

KANT AND KIERKEGAARD: THE LIMITS OF REASON AND THE CUNNING OF FAITH

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“Faith, in Kant’s view, is essentially different from knowledge,” Allen Wood notes. There can be no “theoretical demonstration” of judgments held on faith; rather faith “presupposes that the believer be *conscious* of the ‘objective insufficiency’ of the judgment he holds.”¹ In this way Kant is said to have anticipated Kierkegaard’s contention that faith involves the assertion of an “objective uncertainty” that places the believer upon the most unstable of grounds, seventy thousand fathoms of water. The affirmation of God’s existence is not an objective judgment based on knowledge but a subjective judgment which Kant believes to be identical with moral belief or faith. Wood is quick to point out, however, that while faith may be personal and subjective for both Kant and Kierkegaard, faith for Kant is not “illogical’ or irrational.”²

In this paper I will argue that while faith for Kant is logical and rational it is not personal and subjective and while faith for Kierkegaard is personal and subjective it cannot be dismissed as illogical and irrational. Objective uncertainty in Kant turns out to be just another kind of certainty, practical certainty. Although he makes the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity, Kant is far too much the classical rationalist to pursue the implications of that distinction. Kierkegaard, I believe, does have a theory of subjectivity. The main stumbling block in an appreciation of Kierkegaard’s teaching is the almost universally held contention that, as Jerry Gill puts it, Kierkegaard uses the notion of subjectivity to differentiate not among kinds of knowledge but between knowledge on the one hand and faith (i.e., will, choice, commitment) on the other.³ Subjectivity in this way becomes synonymous with irrationalism, misologism and subjectivism. In the view to be developed in this paper, Kierkegaard’s teaching that Truth is Subjectivity is not seen as an attempt to ignore the truth or to relativize it. Kierkegaard wants to privatize without personalizing the truth. This is the strategy and the gamble of subjectivity. Kierkegaard wants what Wood mistakenly believes Kant to have, a truth which is both personal and objective.

The paper begins with a consideration of Kant’s attempt to found faith in judgments of subjective necessity. In Section II the difficulties in Kant’s position on subjectivity are developed and considered and Kierkegaard’s theory is intro-

duced. Kierkegaard's teaching "Truth is Subjectivity" is developed in Section III. Section IV points out the personal and subjective elements in Kierkegaard's teaching, and Section V responds to the charge of irrationalism and illogicality commonly levelled at Kierkegaard's position.

I

Kant attempts to find room for faith through the limitation of knowledge. Knowledge is dependent on cognition. Human cognition is necessarily sensuous and not intellectual. Therefore, there can be no human cognition of the supersensible objects, God and the immortal soul of man. Knowledge does not offer a way of affirming or denying the judgment, There is a God. But knowledge is not the only way in which a judgment may be affirmed.⁴ Kant contends that the grounds of sufficiency which enable one to hold a judgment may be found not only in the object but also in the subject. This is the originating insight in Kant's analysis of faith. The grounds of sufficiency on the side of the object require correspondence between an object and a subject's conception of that object. The grounds of sufficiency on the side of the subject are certain needs of the subject. Objective sufficiency is based on cognition, subjective sufficiency on need.

Knowledge requires a judgment backed by both objective and subjective sufficiency. Opinion, at the other extreme, lacks both. Faith or belief occupies the uneasy middle ground between the two. A faith judgment is held on the basis of objective insufficiency and subjective sufficiency. The strategy of Kant's analysis is to establish a ground for the holding of judgments which neither conflict with nor impinge upon those claims associated with knowledge. Hence faith or belief is based on the needs of the subject in relation to an object which lacks objective sufficiency, that is, which is, from the standpoint of knowledge, problematic.

A judgment on the basis of subjective sufficiency is possible only from a practical point of view. The practical point of view includes skill (*Geschicklichkeit*) and morality.⁵ Skill in turn involves two forms of belief, pragmatic and doctrinal. If I adopt an end I may come to believe in the effectiveness of a certain means to that end. My belief in the effectiveness of this means is pragmatic belief. Doctrinal belief involves an attitude of certainty about a state of affairs which is permanently beyond man's capacity for knowledge but which may, nevertheless, act as a guide in the pursuit of knowledge. "The doctrine of the existence of God belongs to doctrinal belief," Kant declares.⁶ He observes that "purposive unity is so important a condition of the application of reason to nature that [he] cannot ignore it." But this unity cannot serve as a guide to the study of nature unless one assumes that there is a "supreme intelligence [who] has ordered all things in accordance with the wisest ends."⁷

Doctrinal belief does not allow one to say, There is a God. Indeed, Kant observes that this belief is "somewhat lacking in stability; we often lose hold of it, owing to the speculative difficulties which we encounter."⁸

In the case of morality, however, the end, “that I must in all points conform to the moral law...[is] irrefragably established.” And “there is only one possible condition under which this end can connect with all other ends, and thereby have practical validity, namely that there be a God and a future world.”⁹ Morality establishes a necessary, universally binding end and God and immortality are those conditions without which that end cannot be acknowledged. God and immortality are, therefore, unavoidable needs of the human subject as a creature subject to the moral law. In this way, morality replaces metaphysical knowledge as a justification for religious belief and a subjective argument for the existence of God replaces an objective one.

These beliefs, Kant argues, do not alter our knowledge of the world. “No one, indeed, will be able to boast that he *knows* that there is a God, and a future life.”¹⁰ A subjective argument does not render the objective insufficiency of the object any less insufficient.

Faith finds its ground in a universally binding need of the subject, namely, the Highest Good which is the necessary end of a creature obligated by the moral law, but belief neither constitutes nor yields knowledge. In this regard Kant writes, “My conviction is not *logical*, but *moral* certainty; and since it rests on subjective grounds (of the moral sentiment) I must not even say, ‘*It is* morally certain that there is a God, etc.’ but ‘*I am* morally certain, etc.’”¹¹ It appears to many that Kant personalizes the argument at this point. To some this step appears not only to qualify faith as practical rather than theoretical, but also to humble the claims of this belief with regard to both its universal character and the reality of the objects to which it is directed. The issues are these:

1. Is Kant arguing that the subjective argument provides (i) a less certain conclusion than does the objective argument or (ii) a different kind of certainty, one which is based on a consideration of the needs of the subject rather than the cognition of an object, but which is, nevertheless, as certain as that offered by the objective argument?
2. Is Kant arguing that the subjective argument provides (i) an objective (in the sense of universal and necessary) ground for the legitimacy of belief or faith in God which does not affirm the real existence of the object of that belief or (ii) an objective ground for the legitimacy of the affirmation of the real existence of God?

W.H. Walsh argues that the subjective argument is not intended to carry with it a “truth claim” as such. Rather the argument is concerned to express a certain conviction inherent in moral conduct. Belief, according to Walsh, is different from knowledge, not only because belief does not involve objective sufficiency, but also because “there is something inescapably personal” about belief. “The conviction that God exists is ‘not *logical*, but *moral certainty*’. The believer, in view of the fact that his conviction rests on ‘subjective grounds’, must not say that *it is* morally certain that there is a God; the only words he can legitimately use are ‘*I am* morally certain’.”¹²

Walsh interprets this to mean that the statement, There is a God, “is not *really* a truth of any kind.”¹³ The affirmation of God’s existence by the Kantian moral agent is an expression of an attitude not of a truth. These words “do not express a proposition, but a formula internal to a moral attitude: they have nothing to with how things are, but get their meaning and force from deliberation about how things ought to be. Or to put it another way, they have to do with the will, not the understanding... [and, now quoting from the second critique, Walsh continues] ‘I will that there be a God.’”¹⁴ Walsh argues that one does not make a judgment concerning the existence of God based on an analysis of willing; rather one wills the existence of God. “The moral agent is indeed committed on Kant’s view to reciting certain sentences which look as if they were used to make assertions; if asked the question, ‘Is there really a God?’ he knows very well what to reply. But it cannot be claimed that in giving his reply he is enunciating a truth, even though his answer is the correct and indeed ‘inevitable’ one for someone in his position.”¹⁵

Kant accepts a version of the correspondence theory of truth, and if one understands the terms *true* and *truth* solely within that framework then it is clear that he is not making a truth claim. The believer could not be enunciating a truth in the correspondence sense of truth, that is, by forming a conception in his mind of an object which is outside of his mind, for there can be no cognition of the object. Kant, it seems, wants to restrict the terms *true* and *truth* to the sphere of knowledge. *True* and *false* are to be used only where knowledge is possible. If this is the case then Walsh is quite correct when he says that Kant’s believer is not enunciating a truth when he asserts that there is a God, but this says only that the claim is not one which is based on knowledge, which, of course, Kant says that it is not. The whole thrust of the subjective argument is that its claims are based on the needs of the subject with regard to an object about which there is no knowledge.

Commenting on the same passage Beck writes, “In willing to do what duty requires I do not know that there is a God, although *I* am in a literal sense, morally certain of it; *it* is not certain, but *I* am certain. In willing to do what duty requires, I act as if there were a God, or [and here Beck also quotes from the second critique] ‘I will that there be a God.’”¹⁶ The claim, I am morally certain, is, then, literally a claim. But to what is it a claim? It is not a claim to knowledge. What kind of affirmation does the subjective argument allow the individual to make, a claim about the status of an object, God, or a claim about what one may believe with regard to this object? Does the claim in the subjective argument refer to the object or does it refer back to the subject, establishing grounds not for the affirmation of the existence of the object but only for the legitimacy of the subject’s belief with regard to it?

I take Beck to mean that the subject, on the basis of his rational but “all-too-human” needs, is rationally enabled to pursue his moral self-perfection, his achievement of a good will, not to affirm that morality establishes either the necessity or the right to affirm the existence of God, for that would look like an *It is certain* statement, but rather to affirm the plausibility of his own belief *vis-à-vis* God.¹⁷ This it to say, in effect, that I hold my religious belief to be rationally plausible

but the ground upon which this rational plausibility is based does not extend to an affirmation of the object of these religious beliefs. The problematic character of the existence of God is in no way altered by the conclusions of the subjective argument. Thus the subjective argument is revealed as one which does not move from the needs of the subject to the status of a certain object outside of the subject, but rather from the needs of the subject to yet another need of the subject, his need to believe.

II

For Beck, subjective sufficiency establishes a justification for belief but it is not a justification for the object of belief. Wood accepts this interpretation and takes it a dramatic step forward. Noting that knowledge is held on the basis of objective sufficiency, faith on the basis of subjective sufficiency, Wood concludes, as I have noted above, that "faith in Kant's view, is essentially different from knowledge and no theoretical demonstration or evidence...can be presented in support of judgments which are held in this way." Now Wood gives the argument a Kierkegaardian turn, claiming that Kant anticipates Kierkegaard. "Faith presupposes that the believer be *conscious* of the 'objective insufficiency' of the arguments he holds."¹⁸ It is important to note that according to Wood it is the ordinary believer and not merely the philosopher who must be conscious of the objective insufficiency of judgments held on the basis of faith. Subjective sufficiency does not constitute a different kind of evidence for the acceptance of the proposition *There is a God*. Rather, it provides a rational justification for my affirmation that I believe there is a God. And when I make the statement *I believe there is a God* I must include within it the further statement that there is no objectively sufficient ground for the statement *There is a God*. In this way, according to Wood, "Kant anticipates... the famous remark of Kierkegaard in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: "If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast to the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith."¹⁹

Although he says that Kant's subjective justification for faith is personal and subjective, Wood is careful to point out that it is not illogical or irrational. Wood appears to conclude that where Kierkegaard's argument is personal, subjective, illogical and irrational, Kant's argument is personal, subjective, logical and rational. I would argue, however, that just as Kant would not accept the illogical and irrational elements of Kierkegaard's position, Kierkegaard would not accept the personal and subjective elements of Kant's position. For Kierkegaard Kant's subjective argument is merely an objective argument based on the subject. But here we are getting ahead of ourselves.

I will begin by quoting the whole paragraph in which Kant's point concerning moral and logical certainty occurs.

[1] Thus even after reason has failed in all its ambitious attempts to pass beyond the limits of all experience, there is still enough left to satisfy us, so far as our practical standpoint is concerned. [2] No one, indeed, will be able to boast that he *knows* that there is a God, and a future life; if he knows this, he is the very man for whom I have long and vainly sought. [3] All knowledge, if it concerns an object of mere reason, can be communicated; and I might therefore hope that under his instruction my own knowledge would be extended in this wonderful fashion. [4] No, my conviction is not *logical*, but *moral* certainty; and since it rests on subjective grounds (of the moral sentiment), I must not even say, '*It is* morally certain that there is a God, etc.', but '*I am* morally certain, etc.' [5] In other words, belief in a God and in another world is so interwoven with my moral sentiment that as there is little danger of my losing the latter, there is equally little cause for fear that the former can ever be taken from me.²⁰

Both Walsh and Beck follow their reference to sentence (4) with a sentence from the *Critique of Practical Reason*: "I will that there be a God." This serves to harden the distinction which both see in sentence (4) between a form of logical certainty which allows for statements of the kind *it is* and a lesser form of certainty, called moral certainty, which allows for statements of the kind *I am*. Moral certainty, in this view, does not establish a claim about something that *is*, but is bound up with obligation, conduct, with willing. However, the sentence which follows sentence (4) in the section of the first critique quoted above points to a dramatically different conclusion. Kant assures his readers that God and immortality are so securely placed among the judgments which he holds that they cannot be taken from him any more than could obligation and the moral law. The certainty which attaches to the conditions which are required by the moral law and the highest good may be different from that which attaches to the world of sensible objects but this certainty is only a different not a lesser form of certainty. If Kant's moral agent is asked whether he believes that there is a God he must answer affirmatively.

In the Preface to the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant notes: "Through the concept of freedom, the ideas of God and immortality gain objective reality and legitimacy and indeed subjective necessity (as a need of pure reason)."²¹ And, "now is explained the enigma of the critical philosophy which lies in the fact that we must renounce the objective reality of the supersensible use of the categories in speculation and yet can attribute this reality to them in respect of pure practical reason."²² The subjective argument does not merely enable the moral believer to defend his belief as something which he requires. The argument establishes that there is a God, a supersensible entity who is the Author of Nature and who can effect the destinies of human beings on the basis of their moral worth.

There is a God; Kant's argument establishes this conclusion. Ought the conclusion be qualified by the terms *morally certain* prefaced by *I am*? It is possible to respond yes, in the sense that I must point out to my questioner that my certainty does not derive from a cognition of God. Kant makes this point very clearly in sentence (2) which is consistently quoted with sentence (4). But as I read this paragraph, sentences (2), (3) and (4) are presented as qualifying the main points which

Kant seeks to make in sentences (1) and (5). Although reason in the form of metaphysics has failed to go beyond the limits of experience, this failure does not hinder the needs of our “practical standpoint,” Kant informs us in the first sentence, and in the last he affirms his conclusion that there is a God.

The intervening sentences qualify his point. This affirmation does not derive from a cognition and it cannot be confused with knowledge. The confusion of the claims of the moral standpoint with those of theoretical understanding would result in a prolongation of the pointless battles associated with metaphysics. The moral agent must affirm God but renounce any knowledge of Him. And to make his point even more emphatically, Kant declares in sentence (4) that moral certainty is not to be confused with logical certainty, not that moral certainty is not logical or not “really” certain, but because these are two distinct spheres the trespass of which will serve only to ignite argument which at best will go nowhere and at worst will bring freedom, God and immortality into disrepute.

Indeed, I believe Kant to be saying, we must not even put the conclusion of the practical argument in the form of a theoretical argument. Not only must the practical argument not advance its conclusions as theoretical in character, they must not look like theoretical conclusions. Therefore, let us not say, It is certain, but rather, I am certain. The existence of God is not what Kant is willing to call a fact. Therefore the assertion ought not even look like one.

Another interpretation consistent with the above but a bit more freely interpretive of the text might argue that by denying the *It is* and affirming the *I am* the burden of explanation is shifted from the *world*, where an *It is* proposition would have to prove itself, to the *subject*, where another mode of analysis is appropriate. Don't look to the world, Kant is saying, where the objects in question cannot, in principle, be found; look to the subject, for in his needs as a rational finite being, a creature subject to obligation, the answer is to be found. In a practical argument *I am* the evidence. The moral law is within *me*. But my argument here is not personal. Each human being provides the same evidence. The *I* of the practical argument is a universal *I*.

The statement *There is a God* may profitably be qualified by the inclusion of the terms *morally certain* and *I am* for they clarify the practical character of the affirmation. But it is also possible to respond that these qualifications are *not* necessary. They are not necessary if they are intended to qualify the degree of certainty with which the assertion can be made. Moral certainty is not a lesser degree of certainty than that afforded by theoretical inquiry.

I am not less certain of God for not knowing Him. It is, therefore, inaccurate to compare Kant's moral believer to Kierkegaard's man of faith. There are no 70,000 fathoms of water in Kant's analysis; rather there is a bridge of reasoning which offers certainty. The believer may not occupy a vantage point from which he can *see* but his feet are on the surest of grounds, namely, that a rational argument requires him to be there. He must believe that there is a God.

The only thing problematic about God is his theoretical status. Kant is insistent that this status not be forgotten. But if we shift from a theoretical to a practical

point of view, speak of the needs of the subject rather than the cognition of the object, then there is nothing problematic about the certainty of God, about the character of his existence, or about the way in which He conducts Himself. For Kant, belief or faith which extends beyond these limits is simply fanaticism. But is faith within these limits justly called faith? Kant's response is that faith is the necessity of accepting that which we do not know but which we can, nevertheless, affirm with rational necessity. But for Kierkegaard *certainty and faith*, and not merely *knowledge and faith*, repel each other.²³ Kant's subjective argument establishes nothing less than a non-cognitive demonstration of God's existence. Kant's subjective argument, therefore, may establish the object of the life of faith, God, but it does so at the expense of losing the life of faith.

III

The Kierkegaardian subject must step back from both the statement *It is certain that God exists* and the statement *I am certain that God exists*. He can say, I am not certain that God exists. He can say, If God exists.... For Kierkegaard, the subject is free to make only the following affirmative statement: I am certain that my life is what it is. Subjectivity in Kierkegaard establishes the subject's certainty of himself based on his knowledge of himself, and this may *indirectly* affirm the certainty of that object which makes self-knowledge and self-certainty possible. Subjective knowledge is, I believe, the subject's knowledge of himself mediated by his relationship to God.

No matter how the individual presents himself in society, Kierkegaard believes, his personal experience of himself is one of irresolution and conflict. Not without reason does Aristotle begin the *Nicomachean Ethics* with the contention that it is self-evident that all men seek happiness. They seek happiness because they lack it. Whatever we do not know about the world and about God we know this much about man: that he sees happiness not as something which he has and might lose but as something he must acquire. Philosophy and religion are preoccupied with the various options presented as resolutions. This tends to obscure the more fundamental perception of the human subject's grasp of his own life. He views it as a problem to be resolved. This problem, Kierkegaard believes, is built into the very nature of human existence, which he understands as the tension between the temporal and finite on the one hand and the eternal and the infinite on the other.²⁴ The dynamic of this search for resolution is passion; its fulfillment is happiness.

The subject, Kierkegaard argues in a particularly well-known section of the *Postscript*, may choose to ignore that his life is this problem.²⁵ The subject under pressure from society where problems are seen as malfunction (a view reinforced by an age which radiates optimism and satisfaction and by a popular philosophy which extolls the merits of personal detachment in the name of objective truth) may choose to distance himself from himself, a strategy doomed to failure, for it produces "a comic figure, since existence has the remarkable trait of compelling

an existing individual to exist whether he wills it or not." The individual may, on the other hand, seek to confront his life and to deal with it as a problem which seeks resolution; "he can concentrate his entire energy upon the fact that he is an existing individual."²⁶

The Kierkegaardian subject is certain that his life is what it is, a play of forces that make for irresolution and conflict which he experiences as unhappiness. This life seems of its own to direct itself to a resolution of these forces, to happiness, but this seems unattainable; his thrust for resolution is frustrated. It eludes his grasp. Beauty promised fulfillment in the intensification of the moment, a moment where the universal and the particular are joined, but the moment, however precious, passes. Morality promised fulfillment in terms of both the demands of conscience and those of happiness, but gave him only trial and a heightened sense of his own failure.

It is happiness or the hope for resolution that is the point of intersection between the interests of the individual on the one hand and the offer or promise of Christianity on the other. To the unresolved and unhappy subject, whose lack of resolution and degree of unhappiness is made more intense by the failure of Romanticism and rational morality, Christianity offers happiness in this life and for eternity. In Kierkegaard's view, a simple-minded approach to the problem of Christianity would grasp at the needs of the human subject on the one hand and the promise of Christianity on the other and proclaim them a perfect match; the subject has the problem and Christianity the answer. Not wanting to be misled, the simple-minded approach becomes objective, subjecting the claims of Christianity to the test of history and/or speculative thought. But this objective approach is confounded; neither history nor philosophy is able to determine the truth of Christianity's claims. The promise that offers the subject everything gives him nothing in the way of demonstration or assurance. The perfect match is really a perfect mis-match; the human subject, however rational, is finite and cannot know God or determine the question of His existence, while the God of Christianity confronts the subject with a promise the credibility of which is uncertain. The subject wants happiness and proof; Christianity promises happiness and offers no proof.

Romanticism fails. Rational morality fails. Christianity promises the individual eternal happiness and it would be foolish of him not to respond, not to take it seriously. He moves to Christianity and asks it for confirmation: If as you claim you can give me eternal happiness then surely you can give me the confirmation which I need. It gives him nothing. What the individual does from here is uncertain. He could choose to remain, as Kierkegaard believes most human beings remain, as reason would have us remain, with reason, a reason humbled, resigned to its own failure but confident that there is no other path. The human subject is not certain of God. He is certain of his life and of his need for resolution. The subject is brought to God through His promise to him. The act of entering this relationship is one which the individual takes on his own initiative. It is not the conclusion of an argument. Reason, critical of itself, may help him to arrive at and appreciate this point. There is no rational support for his move but he *knows* that this support is not

forthcoming and that his preoccupation with it accomplishes nothing. But initially the individual has nothing to go on; the failure of reason does not produce the reality of faith. There is no Beatrice who emerges to escort him to the Divine Presence. He must choose. This choice, the leap of faith, is a decision to move from the rational and ethical to faith and religion. This is not an irrational decision.²⁷ If all there is is the objective point of view then no sense can be made of this choice, it is truly a leap into the absurd, a reckless abandonment of reason. But we can, Kierkegaard argues, look at things from more than the objective point of view. We have available the subjective point of view.

“Objectively, reflection is directed to the problem of whether this object is the true God; subjectively, reflection is directed to the question whether the individual is related to a something *in such a manner* that his relationship is in truth a God-relationship.”²⁸ And “when the question of the truth is raised subjectively,” Kierkegaard writes, “reflection is directed subjectively to the nature of the individual’s relationship.”²⁹ In the objective approach attention is drawn to the object – does it exist? This approach construes the relationship between the person and God to be one of an abstract mind in relation to a passive entity who could not help but be known by the subject with the right argument. In the subjective approach attention is drawn to the subject’s relationship with the object, with God. What kind of relationship is this? It could be argued that what Kierkegaard is doing here is requiring a formal criterion for truth, making the issue how one relates oneself to the object not whether or not the object exists. I do not believe that this is what Kierkegaard is, in fact, attempting to do. To opt for a merely formal criterion would be to abandon the defense of Christianity, for any content would serve the subject’s need for an opportunity to effect the proper relationship. Kierkegaard concentrates on the relationship but does not forget the content.

The analysis of the relationship has two elements, the Socratic and the Christian. Kierkegaard writes of “the subtle little Socratic secret: that the point is precisely the relationship of the subject.” And this secret, he declares, “must be preserved in Christianity.”³⁰ For Socrates the relationship between the subject and the object, between man and the Good, is based on a paradox, that one can know the Good only if one is already good, which implies that one has already made one’s choices and conducted one’s life as if one knew the Good. In the context of religion this means, presumably, that only the believer can be said to know God, that belief in God is the precondition of the possibility of knowing Him. Kierkegaard is at great pains both to include the Socratic secret in Christianity and to differentiate the Socratic teaching from the Christian. Kierkegaard argues a position which he knows to be more extreme than the Socratic one. Socrates, according to Kierkegaard, believes that his relationship to the truth is paradoxical, that it involves, in effect, a decision which is a leap of faith of sorts, because it is a decision to gain knowledge which is itself not based on knowledge, but presumably the Good is eventually known by the subject who becomes good. As Kierkegaard presents it, the Socratic relationship to the Good involves a paradox, but the content or object of that relationship is not a paradox. The paradoxical relationship to the object

will result in the subject's knowledge of the object. But the content or object of Christianity, Christ, is Himself, according to Kierkegaard, a paradox, the God who becomes man and who becomes God again, the Being who is both man and God, both finite and infinite, both temporal and eternal. Unlike the Socratic thinker the Christian believer is paradoxically related to a paradoxical content or object.

The paradoxical relationship to the paradoxical content accomplishes two things. First of all, like Kant's noumena/phenomena distinction it places God beyond the limits of human knowledge. Kierkegaard's God is akin to Kant's noumenon rather than to the Socratic or Platonic Good. Second, the subject in this situation is understood by Kierkegaard to be thrown back upon himself and upon his relationship with the God who promises him eternal happiness yet refuses to offer anything in the way of proof and demonstration. If he moves forward he does so by virtue of a decision to accept this situation and to pursue the promise of Christianity while enduring the lack of certainty which it enforces. Christianity offers happiness but demands faith. Faith is not understood simply as the way in which a judgment is to be held, as it is for Kant; rather faith is an active element in the life of the individual. It has an effect on what he is and what he becomes.

This psychological element is part of the legacy of the Socratic secret, namely that in order to know the Good one must be good; in order to be good one must do the Good. There is a connection among acting, the character that forms as a consequence, and what one knows as a result of the character one has. What doing is for Socrates, i.e., the formation of habit and thereby character, faith is for Kierkegaard, the formation of personality and character as a result of the intensification of the struggle which Christianity promises to resolve but which it intensifies to its highest level. The subject's passion, his desire for resolution, completion, happiness, is raised to a new height by the confrontation with the irreducibly paradoxical character of the Christian content. Passion and paradox are indeed a perfect fit. "Subjectivity culminates in passion, Christianity is the paradox, paradox and passion are a mutual fit, and the paradox is altogether suited to one whose situation is, to be in the extremity of existence, Aye, never in all the world could there be found two lovers so wholly suited to one another as paradox and passion."³¹ The perfect match which became the perfect mis-match must again be seen to be the perfect match.

Through the process of submission to the Good the Socratic man becomes good, becomes what he was not before, a good man. In an analogous way, Kierkegaard argues, through faith the individual becomes the Knight of Faith. In the pursuit of the promise of happiness the individual enters into the religious relationship, but the interplay of passion and paradox turns the relationship into a crucible, one in which he is remade, He wanted happiness and he got a new life. He wanted resolution and he got irresolution magnified to the highest degree. He wanted an end to struggle and he got the life of the Knight, the one who struggles. He does not move beyond faith to knowledge, but in rising to the challenge of faith he becomes the Knight. Whatever the intention of the existing individual may have been, Kierkegaard believes, it is not the intention which Christianity has with regard to him. It

is not the intention of Christianity to dispense happiness and resolution but rather to remake the life of the individual. One might call this the cunning of faith; wanting Santa Claus the existing individual got Abraham.

IV

The Kierkegaardian Knight of Faith comes to see that faith has given him something other than what he wanted; it has used him for its own purpose, the formation of a new self. As the Knight, a fate he never dreamed of or wanted, the individual comes to see that happiness is not his lot, that he is a creature destined for irresolution and conflict. Faith as the paradoxical relationship to the paradoxical has blocked the way to God. The Knight can have no knowledge of Him or certainty of His existence. Faith has thrown him back on himself. Offering itself as a way to God faith has succeeded in giving him a way to himself. The new self, the Knight, recognizes that conflict and trial are his lot, and that he will be measured not by his degree of resolution, not by the harmony in his soul (for these are Socratic and not Christian considerations) but by his courage and resolve in the face of irresolution and conflict. Subjective knowledge is a kind of knowledge; it is self-knowledge. Subjective knowledge is knowledge of the subject as it lives in terms of an object. Kierkegaard's God cannot be known. But the subject knows himself in relation to that object which he does not know. He knows what has happened to him as a result of his relationship to that object.

Kierkegaard's argument, which is unquestionably indebted to Kant's analysis for the very distinction between objectivity and subjectivity and the attempt to link faith to subjectivity, involves an understanding of the subjective and personal which is very different from Kant's and which I would express in three points.

First, in *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard's author, Johannes de Silentio observes, "Abraham I cannot understand, in a certain sense there is nothing I can learn from him but astonishment."³² The author attempts to stalk Abraham with the purpose of plotting his movements towards faith. In this view, obviously a variant of what Kierkegaard calls the objective approach, Abraham's movements can be traced, and his footsteps can be followed, and following them one will do as Abraham did and one will be as Abraham was. Johannes de Silentio finds that this cannot be accomplished. Abraham's movements or steps are too completely his. Abraham cannot be understood, thought cannot penetrate his particular existence and present it as the journey of everyman to faith. The author is left with astonishment, not with knowledge or understanding. Yes, Abraham is something rare and perfect, but I cannot understand him and therefore I cannot follow in *his* footsteps.

Kierkegaard's conclusion is that the choice which Abraham makes is not one which can be separated from Abraham's person. It is *his* choice, not only in the obvious sense that he is responsible for having made it and must, therefore, accept the consequences of having made it, but in the sense that only he could make it and he makes it with the realization that this choice is *his*, a unique expression of

his particular self. Abraham, as Kierkegaard points out, cannot communicate the decision he has made (to sacrifice Isaac on Moriah) to Sarah, not because he is not moral and responsible but because this choice is *his*.

Second, Kierkegaard's position is also to be understood as personal and subjective in the sense that it involves what might be called a psychological element. It is Kierkegaard's conviction, one which finds its origin in his reading of Socrates, that the subject himself must enter into the process by which this knowledge is achieved. Knowledge, in this view, as discussed in Section III above, is not independent of other features of an individual's life. Knowledge is dependent on character. A certain condition of character is the necessary, although probably not the necessary and sufficient, condition of the possibility of knowledge. Character in turn is a function of action, and this for Kierkegaard is a function of the will; knowing, choosing, acting, character are all bound up with one another. Therefore, the individual who wishes to have knowledge in the moral and religious sense must realize he must change his life, his character, he must alter his actions, make different choices and decisions. Knowledge is dependent on what the individual is. The *I* of the *I am certain* is not a mind without a character, a personality, a life and a history. He *is* all these things. The agent with aspiration to the certainty expressed in the statement *I am certain* must deal with the *I* or the self without which there is no certainty.

The third point is a continuation of the second, an extension of the notion of the Socratic relationship. The Kierkegaardian subject may declare, You are not certain but I am certain; he may also declare that it was not always the case that he was certain. Once I was not certain, now I am. According to Kierkegaard's reading of the Socratic paradox the individual who would aspire to know the Good must already be good in the sense of having a character or personality which one would call good. The paradox is that knowledge of the Good belongs to the individual who is already good and therefore does not need to pursue it, while the individual who lacks the Good and who aspires to the Good cannot really achieve it. How can the individual become good? The answer appears to be to attach oneself to a teacher and to imitate his actions and life. The good individual who results from this learning and training is not the individual he was. There has been a change in the individual without which the subject could not be said to know the Good.

Kierkegaard's analysis juxtaposes the passion of the individual, his desire for completion, resolution, and happiness, with the uncertainty of the promise for resolution and eternal happiness in an attempt to explain what might be called the dynamic of transformation, the dynamic by which the subject becomes good, by which the individual is changed by faith. Kierkegaard uses the term *inwardness* to describe this process. The search for resolution, completion, happiness, becomes the achievement not of these things but of the life of the Knight of Faith.³³ The subject has become something other than he was. Faith has remade him. Once he is the Knight of Faith he deals with his search in a way which would have made no sense to him prior to his achievement of the life of faith.

Kierkegaard's view of subjectivity, then, involves a particular rather than a

universal *I* and a psychological and transformative element. In this sense Kierkegaard's theory is justifiably described as subjective and personal. There is, of course, little disagreement with regard to the contention that Kant's position is rational and logical and little disagreement with the contention that Kierkegaard's position is subjective and personal. My disagreement is with the contention that Kierkegaard's position is *merely* subjective and personal and cannot make a claim to be anything but illogical and irrational. The main reason Gill and Wood and so many others fail to appreciate the differences between Kierkegaard's theory of subjectivity and that of Kant is the view that, as Gill puts it, Kierkegaard does not use the notion of subjectivity to differentiate between kinds of knowledge but between knowledge on the one hand and faith (by which is understood will, choice, commitment) on the other. Kierkegaard, in the distinction between subjective and objective, appears to distinguish reason and knowledge from choice and commitment, setting the stage for the charge that his position is synonymous with irrationalism, misologism and subjectivism. Henry Allison, for instance, concludes that Kierkegaard's position represents a consistent "misologism" which finds its closest historical antecedent in Tertullian.³⁴

Actually, Kierkegaard's distinction is not made according to reason and knowledge on the one side and choice and action on the other, but rather both objective and subjective approaches are understood to yield knowledge. Kant excludes knowledge from the sphere of the practical while locating the practical on the foundation of reason, thereby insuring the objectivity of practical certainty; Kierkegaard excludes reason, but not knowledge, from the sphere of faith. Faith for Kierkegaard facilitates a kind of knowledge. For Kant the distinction is between knowledge and faith where both are based on reason; for Kierkegaard the distinction is one of objective knowledge, the realm of empirical observation and rational argument on the one hand, and subjective knowledge, the realm of the personal and subjective, on the other.

Kierkegaard, no matter how he sometimes sounds, does not simply disparage reason and reflection, for in doing so he would undermine the credibility of Christianity. If one were a consistent fideist one would argue that there is no answer to the question concerning the status of the objects to which faith relates the subject. Kierkegaard is quite serious, I believe, when he argues that it is better, that is, more truthful, to have the correct relationship to the wrong God than the wrong relationship to the correct God, but this does not express what I take to be his view of the ideal situation, which is that one have the correct relationship to the correct God. Truth is Subjectivity involves a claim about both the form and the content of what the subject holds to be true, and therefore, cannot simply be equated with subjectivism and misologism.

V

There are three points I would make to support my contention that Kierkegaard's theory of subjectivity cannot be dismissed as irrational and illogical. First, Kant gives his readers a very concise and highly focused statement of the intention and purpose of his sprawling system in his famous three questions, making clear, among other things, the inter-relationship among his metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and philosophy of religion. We find no similar attempt at helpfulness in Kierkegaard. This lack is clearly by design rather than accident. Kierkegaard does not merely admire Socrates but strives to be to Christianity what Socrates was to Athens, a stinging fly. Conversion, not knowledge, is the goal. Kierkegaard's writing has enormous poetic and dramatic force but his work is not systematic or helpfully arranged. Indeed it tends to land on the reader as would the contents of an over-stuffed closet. Yet there are systematic elements in Kierkegaard's effort which, in fact, resemble the broad outline of Kant's procedure. The argument for subjectivity is preceded by a critique of human knowing, an attempt to determine the limits of human knowledge.

Kierkegaard begins the *Philosophical Fragments* with the question, "How far does the Truth admit of being learned?"³⁵ The question is strikingly similar to the first of Kant's three questions, "What can I know?"³⁶ So is Kierkegaard's answer that we can have no direct knowledge of the existence of God. Philosophy, which gives itself as the highest knowledge of those things which are deemed best in reality, assumes the Greek contention that the truth is eternal and separate from the temporal and yet available to the temporal human subject through that aspect of him which is eternal, mind or thought. Recollection, which claims to guide the subject from the temporal to the eternal, is the path of philosophy and the direct antecedent of demonstration and objective truth.³⁷ But, asks Kierkegaard, what if the truth is eternal and yet not separate from the temporal? What if the truth has entered the temporal at some specific moment?³⁸ If this is the case then the method of philosophy can only lead the human subject astray. What is required, then, is an approach which puts the subject in contact with the temporal rather than one which encourages him to ignore it in favour of the eternal.

In the *Postscript* Kierkegaard continues his critique of human knowing, arguing that there can be no proof or demonstration with regard to ultimate reality or God.³⁹ Kierkegaard explains why all proofs, empirical and speculative, must fail. The empirical or historical approach cannot produce any evidence; the witnesses who affirmed the divinity of Jesus were side by side with those who denied it. The witnesses did not move from a perception of miracles to a profession of faith but from a profession of faith to a perception of miracles.⁴⁰ The speculative approach, Kierkegaard believes, and here it is Hegel Kierkegaard has in mind, necessarily introduces unwarranted assumptions and works through artificial and empty reasoning. Thought seeks to ground itself in existence but has no more success in doing so than does geometry.⁴¹ Witnesses are witnesses to their own faith rather than to historical events, and arguments fail to demonstrate how one can move

from a series of non-religious premises to a conclusion which affirms religion.

More important, Kierkegaard argues, is that the objective view misconstrues the nature of Christian belief and the Christian believer. In the objective point of view the individual adopts a position of detachment and considers the historical evidence or runs through the steps of a philosophical demonstration in the persona of universal man, carefully suspending his personal concerns and interests in the name of unbiased rational judgment. In this way the individual distances himself from his own personal interests and concerns, seeing them as impediments to objectivity. Kierkegaard does not doubt the appropriateness of this method for mathematics and science; the burden of his argument is that this method is inappropriate for an understanding of belief and the believer. Here personal interest is the necessary starting point. The individual's concern for his own well-being is his highest concern and it is precisely to this concern that religious belief, that Christianity, directs itself. By making light of the individual's interest in himself and by presenting religious claims as matters to be dealt with only from an intellectual, detached point of view, free of personal prejudice, the objective point of view defrauds the individual of what is rightly his and betrays the purpose of religion in general and Christianity in particular.

Not only does the philosophical or objective approach fail to extend human knowledge to include the divine, but this approach has negative consequences both for the subject and for an understanding of the religious point of view. The objective approach encourages the subject to take his own life less seriously and to be less receptive to the God who is the very object of his concern. It also presents religion in general and Christianity in particular as a theory about the nature of reality. Christian philosophy is looked at as is Greek metaphysics and this, Kierkegaard believes, is a misrepresentation of Christianity which addresses humanity's distress and irresolution. The philosophical or objective approach fails. And even if it succeeded on its own terms in finding the demonstration which accomplishes what the rational agent needs, it would succeed only in producing paganism, for rational faith is not faith but merely another form of demonstration. So reason fails to do what it says it will do, to know God, fails to grasp the source of faith in the subject, namely, personal concern, fails to understand the nature of Christianity, a paradox addressed to the human subject, fails to see that rational belief is not faith but paganism. My purpose here is not to argue for Kierkegaard's interpretation in each case but to point out that, like Kant's, his argument for subjectivity is preceded by, or at least presented in the context of, a critique of human knowledge.

The second point I would make in defense of the basic rationality of Kierkegaard's position is concerned with the so-called Socratic secret. There is a paradox, Kierkegaard argues, a paradox understood by Socrates, between the decision to act in a certain way and the knowledge that would make that decision an informed or correct one. We assume that informed choice must be preceded by knowledge, for it is knowledge which makes our choices informed. Choice which is not preceded by knowledge is capricious. Socrates presents a view which reverses

this relationship; rather than requiring knowledge of the Good as the precondition of good actions, he argues that good actions are the precondition of knowing the Good. It is not that knowledge precedes action and makes it possible but that action precedes knowledge and makes it possible. The middle term in the Socratic paradox is the contention that knowledge requires that the individual be of a certain psychological state or character and the further contention that this state is formed as a result of the good actions of the subject.

The fact that the Kierkegaardian version of the paradox involves not only a paradoxical relationship but a paradoxical object does not really affect the logical character of Kierkegaard's psychological argument. The structure of the argument remains the same. The double paradox, as already noted, not only places God beyond the limits of human reason but reorients the subject to himself. The content of subjective knowledge is the self. The paradoxical relationship to the paradoxical is the occasion for some of Kierkegaard's most flamboyant and cavalier anti-intellectual, anti-rational remarks. It is in this context that he speaks of "the absurd."⁴² Much of what Kierkegaard does here, I believe, is simply polemical. He is being extreme for effect and emphasis. It is wrong to conclude, based on these remarks, that Kierkegaard's position is a Tertullianesque anti-rationalism. Kierkegaard is attempting to interpret and defend an old tradition which makes its own claims to being the absolute truth about man's condition in the world, and which does so with a specific opponent in mind, that brand of idealism which seeks to preserve religion by reducing it to a set of philosophical equivalents. The absurd might not announce the entry of Beatrice, but it serves, in Kierkegaard's view, to bar Vergil from the path to God. The absurd is a sign and a symbol that informs the human subject that he has arrived at the limits of human knowledge and that the way ahead is the way back to himself.

The third point in my defense of Kierkegaard draws on what I have called the cunning of faith. This is, of course, a play on Hegel's famous "cunning of Reason."⁴³ Out of the actions of individuals who have nothing but their own narrow interests to guide them come the great changes that mark the development and progress of the Idea or Reason. Using the passions of individuals, Reason advances the cause of the Idea.⁴⁴ A similar analysis is operative in Kierkegaard. Interest in an eternal happiness, passion, and the transformation of individual life or faith are both operative in the actions of human subjects. From the standpoint of the individual what is operative is the desire for completion and resolution in his life. From the standpoint of Christianity, however, one sees that a larger scheme is at work here, that Christianity does not see itself as merely giving resolution by the pound to anyone who has the price, but sees itself as bringing a transformed existence, a new life, to the individual which enables him to see that his life is permanently unresolved, a test, a trial. The Kierkegaardian subject comes to see himself from the second standpoint, for unlike the Hegelian subject who need not become the philosopher, the Kierkegaardian subject must become the Knight, one who not only does battle but who understands his life as the necessity for battle. Using the passion of the individual, his desire to achieve his own happiness,

Christianity makes the individual deal with himself as the unresolved entity he is, and transforms him from supplicant to Knight.

At the level of the supplicant the individual must reject faith as irrational, as wanting from him rather than giving him what he wants. But from the higher standpoint, that of the Knight, he sees that what he wanted was shallow and unworthy of him. The cunning of faith does not provide for a demonstration of the existence of the object, of God, but it does provide for the authentication of the life of the subject which "justifies" the relation to the object. The Knight knows that this life is the one most appropriate for him. He does not tear the eyes of reason from his head in order to have faith; rather, having faith, he believes that he can see more than reason had allowed him to see. Faith does not deny reason; it transcends it.

By way of some concluding remarks let me point out that there are problems with Kierkegaard's position. For example it is clear that Kierkegaard's subject can never determine the truth of the claim *God exists*. What is strange is that this seems not to matter. Whether or not God exists the subject exists in a transformed life which is sufficient to justify his faith. Kierkegaard's God is not only unknown and unknowable but ultimately, perhaps, irrelevant. Another problem is that the Knight of Faith battles with himself and within himself. The test is Abraham's, the decision to sacrifice Isaac is Abraham's, the drama happens within Abraham. It is played out in the self and ignores the world, specifically the social world, in which that self functions. Christian faith, Kierkegaard believes, best expresses what the individual is, that is, both finite and infinite. But, of course, this is precisely what Kierkegaard understands man to be. Kierkegaard may end with the Christian faith simply because he starts with Christian anthropology.

In this paper I have sought to save Kierkegaard from Tertullian but not from himself. The value in Kierkegaard's view of subjectivity and faith is that it seeks to confront the philosophical reduction of religion and religious texts and to deal with faith in its own framework. It seeks to hold onto religion's claim to being personal without giving up its claim to being the truth. Kierkegaard's analysis cuts across established religious, philosophical, psychological and artistic lines. Kierkegaard's teaching on subjectivity compels us to rethink the nature of the human subject, the character and limits of the philosophical enterprise and the nature of faith. It is radical not in its rejection of the philosophical tradition but in its rethinking of key elements in that tradition. By resisting the tendency to dismiss Kierkegaard's teaching on subjectivity as irrational and illogical we will be more likely to appreciate its radical and constructive elements.

NOTES

1. Allen W. Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 16.
2. Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion*, p. 17.
3. Jerry H. Gill, "Kant, Kierkegaard and Religious Knowledge," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 27 (2) (December 1967), reprinted in *Essays on Kierkegaard*, ed. Jerry H. Gill (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Company, 1969), p. 65.
4. The material for this analysis can be found in "Opining, Knowing and Believing" in *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 654–652, Prussian Academy Edition pagination A832, B849–A832, B860.
5. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 647, A824, B852.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 648, A826, B854.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 649, A826, B854.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 650, A828, B856.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 650, A828, B856.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 650, A829, B857.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 650, A829, B857.
12. W.H. Walsh, "Kant's Moral Theology" in *Proceedings of the British Academy* XLIX (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 283.
13. Walsh, "Kant's Moral Theology," p. 284.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. Lewis White Beck, *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 254.
17. Beck, *Commentary*, p. 254.
18. Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion*, p. 16.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 650, A829, B857.
21. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), p. 4, Prussian Academy Edition, 4.
22. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 5, 5.
23. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie as *Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 30.
24. Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, pp. 54, 267, 268, 350.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
27. I have dealt with this point in another context. See R.Z. Friedman, "Kierkegaard: First Existentialist or Last Kantian?" *Religious Studies* 18 (Spring 1982), 159–170.
28. Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, p. 178.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 178.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
32. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 37.
33. "The truth is the subject's transformation in himself," Kierkegaard writes in the *Postscript* (p. 38). Kierkegaard also says of the disciple that "he becomes another man...in the sense of becoming a man of a different quality, or as we may call him a new creature." Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David F. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 22–23.
34. Henry E. Allison, "Christianity and Nonsense," *The Review of Metaphysics* (March 1967) reprinted in *Essays on Kierkegaard*, ed. Jerry Gill, pp. 135–136.

35. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 11.
36. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 635, A805, B833.
37. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 26.
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 108–109.
39. Kierkegaard's analysis is found in "The Objective Problem Concerning the Truth of Christianity," in *Postscript*, pp. 23–59.
40. Kierkegaard, *Postscript*, p. 190.
41. *Ibid.*, pp. 101–107.
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 183–192.
43. G.W.F. Hegel, *Reason in History: A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), pp. 43–44.
44. Hegel claims that there are two different things going on in human activity and there are, correspondingly, two different standpoints by which human activity is to be understood, namely, passion or self-interest and Reason or the unfolding of the Idea. Similarly, the conduct of individuals can be understood from the perspective or standpoint of the individuals themselves, i.e., what they say about themselves and their actions, *and* from the standpoint of the world-historically conscious philosopher who sees the consequences of individual actions in terms of their broad historical context. From the standpoint of the individual one is directed to the individual's needs and wants, to his desire and passion, and from the standpoint of the philosopher one is directed to the way in which the individual's conduct forms a thread in the tapestry of world history.