

# Kierkegaard, the Apophatic Theologian

David Kangas

Yale University

The question about the «theological» status of Kierkegaard's authorship has always been a complicated one. The reception of his work in the twentieth century has veered from strong theological readings by neo-orthodox theologians to strongly anti-theological readings by post-structuralist and deconstructive interpreters. The authorship itself was conceived within the milieu of, and as a response to, the theology of speculative idealism —a theological genre which has also been subject to radically different evaluations. Hegelian theology, for example, has been read both as the repristination of trinitarian orthodoxy as well as the harbinger of the death of theological discourse. Certainly there appears to be no consensus in sight on the theological status of either Kierkegaard's or Hegel's work. In this situation, it may be neither possible nor desirable to assign Kierkegaard's thought to a single theological genre. Yet the question about the *religious* nature of Kierkegaard's discourse persists. Is it possible that within the thought of Kierkegaard (and Hegel) the location and meaning of theological discourse has itself shifted? I want to allow this uncertainty and this question to constitute the horizon of this short essay in which I will nevertheless suggest that the genre of Kierkegaard's thought can be understood as a kind of *apophatic*, or negative, theology.

Apophatic theology is first of all a *discourse* on the absolute which involves the denial that one can make positive predications about the nature of absolute, or God; one cannot say *what* the absolute is. What characterizes apophatic thought as a discourse, however, is that it continues to speak about the absolute, though it avoids saying what it is. Communication happens through the *form* of the discourse. With apophatic theology, I will suggest, Kierkegaard's authorship shares the following qualities: 1) it presupposes a non-entitative concept of the absolute which is, in some respect, «beyond being»; 2) it maintains a notion of discourse as «negative dialectic». In these two ways, Kierkegaard's thought resembles the tradition of apophatic theology which extends from Plotinus through Pseudo-Dionysius and Eckhart to Nicholas of Cusa.

## I. The Absolute

Throughout his authorship and in his *Papirer* Kierkegaard refers to the divine as «the absolute». In his *Papirer* Kierkegaard formulates the concept of God as the absolute in two philosophically precise ways: 1) as «unconditioned, being in-and-for-itself» (*det ubetingede, Iogforsigværende*) (*Pap.* XI 2, 133/*JP*II, 1449), and 2) as «pure subjectivity» (*rene Subjectivitet*) —which is defined by Kierkegaard as an «infinite redoubling» (*uendelig Fordobelse*). When one considers the meaning of these formulations, it becomes apparent that both state an apophatic conception of God or the absolute. First I will consider the second formulation. Kierkegaard writes:

[God] has not an element of objectivity in his being [...] for this would limit God and relativize God; but God relates himself objectively to his own subjectivity, but this again is *simply a redoubling of his subjectivity* [...] God is infinite redoubling. (*Pap.* XI 2A, 97; my italics)

The concept of infinite redoubling derives directly from the greatest of the apophatic theologians —Meister Eckhart. Eckhart called God «negation of negation» and «doubling of affirmed being». Infinite redoubling is apophatic because it involves a *double negation*: not merely the exclusion of objective and relative being from God (a first negation), but the denial that God relates as a subject over against an object (a second negation). As a double negation, it expresses an indefinable «positivity»: it says that God's nature is «pure act,» i.e., act without anything being acted upon. This is a radically non-entitative and desubstantialized divine: God's being is purely posited being. The divine is made incommensurable with any result or anything determinate. God does not have a pre-existing, determinate nature which would be actualized in an infinite act of existence; God is not a substance at all, not even an infinite substance or a highest being. Infinite redoubling is, furthermore, what Kierkegaard calls a «totality determination» (*Totalitets-Bestemmelse*): it expresses the indefinable positivity that God is neither subject nor object, but a *totality* inclusive of both subjectivity and objectivity. According to this conception, God does not have an «outside»; God does not stand «over against» anything. The radical transcendence of the divine, therefore, does not exclude radical immanence. God is the *ubique et nusquam*, the «everywhere and nowhere».

Kierkegaard has also referred to the divine as the «unconditioned, being in-and-for-itself». One is initially surprised to see that Kierkegaard refers to the divine in this way, since this is precisely the Hegelian definition of the absolute. Kierkegaard is able to employ this formulation because, for him, it has a totally apophatic meaning. In his dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard apophatically counterposes his own concept of being in-and-for-itself to the Hegelian one by claiming that it is, not infinitely determinate being (as in Hegel), but the «infinitely abstract». As such, it is the «absolute

in the form of nothing» (*det Absolute under Form af Intet*) (SV3, 1, 256)<sup>1</sup>. Once again, there is a relation between this understanding of the divine and the Eckhartian concept of the divine. For Eckhart, too, the Godhead is definable only as «nothing» (*Nichts*), i.e., as that which lacks determination.

In terms of these formulations of God as the absolute we must reconsider the meaning of Kierkegaard's famous «infinite qualitative difference» between the divine and the non-divine. We must say that it is *not* a difference between two beings or entities. It cannot be because, as the above passages indicate, God cannot be defined as *a* being. Therefore it is a false picture to portray Kierkegaard's God as a being standing separate from and simply over against the non-divine. The meaning of God as infinite redoubling is that God does not apprehend the world as something objective; God knows and relates to the world non-objectively. The infinite qualitative difference must therefore refer to a difference of *form* rather than a difference in being; a difference which cannot be marked ontologically but can only be marked within the discourse on the absolute. For discourse, a desubstantialized absolute, the absolute under the form of nothing, represents something radically unknowable and unsayable. To articulate the absolute within thought is precisely to convert it into objective being and thereby to lose it as the absolute; that is, to lose it absolutely. Hegelian discourse is the absolute loss of the divine precisely because it would be the absolute's own discourse. For Kierkegaard, thought and discourse follow an apophatic path: there is an attempt to speak about the divine without speaking about the divine, to let the absolute be the absolute, pure subjectivity. This requires a speaking which does not posit an object, a speaking which is apophatic. To this we now turn.

## II. Apophatic Discourse

How, then, for Kierkegaard, does one apprehend the absolute or God? How does one begin speaking at all? It is well-known that Kierkegaard rejects the ontological argument for God's existence. This means that Kierkegaard rejects the possibility of an ontological discourse on the divine; it indicates, more specifically, that Kierkegaard rejects the Hegelian position that discourse about the absolute is the absolute's own discourse about itself. It is also necessary to say, however, that Kierkegaard rejects the position of Jacobi. Jacobi would say that, with respect to the absolute or God, one must simply give up discourse and fall into a silent intuition of God—a kind of apprehension of the meaning of the divine outside of discourse. For Kierkegaard, such an intuition, or «immediacy», would be a false abstraction. As he makes clear in his unpublished *De Omnibus Dubitandum est*, Kierkegaard holds the position that one cannot have consciousness outside of language. Language and consciousness are equiprimordial. Therefore any relation to God or the absolute

1. Here and elsewhere I refer to the third edition of Kierkegaard's *Samlede Værker*.

must be thought as mediated by language. We have, then, a paradox which constitutes the very heart of Kierkegaardian discourse: on the one hand, the absolute is beyond articulation, ineffable; on the other hand, one cannot relate to the absolute except through language or discourse. This is the circular paradox which inhabits all apophatic discourse. For Kierkegaard, it is the problem of «indirect communication».

How, then, within this circle, is it possible to *begin* indirect communication, to begin speaking about God? This is first of all a problem about how the mind is able to apprehend the absolute as that which constitutes the mind's own limit. For Kierkegaard, the mind can apprehend the absolute only negatively. This means, it cannot apprehend the absolute directly out of its own initiative and freedom. The intellect —or, to use Kierkegaard's word, the «understanding» (*Forstanden*)— cannot produce the presence of the divine from out of itself. It cannot convert the divine, pure subjectivity, into an object which it would be able to apprehend directly or even in a mediated way. The possibility of Hegelian discourse depends upon this conversion. Yet for Kierkegaard, in order to apprehend the absolute the mind must radically *empty itself* of objective content; it must «lock everything out of its consciousness» (SV36, 46); the understanding must be «put out of action» (*entlediget*) (SV36, 58). This emptiness of determinate content is what Eckhart called «poverty». What supports this radical emptying, however, is the understanding's *desire* for the absolute. Kierkegaard names this desire, this eros, «passion» (*Lidenskab*). The understanding is able to renounce itself or «will its own downfall» only through the desire to «discover that which cannot be thought.» (SV36, 38)

Due to the necessity of a moment of emptying, the mind's apprehension of the absolute cannot be thought as the apprehension of determinate content. Knowledge of the absolute is more an «unknowing». This act of knowing, which is an unknowing, does not imply ontological identity with its object. Just as in apophatic theology, Kierkegaard maintains the identity of the understanding with the absolute only as something essentially «momentary». Here one should point out that Kierkegaard's central concept, the moment (*Øieblikket*), is a well-known mystical cipher, employed in Plato's Parmenides as well as in Pseudo-Dionysius, referring to the breakthrough to a knowing of the absolute beyond concept. Kierkegaard is explicit: «What we call the moment, Plato calls το ἄξαυφνής (the sudden).» (SV36, 176) Momentary identity with the absolute is a non-stable point which has continually to be re-won. The task of striving and restriving for this limit, an essentially negative task, is what Kierkegaard calls «negative dialectic» (which counters the Hegelian «positive dialectic»).

Now, for Kierkegaard just as for apophatic theology, discourse on the absolute must take the form of a negative dialectic. The intellect's action of emptying must repeat itself in discourse, at the level of signification. To be precise: with respect to God or the absolute, discourse must continually put the signified «out of action.» Language must cease to be used assertorically and become performative. To speak about God is not the act of making ontological

predications of an absolute subject. The discourse can signify only *momentarily*: in order to let the absolute be the absolute, discourse cannot allow a referential object to congeal; it cannot allow stable meanings to form. Just as God is a «redoubling», discourse must itself become redoubled, continually carried through a process of «double reflection» (*dobbelt Reflexion*). It must continually turn back upon itself to unsay what has been said. Here it is not merely a case of the «form» of the discourse (what Kierkegaard calls the «artistry») achieving a priority over its «content». Rather, it is the case that form and content, the «how» and the «what» of discourse, become identical. In Kierkegaard, however, the identity of form and content does not mean, as perhaps certain versions of post-structuralism have it, that discourse becomes simply and self-consciously a discourse about discourse itself. It does not mean the *elimination* of reference. No: for Kierkegaard discourse is always discourse toward the absolute. The absolute remains a referential horizon. What makes it apophatic, however, is the refusal to define the absolute, the refusal to identify the *subject* of its discourse. In order to relate to the absolute or God, therefore, one must have recourse to discourse; but even within discourse, God remains for Kierkegaard «just a name» (*blot et navn*) (SV3 6, 40), the «unknown» (*det Ubekjendte*). (SV3 6, 44)

Ultimately, signification for Kierkegaard is something ethical: signification occurs not through the stabilization of a thematic meaning, but only when becomes the discourse, when the subject and object of the discourse become identical —and this, it will be noted, is the *grammatical* analogue to the divine as «infinite redoubling».