



Faith, self-transcendence, and reflection

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Religious faith is, according to one of Kierkegaard's most important pseudonyms, the appropriation in passionate inwardness of an objective uncertainty.¹ This requires that religious faith not follow from what Johannes Climacus calls objective reflection. It seems to have two additional implications. It seems to imply that the attitude that Climacus calls faith requires indifference to concerns about the rightness of one's concepts of what is sacred or divine. After all, worrying about the rightness of concepts involves shifting away from inwardness and appropriation. It also seems that in this attitude one must abstain from reflection as to whether religious praxis is a response to reality. This reflection seems also to require a standpoint inconsistent with the concerns of subjectivity, and to have as its aim a "certainty" that is inconsistent with appropriation.

But Kierkegaard's understanding of faith in fact does not carry these implications at all. This has a conceptual as well as an historical importance. That is especially the case for the second supposed implication I have mentioned. Kierkegaard in part states and in part implies a powerful position concerning the way in which evidence that supports a religious orientation to reality emerges within religious involvement. In this and many related ways he makes an enduring contribution to philosophy of religion.

I.

Any genuine religious possibility, according to Kierkegaard in the *Postscript*, presents not a doctrine but an existence communication. The pseudonymous author makes this statement about Christianity. Kierkegaard claims this not only of Christianity considered in its distinctiveness but also of religious existence more generally understood.² The idea that a religious possibility presents an existence communication belongs to an account of religious existence to which both Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus contribute. This account provides an important context for Kierkegaard's remarks about faith.

Central to this account of religious existence is the understanding of the initial, essential, and decisive expressions of religious existence. These are an absolute respect for the absolute telos and a relative relation to relative ends, suffering, and guilt. The ground of religious existence is an orientation towards that which sets itself off from everything that is relative, finite, or proximate by being absolute. Please note that one does not exclusively conceive of the object of religious involvement in terms of its ultimate reality. The axiom “ens et bonum convertuntur” applies here. The ultimate reality of the object of religious involvement entails its transcendent and unsurpassable perfection and goodness. This is an ultimacy which presents itself to the existing individual as the absolute object of commitment. It is the absolute *telos*.

Religious existence cannot allow for any relativizing of the absolute object of religious involvement. More specifically, religious existence cannot allow for “mediation”. “Mediation either allows the relation of the absolute telos to be mediated in relative ends, whereby it becomes relative itself, or allows the relation to the absolute telos, as an abstract noun to exhaust itself in relative ends as predicates. . . . But the relation to the absolute telos cannot be said to exhaust itself in relative ends, since the absolute relation can require the renunciation of all of them”.³ One may treat the absolute telos as if it were one end among others to which one commits oneself. Or one may suppose that a relation to the absolute telos becomes concrete rather than abstract just through the whole of one’s commitments to relative ends, both ordinary and noble.⁴ In either case, “mediation” relativizes the relation to the absolute telos. Then religious existence is fatally compromised.

However, religious existence also does not and cannot call on one to abandon relative ends. On the contrary, “the task is to practice one’s relation to one’s absolute telos so that one continually has it within while continuing in the relative objectivities of existence”.⁵ More specifically, one pursues the commitment to the absolute telos by bringing the relative ends one seeks in a right relation to it. This entails recognizing that they are subordinate to it and that the activities through which one seeks relative ends occur in the context of one’s absolute commitment. Insofar as one chooses to understand these activities not just on their own terms but in terms of their location in the context of absolute commitment, they become ways of pursuing that commitment.⁶ In this specific way one enacts the commitment to the absolute telos through activities that aim at relative ends. This is not “mediation” because in no sense is the absolute telos confused with relative ends in this situation. Here one maintains involvements with relative ends, defines those involvements as ways in which one pursues the absolute telos, and

persistently recognizes the difference between all of them and the absolute telos.

Needless to say, this process is one of delicate balancing and strenuous effort. "Sitting calmly on a ship in fair weather is not a metaphor for having faith; but when the ship has sprung a leak, then enthusiastically to keep the ship afloat by pumping and not to seek the harbor – that is the metaphor for faith".⁷ The need for strenuous effort in relating relative ends to the absolute telos is an important aspect of suffering as a feature of religious existence. There are at least three others. First, religious existence is an effort to "transform the individual's inner existence".⁸ The effort to persistently and ever more perfectly maintain an absolute respect for the absolute telos and relative commitments to relative ends has to do with the very identity of the self. Here the difficulties are subtle and success is very elusive. Second, that at which one aims here is not really a possibility to be realized just through one's own efforts. Attaining inner reorientation with regard to one's absolute and relative commitments requires action and effort, but comes about as much through the receptivity of the individual who is resigned to and undergoes a process.⁹ It is similar to the situation in which a person does and must act strenuously to acquire knowledge, but becomes wise, if one does at all, only by undergoing the experience which knowledge and its acquisition makes possible.

Third, the project that belongs to religious existence is one that one can undertake at all only if the absolute telos presents itself as the possible focus of one's commitment. In reality, one does not even begin this project through one's own initiative, but through a response to the initiating self-manifestation of the absolute telos. This project asks for recognition "that the individual is capable of doing nothing himself but is nothing before God. . . . Religiously, the task is to comprehend that a person is nothing at all before God or to be nothing at all and thereby to be before God".¹⁰ The basic dimension of religious suffering or difficult undergoing is the experienced insufficiency of one's own strivings to bring about perfection in or even to initiate by oneself alone the project of rightly determining one's absolute commitment and relative aims. One makes progress in and even embarks on the task of religious existence not just on account of one's own efforts but finally on account of God.

But still one's own efforts are necessary, continually and from the very beginning. And here one knows that one always falls short. This awareness is guilt. Just as suffering is not self-torment, guilt is not emotional self-affliction. Guilt acknowledges that one's efforts at disposing oneself for the effects of the absolute telos on inwardness always begin too late and are always insufficient.¹¹ This self-consciousness is not despair, because it is really a

more specific sense of connection with and dependence on the absolute or God.¹²

These comments show that self-transformation, understood in a specific way, is what defines the task of religious existence. Religious existence has to do with the task of resolving upon and maintaining an orientation to the absolute telos that avoids “mediation”, and that reorients one’s relation to all other ends. As developed so far, this understanding of self-transformation in relation to religious existence emerges from the description of religious existence that Johannes Climacus presents. Another pseudonymous author, Anti-Climacus, takes this concept one crucial step further.

Anti-Climacus notes that God draws the religious exister to himself. Then he says, “when that which is to be drawn is itself a self, then truly to draw to itself means first to help it truly to become itself in order then to draw it to itself, or it means in and through drawing it to itself to help it become itself”.¹³ From the standpoint of religious existence, it is the relation to the absolute telos that determines true selfhood. To stand outside of or to fall short of that relation is a privation that diminishes the self. One could say that God creates the conditions that enable the individual to attain identity and then, presupposing that identity, initiates additional conditions that allow the individual to resolve upon the task of religious existence. God enables one to establish oneself and then draws one to Godself. But it is even more truthful to say that through initiating the conditions that allow the individual to resolve upon the task of religious existence. God enables the self to surpass a condition of privation with respect of identity and attain genuine identity. God draws one to Godself and thereby enables self-establishment.¹⁴

The self-transformation that defines religious existence not only restructures but also establishes the identity of the self. One becomes the self who one is and can become, attains actual self-relation, through the relation to the absolute telos. Actual self-relation is not most essentially the condition of the possibility of the relation to the absolute telos but the outcome thereof. One can say that religious existence has as its aim not self-actualization, but self-actualization through self-transcendence that has as its object the absolute telos or God. This self-transcendence is radical in two interrelated ways. First, it is not simply a relation of the self to something other. It is a relation of the self to something that is other than the self and other than everything else that is in any way other than the self, on account of its uniquely absolute character. Second, as already claimed, it is a relation that does not so much presuppose self-identity as provide the self with identity.¹⁵

I believe that the most incisive aspect of Kierkegaard’s understanding of religious existence is his recognition that religious existence calls for self-transcendence in this radical sense, and that the religious exister pursues

self-actualization not as such but through self-transcendence understood in this sense. Merold Westphal also derives the concept of self-transcendence from Kierkegaard. He defines religious experience through this concept¹⁶ and explores basic ways in which religious experience can fall sort of self-transcendence and involve self-deception.¹⁷ My discussion takes a somewhat different but I believe compatible tack. I want to understand religious existence as a task, define that task in a formal way through a concept of self-transcendence that is radical in at least the two ways I mention above, and say that this task is compatible with a manifold variety of experiential possibilities. Many of those possibilities are not at all grandiose. One plays out the task of religious existence at least as often in an endless diversity of quotidian ways as in ways connected with achievements that call for great public note or in moments of great insight that yield dramatic modifications of consciousness. Whatever experiential modalities may be present in religious life, it is the task of self-transcendence, I maintain, that is at their core. Kierkegaard's understanding of religious existence strongly indicates that it is this task that one who resolves upon religious existence discovers as an existence-possibility and strives to appropriate.

II.

Since religious existence is the appropriation of an existence-possibility it requires a distinctive sort of reflection. Kierkegaard calls this subjective reflection and distinguishes it from objective reflection. He says, "To objective reflection, truth becomes something objective, an object, and the point is to disregard the subject. To subjective reflection, truth becomes appropriation, inwardness, subjectivity, and the point is to immerse oneself, existing, in subjectivity".¹⁸ In objective reflection one focuses on the external item with which one is concerned, a thing, or an event or series of events occurring in history, or an abstract concept, and tries to arrive at the best understanding of it that is possible. Truth is the correspondence of one's understanding to the object of reflection. One attains this correspondence by, among other things, putting out of consideration whatever relations one might actually or possibly have towards the object, since those could detract from seeing the object just on its own terms.

Subjective reflection is different. It has to do not with the subject matters with which objective reflection is properly concerned but with what Climacus calls essential knowing. This is knowledge that "pertains to existence", and more specifically ethical and religious knowledge since "all ethical and ethical-religious knowing is essentially a relating to the existing of the knower".¹⁹ Reflection here focuses on the possibilities for existence that

ethical and religious knowledge present. One's concern is precisely with relations one does or does not have to those possibilities. Truth follows from and consists in the act of making those possibilities one's own, or determining one's own existence in the light of those possibilities. This is appropriation. Appropriation has its roots in choice and in principle cannot follow from objective reflection as such.²⁰ A resolve to determine one's existence in relation to an existence-possibility cannot follow as such from reflection that prescind from all considerations of the relation of the self to its object. Nor does appropriation follow from some combination of subjective and objective reflection that would require that both together and therefore neither by itself is finally determining.²¹ Appropriation follows from resolve and from the subjective reflection that can lead to resolve, support appropriation as an ongoing task, and attain truth in a specific sense.

These remarks might seem to imply that appropriation, in general and specifically with reference to religious existence, would require that subjective reflection simply displace and eliminate objective reflection. But this would be too hasty. Any ethical or religious existence-possibility possesses conceptual content.²² Given the standpoint of religious existence, it makes perfect sense to want to examine that content.

Johannes Climacus makes it very clear that there are two possibilities that he will not associate with this examination. He will not allow that genuine appropriation have conceptual correctness as a necessary condition, just as he of course will not allow that genuine appropriation follows from conceptual correctness. He makes this evident with a well-known example.

If someone who lives in the midst of Christianity enters, with knowledge of the true God, the house of God, and prays, but prays in untruth, and if some one lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all the passion of infinity, although his eyes are resting on the image of an idol – where, then, is there more truth? The one prays in truth to God although he is worshiping an idol; the other prays in untruth to the true God and is therefore in truth worshiping an idol.²³

Note that Climacus does not say here that the idol is something other than that, or that knowledge of the true God is something other than true on its own terms. His claim is that, since religious knowledge essentially conveys an existence-possibility, it is possible genuinely to appropriate that possibility notwithstanding even deep conceptual flaws in one's religious understanding. And then one stands in the truth, because truth follows from appropriation. But to say that it is not necessary that deep conceptual flaws negatively affect appropriation is not to deny that they can do so. Climacus says that, in matters of essential knowing, how one is related to an existence-possibility, rather

than beliefs about what it conveys, most essentially determines truth.²⁴ Surely what one understands an existence-possibility to convey can affect how one appropriates it. It is at least possible that one's appropriation of a religious existence possibility, say the one that Christianity offers, could be negatively affected by, for instance, a badly mistaken concept of divine transcendence, or by not understanding that an estrangement between the human self and God needs to be overcome. In addition, the fact that the religious focus on the absolute telos involves conceptual content is itself a reason to be concerned about the legitimacy of one's understanding of that content.

Take an analogy. Suppose I am committed to thoroughgoing nonviolence. Allow that my commitment to this possibility is serious and constant. There are of course many ways of understanding what this possibility offers and what its enactment requires. Some of these understandings are better and more legitimate than others. My understanding of the nature and requirements of nonviolence may be badly flawed. If for whatever reason I can do nothing about this, so be it. I am still being true to my pacifism. But that does not mean that my pacifism is true. That this at least can affect my appropriation of this possibility is one reason why I need appropriately to inquire about the legitimacy and truth of the concepts and judgments that belong to my commitment. In addition, the commitment itself is a reason to want a truthful understanding of its conceptual components that has as its measure something other than my current relation to them.

I think Kierkegaard wants to claim that if subjective reflection and resolve establish the appropriation of a religious existence-possibility, then a kind of objective reflection can occur and play an important role in the context those terms define. He does, for example, say that such arguments concerning the existence of God have, in relation to religious existence, the legitimate role of "elucidating the God-concept".²⁵ Climacus says that "the existing person who chooses the subjective way instantly comprehends the whole dialectical difficulty because he must use some time, perhaps a long time, to find God objectively".²⁶ The difficulty occurs because, on the one hand, the subjective way does not allow one to substitute objective reflection for appropriation. But it can require that one develop a kind of objective reflection within the context of appropriation.²⁷ In this instance one would, as it were, abstract in instrumental and proximate terms from a concern about one's relation to the absolute telos, just because this is one's ultimate concern. I might for example adopt in a proximate way the detachment that is needed to critically appraise an argument just because "elucidating the God-concept" has taken on such significance in what is of ultimate concern to me. To do this is to hold commitment and critical detachment together in a context that is always defined by the first and that allows for and can require functions that belong

to the second. It is not easy to establish or maintain this dialectical context. But it is not surprising to find it recommended by a pseudonymous author who says that his task is to make matters not more easy but more difficult.

III.

I intend my argument in the previous section to show that the position about objective reflection in relation to religious existence that I state there is both rightly attributable to Kierkegaard and intrinsically supportable. Assuming that I have done this, a further issue remains. Can one who has resolved upon the task of religious existence determine through reflection that the object of religious commitment is somehow evident as a reality?²⁸ It seems that reflecting on matters of evidence and reality must refer to reality on its own terms, independently of the relation to reality that religious existence beings about. In other words, this would have to be objective reflection. It also seems that this reflection aims at identifying the ground in reality that supports religious existence, and therefore that appropriating the religious existence possibility would follow from the reflection that displays that ground. But, as already shown with respect to religious existence, the operations of objective reflection are possible and can become necessary given appropriation, but they cannot be the source of appropriation. It does not seem possible, therefore, to determine through reflection the reality of the absolute telos.

But Kierkegaard offers a more complex response. In commenting critically on the idea that fortunate or unfortunate occurrences can be said, just on account of those properties, to be caused by God, Climacus says, “The relationship with God has only one evidence, the relationship with God itself; everything else is equivocal”.²⁹ This suggests that, in association with the God-relation, everything does not remain a matter of equivocal possibility regarding one’s considerations of reality, but something does become evident. Given the requirements that Kierkegaard would impose on this suggestion, how might this be the case?

a. *Subjective reflection and imagination*

In order to deal with this question one must more carefully discuss subjective reflection. This involves understanding the way in which imagination is an essential component of subjective reflection. M. Jamie Ferreira has shown the importance of imagination in Kierkegaard’s account of appropriating ethical and religious existence-possibilities. She notes that appropriation begins in a situation in which one holds together a consciousness of one’s actual

condition and of a contrasting condition which is different from one's actual condition but which is one's own as a possibility. This consciousness enlarges one's "horizon of possibilities through presenting the ideal self as a 'picture' of what is not yet actualized".³⁰ It is a consciousness in which one holds together a representation of one's actual condition and of a condition that would require a transformation of oneself but that still belongs to the self now as a possibility. This is "an active and paradoxical holding of elements in tension – as such it necessarily involves the activity of the imagination".³¹ Moreover, to the extent that the representation of an existence-possibility indicates an ideal, "the picture is not of a *neutral* possibility". It is rather of "a possibility which is recognized as a *demand* – and such 'seeing-as' requires imagination". This is because, "To see bindingness where there need not be bindingness, to see a demand in a possibility, is an imaginative extension".³² To determine that an existence-possibility that one is in some way not realizing in one's given situation is still one's own now as a possibility, and presents itself as a demand for self-transformation, requires that one re-envision oneself through imagination.

These comments on imagination are important, Ferreira shows, for understanding the nature of the transition to religious existence. Certainly the transition to religious existence cannot occur on account of any necessity. But this "can, in principle, be maintained without turning either to intentional or to arbitrary decision".³³ That is, one need not hold that the transition to religious existence happens on account of just a fiat of the will or as a choice that one makes when one could just as easily have chosen otherwise. Rather, "the requirement of a decision or leap of faith could, in principle, be fulfilled by an account of willing which was understood more in terms of 'active recognition' or 'acceptance' than in terms of decision by fiat".³⁴ In relation to religious existence, resolution and appropriation can come about as an active recognition of oneself in the re-envisioned image of one's condition as determined by the relevant existence-possibility, leading to the the willed acceptance of this as one's own truth (resolve) and the ongoing task of making this truth ever more genuinely ones own (appropriation). This account can "guarantee the qualitiveness and freedom of the transition while appreciating its character as response".³⁵

I would add two comments to those that Ferreira offers. She points out that even prior to resolve and appropriation one can stand in a real, although not adequately truthful, relation to the religious existence-possibility, insofar as one projects oneself into that possibility through imagination and finds it to be in a demanding way one's own. In an analogous way, even given resolve, appropriation is still something possible as well as something realized. One's appropriation of the existence-possibility that religion conveys

is always imperfect and incomplete. Appropriation is not an all or nothing matter. Religious existence is still something one in some way stands outside of, a possibility into which one projects oneself and not only a condition that determines actual identity. Imagination continues to project an ideal after one enters into the task of appropriation, just as imagination brings the individual into a specifically real relation to this ideal even before one takes on the task of appropriation.

Second, remember once again what most basically belongs to the religious existence-possibility. It is radical self-transcendence. This affects an understanding of the work of imagination in relation to religious existence. In an important sense imagination here does not and cannot envision only an ideal self. In envisioning the self as given over to radical self-transcendence, and in consequently bringing about a consciousness of the self as one for whom such self-transcendence is right now a genuine and demanding possibility, imagination locates something other than the self at the center of its focus. It locates an absolute telos at the center of its focus. One envisions the self here as one who can surpass self-attachment in a relation to the absolute telos and who is called upon right now to do that. In necessary connection with this re-envisioned image of the self one finds that a consciousness of the absolute telos itself emerges. This is a consciousness in which the absolute telos presents itself as the object that calls for radical self-transcendence. But this suggests that it is through what Kierkegaard distinguishes from objective reflection and calls subjective reflection that one can discern the evident reality of an absolute or divine telos.

b. *Kierkegaard's comments on subjective reflection*

In the *Postscript* Kierkegaard has at least three ways of making and discussing the claim that the reality of the absolute telos becomes evident to subjective reflection. In the first place, he observes that the absolute good or telos “has the remarkable quality that *it can be defined only by the mode in which it is acquired*, whereas other goods, just because the mode of acquisition is accidental or at any rate relatively dialectical, must be defined by the good itself”.³⁶ One understands what money is and has some understanding of what knowledge is independently of thinking about the ways in which these goods are acquired. “But nothing else can be said of eternal happiness than that it is the good that is gained by absolutely venturing everything”.³⁷ In fact neither Kierkegaard nor his pseudonym seem to hold exactly this.³⁸ But Kierkegaard does hold that the nature and reality of the absolute and divine telos is something one can affirm and find evident only through reflection in which one considers venturing upon the task of relating oneself to this remarkable end.³⁹ It would be a performative contradiction to affirm and to claim to find evident

something that on account of its being must be acknowledged as the absolute end, and to do this outside of any context in which one's considerations were about one's relation to the task of seeking this end.

In the second place, Kierkegaard observes that, "Nature, the totality of creation, is God's work, and yet God is not there, but within the individual human being there is a possibility (he is spirit according to his possibility) that in inwardness is awakened to a God-relationship, and then it is possible to see God everywhere".⁴⁰ It is not possible that God present Godself directly, as one of the things that is there in the domain of things we universally experience, in nature. The ultimate and transcendent principle of everything that occurs in nature would not truthfully present itself if it were to appear as one of the things, no matter how remarkable, that occurs in nature.⁴¹ This is most importantly the case because otherwise one could have access to God that would be direct, that would not be necessarily associated with or require the transforming task of radical self-transcendence. But the very being of God requires transformation and radical self-transcendence of humans, and therefore the disclosure of divine being to humans requires an association with that task.⁴²

However, Kierkegaard maintains, if one establishes a real relation to the task that determines religious existence, then one can discern God's presence in the occurrences that comprise nature. This discernment of course requires once again the work of the imagination. Imagination is not only, as Kant puts it, the "faculty of representing in intuition something that is *not itself present*".⁴³ It is also the more specific ability to discern in that which is directly present something that operates and may be available there but does not directly present itself. We cannot interpret the relation of discrete occurrences to God on the basis of our direct response to them. But if one lives in a world in which one has taken on the task of radical self-transcendence, then it is in principle possible to "see" God in any of the events that occur in that world.

There is, Kierkegaard says in the third place, a kind of certainty that subjective reflection attains. Climacus observes that, "only eternity can give eternal certainty, whereas existence has to be satisfied with a struggling certainty, which is gained not as the battle becomes easier or more illusory but only as it becomes harder".⁴⁴ In one's efforts at accomplishing the task of radical self-transcendence, one can find that the ultimate and absolute telos is a persistent presence that calls forth that task. On this basis one can affirm the nature and reality of that end. Affirmations made in the light of matters that persistently present themselves carry a kind of certainty. To be sure, it is a certainty that needs to be won again and again in the context of one's relation to religious involvement. It emerges only in the context of that relation, not in

abstraction from it. And that relation is always imperfect. But the relation is a context that supports religious affirmations about ultimate reality and about the condition of human existence in connection with ultimate reality.

These comments on the claim that it is to subjective reflection that the absolute telos can become evident as a reality do not themselves fully present the reasoning that supports this claim. Kierkegaard does state key elements that belong to that reasoning. A discussion of this reasoning begins by referring to a characteristic of subjective reflection readily attributable to that reflection in the light of preceding remarks.

c. Subjective reflection and religious affirmations

Subjective reflection must focus on an existence-possibility that one finds to be real possibility for oneself. For the purposes of this discussion I will distinguish real possibilities from abstract possibilities. An abstract possibility is a possibility that I could choose to realize simply because it is consistent with at least the basic circumstances of my life. I can conceive of flying to Germany this weekend for a short vacation. I can imagine doing that, and imagine the many enjoyable things I would do if I were to spend five days in Berlin. But if I have bought the tickets and they are on my desk, then I know that I can really get on the plane. This is not just something that I can think about doing. In general, subjective reflection involves considering one's relation to a mode of self-becoming. One considers the issue of undertaking that possibility, or reaffirming it, or renewing it, or deepening one's relation to it, or perhaps abandoning it. One does not focus merely on an option that is available in an abstract way, and that one considers because it affects one's sensibility on account of being pleasant or for some other reason.

This is certainly the case for reflection that has to do with the task that determines religious existence. I can conceive of undertaking radical self-transcendence if I have heard about that, or read an article about it, or discovered the concept of it by reading Kierkegaard or one of the indefinitely many other writers for whom the idea, if not the expression, is fundamental. But it is one thing to be able merely to conceive of myself in relation to the task of religious existence, and another thing to know that this task is something that I can resolve upon and undertake and not merely something of which I can abstractly conceive. Subjective reflection in relation to the religious existence-possibility occurs in an authentic way when the conditions are present that allow me to find this to be a real possibility for me, when I find that I really can get on the plane, if that is what I will, because the tickets are on the desk.

The discovery and the subsequent awareness that radical self-transcendence is a real existence possibility has essentially, one must add, the

character of a response.⁴⁵ To find that this possibility presents a real option in relation to self-becoming is not simply to discover something about the circumstances of one's own existence. It is to find that something is the case about those circumstances on account of their connection with the absolute telos. To give any consideration to the possibility of surpassing self attachment for the sake of one's relation to an ultimate and absolute end is to respond, in however hesitant and equivocal a manner, to the claims of that telos on one's existence.

Moreover, this task is a real possibility for the self insofar as one finds oneself responding to an absolute telos that manifests itself, and is evident in its nature and reality to oneself for this reason. The issue here is that of one's interpretation of one's consciousness of the absolute telos. In very different ways both projection and inference are or at least can be at work in religious consciousness, and it is possible and valuable for one who is religiously involved to acknowledge this. But at bottom religious consciousness affirms an ultimate and absolute reality that by its very nature invites and demands that one, as it were, participate in its own life. In order to respond to an invitation or a demand, it must actually be before me, rather than something of which I am aware only through a concept or as an expectation. The absolute telos issues its invitation and demand by presenting itself in some manner, by manifesting the unsurpassable and incomparable perfection that is coincident with its ultimate reality. Self-manifestation is just what the issuing of the demand and the invitation is. It goes without saying, or should, that this incomparable ultimacy, which is not only other than myself but other than anything else that is in any other way other than myself, does not manifest itself to me in a direct way or in just the same way as anything else does. It is not, Kierkegaard says, something very remarkable that presents itself to me, or something that I can identify on account of my direct relation to occurrences in nature. But I must find that it manifests itself to me if I claim that it draws me to itself by calling for radical self-transcendence. In turn, it is the act of considering my relation to the task of radical self-transcendence that puts me in a position to acknowledge this self-manifestation.

Subjective reflection having to do with radical self-transcendence, then, is a consideration of one's relation to a mode of self-becoming that is a real possibility insofar as it is a response to an absolute telos that one finds to be an ultimacy that manifests itself, making its nature and reality evident through self-manifestation. Considering one's relation to the existence-possibility puts one in a position to acknowledge that self-manifestation. Subjective reflection brings imagination into play by re-envisioning the condition of the self and by discerning the self-manifestation of the absolute telos, while acknowledging that the latter is not a direct presence. Funded by these oper-

ations of the imagination, one finds in subjective reflection resources that enable one to identify, understand, and affirm the possibility that belongs to one's own condition as well as the nature and reality of the ultimate and absolute source of that possibility. Affirmations about the nature and reality of the object of religious commitment belong to reflections on the manners and occasions of its self-manifestation.

All well and good, we philosophers may say. One for whom religious involvement is or maintains itself as a real possibility finds, in connection with that possibility, that the ultimate and absolute object of that involvement makes its nature and reality evident. But can we as philosophers find that what the religious devotee finds to be the case about reality is the case about reality? The question is more than understandable. But an affirmative response would require that something whose nature and reality necessarily become evident only in connection with a consideration of one's relation to the existence possibility that it evokes is something whose nature and reality can become evident apart from that consideration. In other words, the response would require that the nature and reality of the absolute telos could be established by objective rather than just by subjective reflection. One cannot affirm an absolute telos independently of any consideration of one's commitment to that end. Kierkegaard shows that such an affirmation occurs at the price of a performative contradiction. Objective reflection must consider historical or conceptual objects in abstraction from any consideration of one's relation to them. Philosophical reflection must be objective. This article is and must be an exercise in objective reflection. I have tried to contribute to an understanding of the necessities that are at work in religious existence, and more specifically to consider what must be the case regarding what the different modes of reflection that operate in religious existence can achieve. Developing such an understanding is the aim of philosophical reflection on religion. It is not the purpose of philosophical reflection on religion to take over the tasks that belong as such to the mode of reflection that specifically operates in religious involvement. It is important to recognize that philosophical reflection has limits. The limits do not subvert philosophy. They circumscribe the domain of its rich and essential achievements.

There are certainly issues discussed in or suggested by the argument of this paper that call for further treatment. The relation between objective and subjective reflection calls for more consideration, especially in relation to an interesting question about arguments concerning the existence of God. Kierkegaard says that such arguments may have the role of "elucidating the God-concept". Suppose they do so in a way that validly shows that "necessarily exists", or "cannot not-be", are necessarily predicated of God. Is that consistent with claims made in this paper about the relation of objective to

subjective reflection and about roles that are available to the latter rather than the former? I believe it is, and that one sees this by exploring the medieval notion of “faith seeking understanding”. But that exploration cannot be a part of this paper.

In addition, the existence-possibility that belongs to religion does not present itself in a vacuum. It presents itself through the cumulative tradition that develops in a religious form of life. Kenneth Schmitz claims that, “The proper (though not exclusive) vehicle of meaning for religion is the symbol and not the concept, precisely because the symbol does not only signify the thing intended but also embodies its presence and calls upon the reader to enter the world which the symbol reveals”. He adds that the religious symbol “proclaims a dimension of reality which is at once a demand for action and a revelation of meaning”.⁴⁶ Kierkegaard would approve of these statements.⁴⁷ I want to claim that without reference to the task of radical self-transcendence religious symbolism is empty, and that without reference to religious symbolism that task is at least in grave danger of being blind. But I cannot develop support for that claim here.

Critical discussion of these issues belongs to the larger project of which this article represents a part. In this paper I have tried, using Kierkegaard as a resource, to discuss the task of radical self-transcendence that determines religious existence, and to discuss what Kierkegaard calls objective reflection and subjective reflection in relation to that task. I have tried to show that, given the terms that Kierkegaard provides, it is quite possible and can even be necessary that objective reflection operate in the context established by appropriating the religious existence-possibility. I have tried to present the argument that Kierkegaard in part states and in part suggests for the claim it is through subjective reflection that one comes to know that religious affirmations grasp the truth about human and ultimate reality.

The development of that argument belongs to a formal discussion of religious existence understood with reference to the task that determines it. This discussion does not allude to the possible experiential contents which that task might inform. That said, one could not think that an ultimate and absolute telos would be something that we find in the way in which we might find a wallet on the sidewalk as we were walking down the street. It is not one among many things that we might happen upon while we are quite involved with something else. The idea of the absolute telos is the idea of something that possesses an absolute and therefore unique alterity, reality, and perfection, to which we relate ourselves for the sake of transforming and indeed of establishing our very selfhood. One cannot hold that reflection that identifies and affirms the reality of such an absolute telos could be anything other than reflection in which one considers one’s association with the task of radical

self-transcendence. Robert Sokolowski tells us that, “Flannery O’Connor, in one of her letters, describes someone who wrote to a friend, ‘and asked him how he could possibly learn to believe, expecting, I suppose a metaphysical answer. [His friend] only said, “Give alms”’”.⁴⁸ It is in association with the task of self-transcendence that one finds the source and end of that task.

Notes

1. Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 203, 240. Johannes Climacus uses these terms to define truth in relation to subjective reflection. He then says that this definition “is a paraphrasing of faith”.
2. See *Postscript*, pp. 379–380. Johannes Climacus does make this statement about Christianity. But one must be mindful of the distinction Climacus makes between Religiousness A and Religiousness B. In each he discusses Christianity. The discussion in Religiousness A considers Christianity in abstraction from that which distinguishes it from religion in more general terms and renders it distinctive. The discussion in Religiousness B is of Christianity in its distinctiveness. Whatever is true in the first discussion is also true in the second, but the reverse does not hold. The statement that Christianity presents an existence communication rather than a doctrine belongs to the first discussion.
3. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 405.
4. See *ibid.*, p. 400.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 408.
6. See *Postscript*, pp. 475–479. This is the point of the comments, in the discussion of suffering, about a man’s decision to take a holiday with his family to the amusement park. If an activity like this needs to be and is understood as occurring in the context of the absolute commitment, then even a trip to the park can be an act of serving God. But then one is also no longer pursuing, in this instance, relaxation just for its own sake. This is what Climacus means by “dying to immediacy”.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 225.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 433.
9. See C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities, 1983), p. 171.
10. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 461.
11. See *ibid.*, p. 527.
12. See *ibid.*, p. 554.
13. Soren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, edited and translated by Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 159.
14. See Merold Westphal, “Religious Experience as Self-Transcendence and Self-Deception”, in *Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Melville Stewart (Sudbury: Jones and Bartlett, 1996), p. 266.
15. C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript*, pp. 42, 43. “The ethicist may believe in and relate to God, but he does so essentially through his relation to himself. . . . The religious existencer relates to himself through his God relationship instead of relating to God through his relation to himself”.
16. Westphal, “Religious Experience as Self-Transcendence”, p. 266.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 267–276.
18. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 192.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 197, 198.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
21. See *ibid.*, p. 199. Climacus speaks here of a “mediation” between subjective and objective reflection, meaning something different by that term than the sense I mention earlier. In general, Kierkegaard uses “mediation” for several purposes and in several senses. One just needs to carefully examine the context to determine the exact use and meaning of the term.
22. See David J. Gouwens, *Kierkegaard As Religious Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 53. Commenting especially on the specifically Christian content of his thought, Gouwens notes that, in addition to requiring appropriation and subjective reflection, Kierkegaard “believes that religion and Christianity are deeply conceptual. For example, while Christianity is not a doctrine but an ‘existence communication’, it still possesses doctrinal and conceptual content, such as revelation, Incarnation, consciousness of sin, and the possibility of offense”.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
24. See *ibid.*, pp. 202–203.
25. Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 43.
26. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 200.
27. C. Stephen Evans, *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard’s Philosophical Fragments*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 68–69. Commenting on Climacus’ views about arguments concerning the existence of God, Evans observes that, “His real target is the notion that such a rational proof could be a substitute for faith. Once it is conceded that the recognition of such an argument requires faith and cannot be a substitute for it, he seems to have no objection to such arguments”.
28. My use of concepts such as “evidence”, “reality”, “certainly”, and “truth” need more discussion that is possible in this paper. Suffice it to say here that these uses are essentially phenomenological and more specifically Husserlian. A remarkably incisive and clear discussion of these notions is available in Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 156–176. I believe that Bernard Lonergan’s discussions of judgments that are virtually unconditioned are also of great value in discussing the concept of certainly. See Bernard Lonergan, *Insight* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., Ltd., 1958), pp. 280–281.
29. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 446.
30. M. Jamie Ferreira, *Transforming Vision: Imagination and Will in Kierkegaardian Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 62. At this point in her discussion Ferreira is commenting on Judge William’s discussion of the transition to ethical existence in *Either-Or*. What she says here applies as well to the transition to religious existence.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
36. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 426–427.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 427. Climacus often uses “eternal happiness” as a name for the absolute telos. One should note that in classical philosophy and scholastic philosophy and theology this expression can name a condition or the reality that is the source of this condition. Thus

the scholastics can say that human happiness consists in God, insofar as the condition of happiness comes about through the perfection of the relation to God. Kierkegaard employs this usage.

38. As I note earlier, Kierkegaard holds in the *Postscript* and elsewhere to much of the conceptual content that belongs to the orthodox Christian tradition as he understand it. This content has to do with God and the relation of creation to God.
39. It is important to note that undertaking the task of religious existence has, for Kierkegaard, the character of a venture and not of a trade.
40. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 246–247.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 245. Climacus says, for example, that it is not consistent to expect that God would appear in “the form, for example, of a rare, enormously large green bird, with a red beak, that perched in a tree on the embankment and perhaps even whistled in an unprecedented manner. . . .”
42. This continues to be the case in the light of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. Kierkegaard discusses this in detail in *Philosophical Fragments*.
43. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp Smith, (new York and Toronto: St. Martin’s and Macmillan, 1965), B 151/p. 165.
44. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 226.
45. See Ferreira, *Transforming Vision*, p. 33.
46. Kenneth Schmitz, “Philosophy of Religion and the Redefinition of Philosophy”, in *The Challenge of Religion*, edited by Frederick Ferre, Joseph J. Kockelmans, and John E. Smith (New York: Seabury, 1982), pp. 7–8.
47. S. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, translated by Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 199. “All human language about the spiritual, yes, even the divine language of Holy Scriptures, is essentially transferred or metaphorical language.”
48. Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre dame Press, 1982), p. 115.

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