea that truth may be historical and offers telling words against what today would be called hermeneutics or post-modernism. Anti-Climacus writes:

Many of the philosophers who were involved in propagating this doctrine of the superiority of the generation over the individual turn away in disgust when their teaching has sunk to the level where the mob is the God-man. But these philosophers forget that this nevertheless is their teaching, that it was not more true when it was accepted in the best circles, when the elite of the best circles, or a select circle of philosophers, was the incarnation. [author's own emphasis]  

The philosophy of the mob is how Kierkegaard understands relativism. Kierkegaard writes:

Can a historical point of departure be given for an eternal consciousness; how can such a point of departure be of more than historical interest; can an eternal happiness be built on historical knowledge?

What Kierkegaard craves is an eternal truth on which the self can be based. Yet, to seek the truth is not to know the object of our inquiry, because if we knew it, we would not be seeking it. Kierkegaard represents truth as being a matter of recollection for the ancients, as if truth was something we have forgotten yet that can be remembered. This is one way in which he can make sense of the claim that truth is a matter of seeking something but we do not know exactly what. Kierkegaard's solution proceeds by trial and error, and terminates with faith. When truth is attained, it causes a transformation, a "conversion," or "new birth."
Kierkegaard is fond of saying that the self is a contradiction (in the specific sense that the structure of the self is composed of opposites). More generally, we can speak of the self as a paradox. Johannes Climacus writes:

For the paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion: a mediocre fellow. This, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something thought itself cannot think. Yet, what cannot be thought—let us assume we cannot know God—can be an object of faith. (Of course, we can know the concept, but that does not presuppose empirical interaction.) Kierkegaard paints with a broad brush, calling all knowledge a matter of faith. “Fact is only for faith...The individual is born with faith—that is, with his second nature.” Anyhow, since God is paradoxical, it is something we must relate to with faith.

Kierkegaard’s views regarding our relation to truth can be drawn out from considering his views on the philosophical enterprise. In *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Johannes Climacus seems to be examining Descartes’ philosophy, which is known to begin with methodical doubt. Johannes Climacus considers three statements: “(1) philosophy begins with doubt; (2) in order to philosophise, we must have doubted; (3) modern philosophy begins by doubt.” Johannes Climacus notes that saying philosophy begins with doubt (the first proposition), is semantically different from saying that doubting is part of philosophy’s task after its inception (the second proposition). Furthermore, he notes that although the first two can be taken as universal, the third is an historical point. It is indeed a modern preoccupation with epistemology that sets doubt in the fore, as we see, for instance, in the writings of Descartes.

Also, Johannes Climacus understands there to be three ways in which we can understand the beginning of philosophy: the absolute (e.g., mysticism), the objective (e.g., science), and the subjective beginning (e.g., the existential). For Hegel, according to Kierkegaard, truth was thought to be present as immediate in the absolute beginning of both consciousness and the history of Western philosophy. “The absolute beginning is that concept which is also the end of the system, the concept of absolute spirit.” God is everything, including the unfolding of history.

Objective beginning is marked by a deliberative approach to truth. We aim to obtain a generically realist brand of truth. For instance, according to Frege, when we proclaim a mathematical truth it would not matter if the speaker was a madman; the statement would be true or false regardless of the personality of the speaker. In Kierkegaard’s polemic, however, a subjective approach to truth makes individual personality a requirement for truth. Since he is not a relativist, however, it would be better to characterize his views as realist, while requiring a certain subjective methodology for its attainment. Johannes Climacus exemplifies the methodology:

I shall endeavour to think it through to the best of my ability, to do what it says with all my passion, come what may, whether it leads to everything.
or to nothing, makes me wise or mad, I shall stake everything but shall not let go of the thought. My visionary dreams about being a follower have vanished; before I was allowed to be young, I became old; Now I am sailing on the open sea.  

The sea, in some of Kierkegaard’s writings, represents being lost; we are “out at sea.” As we may recall, it is to the unchanging sky rather than the heaving waters that Kierkegaard pins his gaze. Johannes has set himself the task of finding out what he can know, and has engaged in doubt. The doubt, as he notes, may lead to wisdom or madness, but he is determined to follow its path. Doubt is not an epistemological problem (how can I know X), but an existential one (how can I live not knowing how). In this regard, Johannes Climacus, more closely than any of the other pseudonyms, seems to be speaking as Kierkegaard himself.

When considering how we should relate to knowledge, Kierkegaard’s thought takes its beginning with a negative criticism of how not to relate to truth. Kierkegaard calls Hegel a Johannes Climacus who wants to climb to the heavens with syllogisms. The idea is that we cannot achieve truth by reflection. If we, like Descartes, however, see doubt as central, if not the very origin of philosophy, epistemology gains prominence over ethics. For Kierkegaard, the “I think, therefore I am” should read “I act, therefore I am.”

The bottom line for Kierkegaard is that we have to live. In Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard paints us the picture of a man who feels that he has wasted his life studying philosophy and not arrived at anything in the end but a pit of doubt. Kierkegaard’s attitude toward doubt is an elaboration of James’s: “[F]or the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.”

In dealing with doubt, Kierkegaard takes as his point of departure a Hegelian theory of consciousness, which corresponds with the different relationships we can have toward truth and the beginning of philosophy. Each stage, in Hegel’s thought, represents a possible way to orient ourselves vis-à-vis the truth. He aims to subsume all the views, the entire history of philosophy, within his own theory. Kierkegaard follows suit thus. The first view:

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<tr>
<th>The beginning of philosophy</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Stage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Absolute</td>
<td>Immediacy</td>
<td>Aesthetic</td>
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We could begin philosophy with immediacy (the absolute). We could assume philosophy to begin with a relationship to truth. Kierkegaard dismisses stage one as an epistemic and ethical impossibility. Thus, “However much the subject has the infinite within himself, by existing he is in the process of becoming.”

The second view:

<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objectivity</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>Ethical</td>
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The objectivity aimed at by science is an example of the second stage. Consciousness, in fact, is taken to be reflective (objective). "Reflection is the possibility of the relation; consciousness is the relation, the first form of which is contradiction." Furthermore, he writes, "Therefore, just as I can say that immediately everything is true, so I can also say that immediately everything is actual, for not until the moment that ideality is brought into relation with reality does possibility appear." Kierkegaard takes language to be a precondition to reflection. "It is language that cancels immediacy; if man could not talk he would remain in the immediate." Words remove us from the immediacy into the notional. The relationship between the ethical and reflection, one may wish to notice, is not exact: according to Kierkegaard, in being concerned with objective truth we may forget "the essential, the innermost, freedom, the ethical." In fact, Kierkegaard says, "Suicide is the only existent consequence of pure thinking." As Johannes Climacus explains, "With respect to existence, thinking is not at all superior to imagination and feeling but is coordinate. In existence, the supremacy of thinking plays havoc." On his analysis, the ancients, for example, wished to exist in the eternal, consequently to do away with the prison of the body. "For Greeks (by which he usually means Platonists), "to abandon existence, which continually yields the particular; now there is the opposite difficulty, to attain existence...pure thinking is most distant from existence." Johannes Climacus says of Socrates:

He was aware that he was a thinking being, but he was also aware that it was existence as medium that perpetually prevented him from thinking in continuity because it continually placed him in a process of becoming. Consequently, in order to be able to truly think, he did away with himself.

Though thought can lead to suicide, nonetheless, there is a generic connection between objectivity and ethics in that reflection is required to will (and hence to be ethical).

Finally, the third view:

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<tr>
<th>The beginning of philosophy</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Stage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subjectivity</td>
<td>Self-consciousness</td>
<td>Religious</td>
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</table>

In the third stage, philosophy begins with our experiences. Taken collectively, the following story emerges: (1) moment, (2) reflection upon the moment, and (3) the relation to reflection (self-consciousness). When it relates itself to itself, it becomes fully conscious. Johannes Climacus writes:

Consciousness is mind, and it is remarkable that when one is divided in the world of mind, there are three, never two. Consciousness, therefore, presupposes reflection. If this were not the case, then it would be impossible to explain doubt. Admittedly, language seems to conflict with this, for in most languages, as far as he knew, the term "to doubt"
Kierkegaard’s Romantic Legacy

is etymologically related to the word “two”. Yet he surmised that this merely suggested the presupposition of doubt, all the more so since it was clear to him that as soon as mind becomes two, I am eo ipso three. If there were nothing but dichotomies, doubt would not exist, for the possibility of doubt resides precisely in the third, which places the two in relation to each other.\(^3\)

The individual is caught between the eternal and the temporal: “Eternity is infinitely quick like that winged steed, temporality is an old nag, and the existing person is the driver...”\(^2\) Johannes Climacus puts it this way: “Human existence has an idea within itself but nevertheless is not an idea-existence...the human being must indeed participate in the idea but is not himself the idea.”\(^5\) The idea, like Hegel’s absolute, is in motion.

Repetition gives birth to consciousness. “As soon as the question of a repetition arises, the collision is present, for only a repetition of what has been before is conceivable...When ideality and reality touch each other, then repetition occurs. When, for example, I see something in the moment, ideality enters in and will explain that it is a repetition.”\(^3\) Kierkegaard writes, “[I]n order to doubt we must will it—the factor of willing must be taken away if we are to stop—consequently we must will to stop it, but then doubt is not at all conquered by knowledge.”\(^3\) Doubt is overcome by an act of will, the leap of faith.

For Kierkegaard, unlike Parmenides, for instance, thinking and being are separated by a chasm within existence. “The systematic idea is subject-object, is the unity of thinking and being; existence, on the other hand, is precisely the separation. From this it by no means follows that existence is thoughtless, but existence has spaced and does space subject from object, thought from being.”\(^3\) In existence, there is consciousness, which sets itself apart from the world, and as such the world becomes the other. Johannes Climacus writes:

A system of existence cannot be given...Existence itself is a system—for God, but it cannot be a system for any existing spirit. System and conclusiveness correspond to each other, but existence is the very opposite...Existence is the spacing that holds apart; the systematic is the conclusiveness that combines.\(^5\)

Kierkegaard contends that human beings cannot grasp existence as a system. Our understanding of existence (required to be a full human being) necessitates a submission to God. As Kierkegaard puts things, “It is really the God-relationship that makes a human being a human being, but this is what he would lack,”\(^2\) if faith in God was not established.

**Godless**
I have depicted Kierkegaard’s quest as the stages of development in the dialectics of self-becoming. He writes:
A bold venture is not a high-flown phrase, not an exclamatory outburst, but arduous work; a bold venture, no matter how rash, is not a tumultuous proclamation but a quiet dedication that receives nothing in advance but stakes everything.\(^7\)

Abraham can be seen as an example of a character who embarked on a journey and staked everything to reach his destination. Johannes Climacus remarks:

That to finish too quickly is the greatest danger of all. This is a very upbuilding observation that has an extraordinary capacity to stretch out the task, even to the point of going a long way...Generally, speed is lauded and in some instances regarded as neutral, but in this instance it is even reprehensible...So it is also when life is the task. To be finished with life before life is finished with one is not to finish the task at all.\(^38\)

Kierkegaard has remarked that today, not only in the world of business but also in that of ideas, everything is a “real sale”: one focuses on the rewards. Kierkegaard often contrasts authentic existence with the existence of the man on the street (how we should live as opposed to how most people do live). Johannes Climacus remarks, “Or what are those people compared with the god; what is the refreshment of their busy clangour compared with the deliciousness of that solitary wellspring that is in every human being, that well-spring in which god resides, that wellspring in the profound silence when all is quiet!”\(^39\) The ground of the self—God—is ineffable. (Kierkegaard once wrote that humans teach us to speak, but the gods teach us how to be silent.) The individual (set against the community) is the model for authentic existence. Johannes Climacus writes:

An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person...Objectively he then has only uncertainty, but this is precisely what intensifies the infinite passion of inwardness, and truth is precisely the daring venture of choosing the objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite...Without risk, no faith. Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty...I am “out on 70,000 fathoms of water” and still have faith.\(^40\)

It is through faith in the face of uncertainty that Kierkegaard hopes to achieve the God-relationship “and the corresponding passion of the inwardness of faith.”\(^41\)

Johannes Climacus characterizes the great failing of his age as having come to know too much about the world while forgetting inwardness.\(^42\) He speaks of inwardness as the transparency of thought. One difference, for instance, between the aesthetic and ethical stage is the desire to be open in our despaite.\(^43\) He explains, “The ethical is the temptation; the relationship with God has come...
into existence; the immanence of the ethical despair has been broken, the leap has been posited; the absurd is the notification."

Kierkegaard is reacting to an age he viewed as preoccupied with objectivity (in a way that denies subjectivity). Johannes Climacus writes, "I ask for nothing better than to be known in our objective times as the only person who was not capable of being objective." And when not expressing himself through his pseudonyms, Kierkegaard writes in the first person singular.

If the misfortune of the age is to have forgotten what inwardness is, then one should not write for "paragraph-gobblers", but existing individualities must be portrayed in their agony when existence is confused for them... Therefore if the production is to be meaningful, it must continually have passion.

Kierkegaard maintains that the modern age has forced man to forget how to shape his character (ethos) by constantly asking him to look away from himself. Johannes Climacus writes:

Lest he become important in relation to others, which, far from being inwardness, is external, noisy conduct. If he does that, he will have consolation in the judgement when the god judge that he has made no concessions to himself in order to win anyone...That subjectivity, inwardness, is truth was my thesis.

Johannes Climacus laments, "In Greece a thinker was not a stunted existing person who produced works of art, but he himself was an existing work of art. Surely, to be a thinker should least of all mean to be a variant from being a human being." The effect of being concerned with ourselves is a concern with others. We may wish to recall that, for Kierkegaard, by loving others we love God. Salvation, however, is a purely individual matter; it is the individual who is in despair, and it is he who seeks salvation.

Kierkegaard's salvation also requires an abandonment of temporal pleasure. Johannes Climacus writes: "Eternal happiness is not something higher in rank than a queen [one's beloved] but is the absolute telos...one is better off saying: no, thank you, may I only be allowed to relate myself to the absolute telos."

According to Kierkegaard, we are better off with God than with Regina. Yet, Johannes Climacus writes, "The subjective thinker is not a scientist-scholar; he is an artist. To exist is an art. The subjective thinker is aesthetic enough for his life to have aesthetic content, ethical enough to regulate it, dialectical enough in thinking to master it." The religious-minded is able to (and must) dwell in the world (though in an austere manner).

According to Kierkegaard, it is through suffering that the religious relate to eternal happiness. Part of this suffering has to do with being alone, which becomes a virtue. Johannes Climacus writes, "Every human being who has passion is always somewhat solitary; it is only drivelers who are swallowed up in social life." He remarks, "The religious person discovers that what engages
him absolutely seems to engage others very little...[he needs] to place a veil
between people and himself in order to guard and protect the inwardness of
his suffering and his relationship with God."

Furthermore, Kierkegaard thinks that guilt is the greatest expression of
existence. Guilt, according to him, expresses our acknowledgement of suffering.
The ethical man feels guilt over his life as an aesthete. Guilt also has kinship
to the ideas of remorse and repentance. We can have remorse over guilt and
seek repentance in the future over it. The ultimate repentance comes, of course,
with faith.

Yet, the mechanics of submission are missing from Kierkegaard's discussion
of faith. Faith seems to require that one conquer one's will in order to submit
oneself to God. Abraham does not just will himself to believe in God's
commandments. More precisely, he submits his will to God's. Freedom seems
to come from giving it up. In the next chapter, I shall critically reflect upon
Kierkegaard's solution by examining his life.