

Comments on Kierkegaard's "Eternal Happiness, Subjectivity, and Truth"

by Dr. Scott H. Moore, Dept. of Philosophy, Baylor University

These notes are intended to assist you in the reading of the assigned essay. The notes are incomplete and are not a substitute for the essay itself.

This selection comes from Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. The author of this essay is not, technically speaking, Søren Kierkegaard. The author is Johannes Climacus, a self-professed non-believer, humorist, and skeptic. [For more about Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship, please see my comments on this subject.]

Climacus accurately observes that no formula (no "certainty") will ever guarantee "eternal happiness." Eternal happiness will require infinite interest. It's possible, but not likely. In the event that it might be possible, what would it require?

Christianity would have to be true. (objective problem)

The individual would have to have an authentic relationship to Christianity. (subjective problem)

Faith and Historical Documentation

Christianity involves historical questions, and the greatest certainty one can attain concerning historical questions is merely an approximation. And such an approximation could never be the basis for eternal happiness. So, right away for Climacus, the objective problem becomes insurmountable by itself. Concerning faith, objectivity cannot be satisfied, by definition.

On this line of reasoning, Climacus continues. To ask about the truth of Christianity, one must consider the veracity of the scriptures. One is tempted to secure the truth of Christianity by "objectively and scientifically" proving that Christianity is right. Now the scholar can do (and has done) mountains of research, and, if this scholar is a believer, he might produce a conclusion that shows that the scriptures are the result of "inspiration." However, according to Climacus, unless you're a believer, you won't be convinced. Once again, we reach the same conclusion: eternal happiness cannot be based on this type of endeavor.

Suppose, Climacus reasons, the scholar succeeds in proving everything he ever wished to prove about scripture. (p. 134) Does one who doesn't have faith come any closer? "No, not a single step. Faith does not result from a scientific inquiry; it does not come directly at all." For Climacus, the result is exactly the opposite of what the believing scholar intends: objectivity tends to kill infinite interest. And infinite interest is the condition of faith.

Is the one who already had faith stronger because he now has facts to back up his belief? No, rather, "this certainty that lurks at the door of faith and threatens to devour it" tempts one to confuse knowledge with faith. "If passion is eliminated, faith no longer exists, and certainty and passion do not go together." (p. 134) Why does Climacus believe this to be the case? Because (as he will say near the end), "without risk, there is no faith." (p. 139)

Believers are tempted to find (and offer) proof--not for their sake, but for their opponent. But the opponent will deny the approximations which will necessarily result, and the quest for the approximations will be counter-productive for the believer. When faith desires proof and ceases to be passionate, it is like a young woman whose love for her lover begins to diminish and she ardently seeks reasons why she should admire the lover she no longer loves. Climacus concludes section II with these words: ". . . when faith thus begins to lose its passion, when faith begins to cease to be faith, then a proof becomes necessary so as to command respect from the side of unbelief."

Kierkegaard, through the pen of the unbelieving Climacus, thus brings his indictment against the Danish State Lutheran Church. Kierkegaard believes that the state of affairs which Climacus is describing is exactly how things are with much of State Church.

The Task of Becoming Subjective

For Climacus (and SK), the objective problem can only be solved through the subjective one (the relationship). For Climacus, the issue is not merely a subjective response to an objective problem; rather the issue is subjectivity itself. The appeal to objectivity is an attempt to "shirk the decision" by replacing the subjective decision with an objective recognition. It is precisely this move which demonstrates the lack of faith and the lack of willingness to accept faith with all of its necessary "fear and trembling." "The subjective acceptance is precisely the decisive factor; and an objective acceptance of Christianity is paganism or thoughtlessness." SK is implying that some of Denmark's most pious are, in reality, some of its most pagan.

Climacus then introduces what some scholars have called the "imperative of the indicative:" "But now to strive to become what one already is; . . . [this is] the most difficult of all tasks." This is the task of becoming subjective--"to become a subject in truth." Climacus will conclude that this is the essence and requirement of Christianity, and he will concede that he cannot do it--thus he cannot be a Christian. Further irony: all citizens in Denmark at this time are also baptized members of the Church, "Christians." In this country at this time, it is illegal not to be a Christian, and yet Climacus will conclude he is not able to do it. What does this say about all of those people who have been doing it but have never considered the cost and the difficulty?

Truth is Subjectivity

God obviously cannot be known (or investigated) objectively. That is, as an Object--as a thing around which one walks and into which one peers and studies the contents thereof. Think of art objects, sex objects, or objects of acquisition. Now try to equate the characteristics of these things with the characteristics of God. Climacus thinks it absolutely cannot be done.

God is a subject. God does the knowing, the peering, the examining. According to Kierkegaard, one cannot hope to know about God--one can only hope to know God. And here there is a world of difference. Climacus believes that one could not deny the fact that Christianity is concerned with the relationship ("knowing God") not with objective knowledge ("knowing about God").

It is for this reason that Climacus introduces the urgency of the decision. If one is simply looking for truth as some sort of objective fact, then it's going to be there when you get to it, and one can "ramble comfortably on by way of the long road of approximation without being impelled by the urge of passion." On the other hand, subjective knowledge "counts every delay a deadly peril."

Climacus offers this definition of **truth**: "An objective uncertainty held fast in an approximation-process of the most passionate inwardness." And by understanding truth, we begin to understand **faith**:

"Without risk, there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am capable of grasping God's objectivity, I do not believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy fathoms of water, still preserving my faith." (p. 139)

Faith and the Absurd

Climacus wishes to describe faith in the language of the "absurd." But by the "absurd," he does not have in mind here something on the order of Albert Camus's understanding of the discord, friction, and despair which humans experience in the world. Rather Climacus uses the term "absurd" in the sense of utterly improbable. More than utterly improbable, it is impossible. For Climacus, one has not understood Christianity until one has understood this. Christianity rests on an historical claim that the eternal became temporal. None of that "makes sense." Here is the great paradox:

"Subjectivity culminates in passion, Christianity is the paradox, paradox and passion are a mutual fit. . ."