


5-1988

Kierkegaard & Natural Religion

William Stewart
Western Kentucky University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses>

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stewart, William, "Kierkegaard & Natural Religion" (1988). *Masters Theses & Specialist Projects*. Paper 2882.
<https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses/2882>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses & Specialist Projects by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

Stewart,

William Christopher

1988

KIERKEGAARD AND NATURAL RELIGION

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of Philosophy and Religion

Western Kentucky University

Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

William Christopher Stewart

May 1988

AUTHORIZATION FOR USE OF THESIS

Permission is hereby

granted to the Western Kentucky University Library to make, or allow to be made photocopies, microfilm or other copies of this thesis for appropriate research or scholarly purposes.

reserved to the author for the making of any copies of this thesis except for brief sections for research or scholarly purposes.

Signed WC Stewart

Date 31 May 1988

Please place an "X" in the appropriate box.

This form will be filed with the original of the thesis and will control future use of the thesis.

KIERKEGAARD AND NATURAL RELIGION

Recommended April 27, 1988
(Date)

Larry D. Mayhew
Director of Thesis

[Signature]
Alan B. [Signature]

Approved May 24, 1988
(Date)

[Signature]
Dean of the Graduate College

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Like most graduate students, my debts of gratitude are legion. I thank my parents for supporting me through the vicissitudes of growing up-- a process I hope one day to complete. Arthur Holmes, my first teacher in philosophy, has for seven years been an invaluable source of practical advice, as well as an exemplar (with Kierkegaard) of philosophy in the service of humanity. My professors at Western Kentucky University (particularly Larry Mayhew, Bob Roberts, and Arvin Vos) greatly facilitated my initiation to philosophy at the graduate level. Finally, I can scarcely imagine the innumerable ways that I have been refreshed, encouraged, or otherwise loved by my best friend Jeanne, who also happens to be my wife, and to whom this brief work is dedicated. Words cannot express my thanks to her, and to the Providence that weaves our two lives together.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Passion	
The Subjective Thinker	
Indirect Communication	
Existence as a Synthesis	
Natural Religion	
II. THE NATURAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD	26
The Divine Elusiveness	
Inwardness	
The Eternal, The Ethical, and the Absolute Telos	
The Infinite	
The Possible	
Evaluation	
III. CERTITUDE AND INWARDNESS	61
Certitude, Probability, and Inwardness	
Probabilistic Theology and Atheology	
Kierkegaard and "Reformed Epistemology"	
Concluding Summary	
BIBLIOGRAPHY	87

KIERKEGAARD AND NATURAL RELIGION

William Christopher Stewart

May 1988

90 pages

Directed by: Larry Mayhew, Alan Anderson, and John Long

Department of Philosophy and Religion Western Kentucky University

According to Kierkegaard, the knowledge of God begins with the recognition of various truths about oneself. Every individual, just by virtue of being human, has the capacity to develop an intuitive awareness of God. In this thesis, I explore the nature of this knowledge. In chapter one, I introduce a number of ideas important for understanding Kierkegaard's phenomenology of religious belief, including his distinction between objective and subjective reflection, his method (indirect communication), and his psychology. The first chapter concludes with a description of the range or domain of "natural religion." In the next chapter, I analyze the structural or formative elements of natural religion, the awakening of a God-relationship in the extremity of self-knowledge (an individual's awareness of the eternal, infinite, and possible aspects of the human "self"). In the final chapter, I explore two related peculiarities in Kierkegaard's treatment of religious knowledge: his contempt for inductive or probabilistic arguments, and his suggestion that the existence of God can become clear to a person with a different kind of certainty. I argue that although he overstates his polemic against theistic arguments, Kierkegaard is nonetheless correct in his account of the proper ground of belief in God. I conclude by juxtaposing Kierkegaard's views on belief in God with those of twentieth century probabilistic theologians and atheologians, as well as the "Reformed Epistemology" of Alvin Plantinga.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For Aristotle, philosophy begins with wonder and culminates in a systematic understanding of the principles that underlie the universe. So conceived, the philosopher's task is to ask the question, "What can I know?" Soren Kierkegaard is a philosopher of another cast. His question is of a different sort. "What I really lack," he writes in his Journals,

is to be clear in my mind what I am to do, not what I am to know, except in so far as a certain understanding must precede every action. The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes me to do; the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die. . . . I certainly do not deny that I still recognize an imperative of understanding and that through it one can work upon men, but it must be taken up into my life, and that is what I now recognize as the most important thing.¹

Descartes begins with the self, with his cogito ergo sum ("I think, therefore I exist"), and reasons his way out (at an alarming rate) to a scientific understanding of the cosmos. Kierkegaard begins with the self, which he conceives as a relation or synthesis of various and opposing tendencies coupled with the self's awareness of the relation, and gazes inward, exploring what it is to be a person, and more importantly, how to get on with the task of existing as a person.

¹Soren Kierkegaard, Journals and Papers, 7 vols., trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1967-78), 5:34-35.

Kierkegaard distinguishes between two types of knowledge, or two ways of knowing. Some of our knowledge is abstract, speculative, or scientific; other is experiential, affective, or connatural. A number of other philosophers, including Pascal and William James, make a similar distinction. Aquinas employs it in his analysis of the virtues.¹ One can know, for instance, what chastity is by studying "moral science." Alternatively, one can know what chastity is by habituation--by being chaste. In the case of the virtues, habituation is arguably a more appropriate way of knowing, and results in a far richer and more complete knowledge of particular virtues. Kierkegaard describes these two ways of knowing as "objective" and "subjective" respectively. He applies the distinction to both moral and religious knowledge. One can know various truths about God through disinterested, objective inquiry. But the best way to know God is to engage in another kind of reflection, one that involves the whole person, not just the intellect.

Furthermore, according to Kierkegaard, the knowledge of God begins with the recognition of various truths about oneself. Hence, every individual, in so far as he is human, has the capacity to develop an intuitive awareness of God. The nature of this knowledge, its sources and its limitations, I explore in what follows. In this chapter, I introduce a number of ideas important for understanding Kierkegaard's treatment of religious knowledge, including his distinction between objective and subjective reflection, his method (indirect communication), and his psychology. I conclude with a description of the range or domain of

¹George Stengren, "Connatural Knowledge in Aquinas and Kierkegaardian Subjectivity," in Kierkegaardiana X, p. 183.

"natural" religion--the knowledge of God that every individual has the capacity to develop just by virtue of being human. These preliminaries aside, chapter two contains a critical analysis of the structural or formative elements of natural religion, in particular its genesis in the extremity of self-knowledge--the individual's awareness of the eternal, infinite, and possible aspects of the human person. Finally, in chapter three I discuss two related oddities in Kierkegaard's treatment of religious knowledge: his contempt for inductive or probabilistic arguments, and his suggestion that the existence of God can become clear to a person with a certainty that is unique. These aspects of his thought set up some interesting contrasts with contemporary philosophers of religion, with which I conclude.

Passion

"The present age," Kierkegaard said of the nineteenth century, "is essentially a sensible, reflecting age, devoid of passion, flaring up in superficial, short lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence."¹ "Passion" here does not signify strong or violent emotion or enthusiasm. Rather, it signifies a deep and abiding concern, earnestness, or interestedness. Passions issue forth from the core of an individual's personality and provide focus and direction for the whole of a person's life. Thinking about human existence, insists Kierkegaard, requires passion:

To think about existential problems in such a way as to leave out the passion, is tantamount to not thinking about them at all, since it is

¹Idem, Two Ages, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 68

to forget the point, which is that the thinker is himself an existing individual.¹

Passion connotes personal involvement in one's reflections as an exister.

Kierkegaard resists what he calls the "objective tendency," the tendency to intellectualize life without regard for one's own existence. The problem with nineteenth century thinking about human existence, manifested in "a sense of despair over being human,"² was not so much a lack of understanding and reflection as it was a surfeit of understanding and reflection coupled with an utter lack of passion. "The individual" had been engulfed in "the System" (Kierkegaard's term for the philosophical tradition inspired by Hegel). The objective tendency makes people into observers--mere spectators rather than active, responsible participants in life. To compensate for an overdose of objectivity with respect to life's most important questions, Kierkegaard prescribes an intensification of passion.

The Subjective Thinker

Kierkegaard drew a now famous and often misconstrued distinction between objective and subjective reflection. To reflect objectively about something is to adopt an attitude of neutrality or disinterestedness toward it. Objective reflection is essentially dispassionate. Science is often considered the paradigm of objective reflection. The physicist investigating the structure of the atom does not (at least not ideally) allow her personal hopes, wishes, feelings, or aspirations to influence

¹Idem [Johannes Climacus], Concluding Unscientific Postscript, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 313.

²Ibid., p. 317.

her analysis of the empirical "facts." The psychologist or sociologist, to the extent that she is a scientist, is expected to reach conclusions about human behavior without interference from her personal desires, emotions, or values, in short, whatever belongs to subjectivity. In each case, the subjective element is considered distortive and a hindrance to discovering the truth about reality. In objective reflection, thought is directed to something external to the individual, and hence, "thought must be pointed away from the subject."¹

Subjective reflection, on the other hand, seeks to relate thought to the reflecting individual's own concrete existence--it "accentuates existence."² In subjective reflection, attention is focused inward on the individual's relationship to the thought content. The aim of subjective reflection is to appropriate or realize a given thought in one's own life. Personal appropriation is the most important element in reflections on human existence. Against the speculative philosophers of his day, Kierkegaard complained that their systems of thought were like huge barns which, once complete, they abandoned to live in an adjacent cottage. One's thought, urges Kierkegaard, should be a dwelling in which one faithfully abides. The task is not simply to know the truth in some detached intellectual sense. From the standpoint of subjective reflection, the important question

is whether a person will in the deepest sense acknowledge the truth, will allow it to penetrate his whole being, will accept all its

¹Ibid., p. 171.

²Ibid., p. 173.

consequences, and not have an emergency hiding place for himself and a Judas kiss for the consequences.¹

As he puts it elsewhere, to think is one thing; but "to exist in what has been thought" is something else altogether.²

Against attempts to "mediate" the two types of reflection by remaking the individual in the form of a "subject-object [sic]," Kierkegaard reminds us that "the fact that [the individual] exists is precisely what will make it impossible for him to proceed along both ways at once."³ To do so would be tantamount to being in two places at one time. A woman facing a pregnancy cannot decide for or against an abortion by a disinterested analysis of the facts, themselves ambiguous and uncertain. Yet she must choose. The decision affects here entire existence and she cannot remain neutral. The question she asks is, "What am I to do?" All of us face similar situations in which a decision is forced in the absence of a firm knowledge of its implications and without the benefit of decisive objective considerations. The key difference, then, between objective and subjective reflection lies in "the relationship sustained by the existing individual, in his own existence, to the content of his utterance."⁴

The contrast between objective and subjective reflection is fundamental in Kierkegaard's thought, and is reflected in other

¹Idem [Vigilius Haufniensis], The Concept of Anxiety, trans. Reider Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 138.

²Idem [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 228.

³Ibid., p. 172.

⁴Ibid., p. 181.

distinctions throughout his works. For instance, in the Concluding Unscientific Postscript, he distinguishes between "abstract" and "concrete" thought. Abstract thought is "thought without a thinker." It abstracts from existence, and "ignores everything except the thought." Since "existence is always something particular, the abstract does not exist." (Italics mine.) Existence is, as it were, a "foreign medium" to abstract thought.¹ Questions about what exists cannot be addressed in the language of abstraction. Concrete thought, on the other hand, "is thought in relation to a thinker."² Concrete thought always pertains to a particular place and time. A person's understanding is "concrete" in so far as its content is concrete, and "the most concrete content that consciousness can have is consciousness of itself, of the individual himself."³

The distinction between "aesthetic pathos" and "existential pathos" also reflects the contrast between objective and subjective reflection. Aesthetic pathos is not concerned with actual (concrete) existence. It is like the pathos of the poet for whom reality is a mere occasion, a point of departure from which she imagines some ideal in comparison with which reality is but a feeble reflection. Aesthetic pathos distances the individual from the pressures of existence. Existential pathos, on the other hand, is expressed whenever an idea "is brought into relation with the existence of the individual so as to transform it."⁴ The end of

¹Ibid., p. 296.

²Ibid.

³Idem [Vigilius Haufniensis], The Concept of Anxiety, p. 143.

⁴Idem [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 347.

existential pathos is the appropriation of the thought content. It is expressed in action--"the reconstruction of the individual's mode of existence."¹

Furthermore, the transition from knowing some objective fact to appropriating it in one's life is not direct, following more or less automatically as a matter of course. To think otherwise, says Kierkegaard, is either an "illusion" based on an individual's ignorance of the decisively subjective character of the decision to act, or an "evasion" of a personal decision, perhaps disguised as an objective approach to the matter.² One can be positively clear on the objective facts pertaining to some momentous issue confronting one's life, and still not come to a personal decision. One can still avoid the appropriation process that constitutes subjective acceptance of a given existential possibility. To borrow one of his examples, "to understand what Christianity is, is not the difficulty, but to become and to be a Christian."³ One can know what Christianity is without being a Christian. But it is impossible to know what it is to be a Christian without actually becoming one.

Kierkegaard claims that subjective reflection yields the "most truth" or the "greater certainty" about human existence. With respect to "essential truth" he denies the possibility of pure objectivity and apodictic certainty of the sort appropriate to mathematics. Essential truth is truth as it pertains to existence, in particular human existence.

¹Ibid., p. 386.

²Ibid., p. 115-116.

³Ibid., p. 497.

Moreover, only "truths which can be appropriated by the subject and in which appropriation plays an essential part" are essential truths.¹

Knowledge has a relationship to the knower, who is essentially an existing individual, and . . . for this reason all essential knowledge is essentially related to existence. [Furthermore,] only ethico-religious knowledge has an essential relationship to the existence of the knower.²

Thus, to suggest that essential truth is a matter of appropriation or subjectivity emphasizes that it bears an essential relation to the exigencies of human existence. With regard to the truth as it pertains to existence (moral and religious truth), objective reflection trades in probabilities--unending approximations that never arrive at the final truth. Since the seeker of essential truth "stresses precisely the fact that he is an existing individual, then one of the . . . two ways which especially accentuates existence [that is, subjective reflection] would seem to be especially worthy of commendation."³ Thus, with regard to the most important questions of life, the truth for the individual "consists in nothing else than the self-activity of personal appropriation."⁴

Kierkegaard's notion of subjectivity does not to preclude a concern for objective truth. Nor does it open the door to epistemological relativism. On the contrary, Kierkegaard believes that a concern for objective, non-relativistic truth is a manifestation of true subjectivity. The truth is universally valid, even if it is not universally

¹Gregor Malantshuk, *Kierkegaard's Thought*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 284.

²Kierkegaard [Johannes Climacus], *Postscript*, p. 177.

³Ibid., p. 173.

⁴Ibid., p. 217.

recognizable. What he challenges is a certain attitude toward truth claims. He is critical of objective reflection when construed as a route to essential truth. The objective path presupposes that the truth can be ascertained apart from any subjective commitment or appropriation on the part of the truth seeker. Sometimes, of course, this assumption is legitimate. Kierkegaard's point seems to be that, at least in some areas of knowledge, "the objective truth is a product of subjective commitment."¹

Precisely as important as the truth, and if one of the two is to be emphasized, still more important, is the manner in which the truth is accepted.²

Essential truth is disclosed in and through the process of existing itself. Given the right sort of subjectivity (the sort that contributes to personal growth), what a person believes on the basis of subjective reflection will be the objective truth.

There are, explains Kierkegaard, two ways to be related to the truth, corresponding to whether the truth is considered from an objective or a subjective standpoint:

When the question of truth is raised in an objective manner, reflection is directed objectively to the truth, as an object to which the knower is related. Reflection is not focussed [*sic*] upon the relationship, however, but upon the question of whether it is the truth to which the knower is related. If only the object to which he is related is the truth the subject is accounted to be in the truth. When the question is directed subjectively to the nature of the individual's relationship; if only the mode of this relationship is in the truth, the individual is in the truth even if he should happen to be thus related to what is not true.³

¹C. Stephen Evans, Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript" (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1983), p. 129.

²Kierkegaard [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 221.

³Ibid., p. 178.

The "mode" of the relationship is the realm of action. To be "in the truth" in the second of the above two senses (in which the truth is considered subjectively) is to have one's existence transformed in the appropriate way--to perform true actions. Hence, it is possible to live the truth (that is, for one's life to be true) even if one's beliefs are objectively false. The clearest instances of this occur in the moral sphere. For example, in book ten of the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle suggests that Eudoxus's arguments for hedonism were convincing because of his virtuous character, not because of the strengths of the argument themselves (which, according to Aristotle, were mistaken). Eudoxus was "in the truth" from a subjective standpoint on the basis of his life, even though his ideas about morality were objectively false. His character was more of an "argument" than his arguments.

Kierkegaard says similar things about Socrates. Socrates offered no proofs of his own of immortality (though he considers several in the Phaedo). But "with the passion of the infinite [he] so determined the pattern of his life that it must be found acceptable--if there is an immortality." He lived his life in conformity with an idea that was, from an objective standpoint, an uncertainty. "Is any better proof capable of being given," asks Kierkegaard, "for the immortality of the soul?" Some people try to prove the immortality of the soul from an objective point of view but "do not at all determine their lives in conformity therewith." In these cases, Kierkegaard suggests, no better refutation of their arguments can be found than the manner of their lives.¹

¹Ibid., p. 180.

In addition, one can be in the truth from an objective standpoint and yet be morally wretched or even insane. Kierkegaard employs a humorous thought experiment to demonstrate that "the objective truth as such is by no means adequate to determine that whoever utters it is sane . . . [and] may even betray the fact that he is mad." Imagine a man who escapes through the window of an asylum. On the road to freedom, the escapee fixes on a plan to convince the townspeople of his sanity: he shall utter only objective truths. As he walks along considering his plan,

he sees a ball lying on the ground, picks it up, and puts it into the tail pocket of his coat. Every step he takes the ball strikes him, politely speaking, on his hinder parts, and every time it thus strikes him he says: "Bang, the earth is round." He comes to the city, and at once calls on one of his friends; he wants to convince him that he is not crazy, and therefore walks back and forth saying continually: "Bang, the earth is round!"¹

Each of the above cases illustrates the fundamental distinction in Kierkegaard's thought between objectivity and subjectivity, and the corresponding ways in which a person can be related to the truth. From an objective standpoint the "accent falls on WHAT is said"; whereas from a subjective standpoint the emphasis is "on HOW it is said." In the ethico-religious sphere (the sphere of essential truth), the "how" of the relation to the truth is the most important. "In this manner subjectivity and the subjective 'how' constitute the truth."²

Indirect Communication

In most of his writings, Kierkegaard is more concerned with the subjective "how" than the objective "what." In his estimation, his

¹Ibid., p. 174.

²Ibid., p. 181.

contemporaries were confused about the objective truth precisely because they misunderstood (even ignored) subjectivity. That is to say, they failed to appreciate the fact that living the truth is a human being's primary task, and that believing the right things is the result of living truthfully, not the other way around. Thought had been divorced from life. Kierkegaard attempted to bring about their reconciliation. His approach was distinctive, tailored both to the nature of the illness (an overdose of objective reflection) and of the patient (the human person).

According to Kierkegaard, the human person is fundamentally spirit, that is, self-determining, free to choose what he or she will be.¹ Consequently, genuine change in a person's life cannot be introduced directly from without, but must originate within the individual, with a personal decision, an act of the will. "There are two kinds of disorder," he writes:

The one is rioting, exterior hubbub. The other is the stillness of death, dissolution, and this is perhaps the most dangerous. Against this latter I have worked, and I have worked to awaken disquietude with the aim of effecting inward change.²

He believes, together with the idea that truth (in the very important sense in which it has to do with human existence) is a matter of personal appropriation (subjectivity), that to effect an inward change an individual must be motivated to change herself.

Whereas the communication of objective information may be accomplished directly, in the form of "results" or "definitions," direct

¹John D. Mullen, Kierkegaard's Philosophy (New York: New American Library, 1981), p. 44.

²Kierkegaard, For Self Examination and Judge for Yourselves!, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 45.

communication tends to inhibit the "self-activity" that leads to genuine inward change. Indeed,

in relation to existential concepts it always indicates a greater discretion to abstain from definitions, because a person can hardly be inclined to apprehend in the form of a definition what must be understood differently, what he himself has understood differently, . . . and which in the form of a definition becomes something else, something foreign to him.¹

The problem in Kierkegaard's day (as he saw it) was not a shortage of objective understanding (of which there was, if anything, a surplus), but rather an absence of what he calls "inwardness." The development of inwardness "pertains to someone who is presumed essentially to possess knowledge and who does not merely need to know something but rather needs to be influenced."²

To accomplish this inner transformation in the lives of his countrymen, Kierkegaard embarked on a literary mission involving a number of fictitious authors, each representing a different perspective or approach to life. Even their personalities are tailored to the content of their works. Because these pseudonyms (with the possible exception of Anti-Climacus) do not represent Kierkegaard's perspective, it would have been inappropriate and misleading for him to have published their works under his own name. The pseudonyms, then, are not simply masks to conceal the identity of the true author. They are personae who embody and articulate various world and life views or "spheres of existence."

In his "First and Last Declaration," appended to the Postscript, Kierkegaard explains that the content of the pseudonymous books

¹Idem [Vigilius Haufniensis], The Concept of Anxiety, p. 147.

²Idem [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 241.

required complete regardlessness in the direction of good and evil, of contrition and high spirits, of despair and presumption, of suffering and exultation, etc., which is bounded only ideally by psychological consistency, and which real actual persons in the actual moral limitations of reality dare not permit themselves to indulge in, nor could wish to.¹

He adds, moreover, that

in the pseudonymous works there is not a single word which is mine, I have no opinion about these works except as third person, no knowledge of their meaning except as reader.²

This does not mean that the pseudonymous works are devoid of insight. Nor does it deny that the books may contain expressed opinions that Kierkegaard himself shares. These remarks suggest, instead, how we should read the books: As if before a mirror, we see ourselves in the pseudonymous works, responding more or less like their authors to human experience at the levels they respectively depict. Kierkegaard's intent is to confront his readers indirectly (from behind, so to speak), enabling them through an intensification of self-awareness (inwardness) to recognize both the partial validity and final inadequacy of certain of the approaches to life embodied in the pseudonyms.

Existence as a Synthesis

Climacus observes that "if men had forgotten what it means to exist religiously, they had doubtless also forgotten what it means to exist as human beings."³ A central element in Kierkegaard's religious philosophy is his conception of human existence. In his writings, he attempted to recover an understanding of human existence, an understanding that had

¹Ibid., p. 551.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 223.

been lost. C. Stephen Evans points out that "one point that Kierkegaard and nearly all of his pseudonyms seem to agree on is that existence, understood in that special sense in which it refers to the type of existence human beings have, is a synthesis of contrasting factors," the most complete analysis of which is provided in The Sickness Unto Death.¹

The Sickness Unto Death appeared in 1849 under the pseudonym, "Anti-Climacus," calling to mind the earlier pseudonym, "Johannes Climacus." Of the two, Kierkegaard writes in his Journals,

Johannes Climacus and Anti-Climacus have several things in common; but the difference is that whereas Johannes Climacus places himself so low that he even says himself that he is not a Christian, one seems to be able to detect in Anti-Climacus that he regards himself to be a Christian on an extraordinarily high level.²

Kierkegaard considered himself "only a very simple Christian" by comparison to the "extraordinary" Anti-Climacus.³ He endorsed Anti-Climacus' analysis of human existence as "absolutely sound," adding, "I bow to it."⁴ Walter Lowrie considers Kierkegaard's utilization of the pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, an "afterthought . . . adopted merely to relieve his own feeling of impropriety,"⁵ as well as a method of focussing attention on the book's message apart from any association with the actual author.⁶

¹Evans, p. 56.

²Kierkegaard, Journals and Papers, 6:174.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 6:175.

⁵Walter Lowrie, Introduction to The Sickness Unto Death, by Soren Kierkegaard [Anti-Climacus] (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954), p. 138.

⁶Lowrie, A Short Life of Kierkegaard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1942), p. 217.

The opening lines of The Sickness Unto Death are a masterpiece of dialectic, and worth quoting at length:

Man is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to itself; . . . the self is not the relation but [consists in] the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom [possibility] and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self. In the relation between the two, the relation is the third as a negative unity, and the two relate to the relation. . . . If, however, the relation relates itself to itself, this relation is the positive third, and this is the self.¹

Anti-Climacus does not say that a human being is a spirit, but that a human being "is spirit." In this context, "spirit" seems to mean something like "spirited," that is, self-determining or free. The self is a relation or synthesis of opposing tendencies. But it is also an awareness of the relation, and not simply the relation itself, for "considered in this way, a human being is still not a self." The self is by definition a self conscious entity, able to "relate itself to itself." Furthermore, the self is not a harmonious synthesis of the dialectical pairs finite/infinite, temporal/eternal, and freedom (possibility)/necessity.

This sets up a point of contrast between Anti-Climacus and Kierkegaard's archenemy, Hegel. In the Hegelian dialectic, a primary stage of unreflective unity is opposed by a secondary stage of reflective disunity. The opposites are negated in a natural progression to a harmonious synthesis of reflective unity. This is a kind of "negative unity." According to Anti-Climacus, the synthesis that constitutes the

¹Kierkegaard [Anti-Climacus], The Sickness Unto Death, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 13.

self is neither harmonious nor the result of a natural progression. Rather, the synthesis is posited by an act of human will, a "leap," a "positive third term," which is the self. That the relation is characterized by tension means that the self faces an "existential paradox," in which the problem for the self becomes how to relate the dialectically opposed tendencies that make up the human person.¹ Human existence is thus a constant striving to maintain the synthesis. To fail to achieve the synthesis is to be in the state Anti-Climacus calls "despair."

Every human existence that is not conscious of itself as spirit or conscious of itself before God as spirit, every human existence that does not rest transparently [that is, without self deception] in God . . . , whatever it achieves, be it most amazing, whatever it explains, be it the whole of existence, however intensively it enjoys life esthetically [sic]-every such existence is nevertheless despair.²

The description of the self with which The Sickness Unto Death begins is the ideal state of the human person, "a state in which there is no despair at all."³ Anti-Climacus distinguishes two forms of despair: (1) "in despair not to will to be oneself" and (2) "in despair to will to be oneself." If the self were responsible for the fact that it is a "relation that relates itself to itself," then despair could only be of the first form. As it is, however, there is "another" to which the self relates itself, namely "that which has established the entire relation," and without which the self cannot "arrive at or . . . be in equilibrium

¹Mullen, p. 46.

²Kierkegaard [Anti-Climacus], The Sickness Unto Death, p. 46.

³Ibid., p. 49.

and rest."¹ Because the self is constituted by another, one can despairingly "will to be oneself."

Anti-Climacus believes that the possibility of despair is an "infinite advantage," for it is precisely the possibility of despair that distinguishes man from the beasts, and "in quite another way than does his erect walk, for it indicates infinite erectness or sublimity, that he is spirit." But "the descent [to despair] is as infinitely low as the excellence of the possibility is high." Indeed, "to be in despair is not only the worst misfortune and misery--no, it is ruination." Despair is "the misrelation in the relation of a synthesis that relates itself to itself."² In addition, it is not something that just happens to a person as if it were "something that lies in human nature as such," or "something he suffers, like a disease . . . or death."³ On the contrary, the responsibility for being in despair always rests with the individual as a spirited being. Despair persists because of an act of will on the part of the despairing individual.

Anti-Climacus concludes his analysis of the self with what Robert C. Roberts describes as something like a psychological argument for the existence of God."⁴ Anti-Climacus equates the moment when one becomes "decisively conscious as spirit, as self" with becoming aware or receiving a deep impression "that there is a God and that 'he,' he himself, exists

¹Ibid., p. 14.

²Ibid., p. 15.

³Ibid., p. 16.

⁴Robert C. Roberts, "The Socratic Knowledge of God," in International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness Unto Death, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987), pp. 136-41.

before this God."¹ As Roberts points out, this implies that one cannot truly be a self willingly, and without despair unless one acknowledges one's dependence on God. In this way, the self-transparent individual knows that God exists. This knowledge of God is closely connected with knowledge of the "eternal," "infinite," and "possible" aspects of the self.

Natural Religion

Kierkegaard is perhaps best known for his trenchant polemic against the state church in his native Denmark. The illusion that "in such a land as ours all are Christians of a sort" is a frequent target of his penetrating and acrimonious scorn.² In his estimation, this confusion precipitated from nineteenth century Christendom's wholesale accommodation of Hegelian idealistic coherentism. To counteract this and similar other adulterations of basic Christian concepts, Kierkegaard addressed himself to "the problem of becoming a Christian."³ He explored various levels of religious awareness from aesthetic preoccupation with experience to the critical moment in which the consciousness offended by the "absolute paradox" (the incarnation) suspends "the Reason" and embraces the Truth in the "happy passion" of faith.⁴

¹Kierkegaard [Anti-Climacus], The Sickness Unto Death, p. 26-7.

²Kierkegaard, The Point of View for My Works as an Author: A Report to History, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 6.

³Ibid., p. 22.

⁴Idem [Johannes Climacus], Philosophical Fragments, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 73.

Kierkegaard's attempt to elucidate the nature of Christianity is, as fascinating as it is, at times perplexing. But the emphasis in what follows will not be on this aspect of his thought. Instead, the primary focus will be on natural religion, or religion per se. More specifically, I will analyze the knowledge of God that an individual is capable of apart from special revelation, religious authority, or any particular religious tradition. In the Postscript, Climacus designates this form of religion "religiousness A," the "religion of immanence," or "Socratic religion," to distinguish it from what he calls "religiousness B," or "paradoxical religion," namely, Christianity.

This distinction is found in many of Kierkegaard's writings, a great many of which are devoted to explicating religiousness A. This may seem like a counter productive strategy given that his primary aim was to "reintroduce Christianity into Christendom." In fact, it reflects his awareness of the "tremendous existential compass [that] is possible outside Christianity" on the one hand, and "what an experience of life is required as a precondition for properly entering upon Christianity" on the other.¹ As Climacus explains, "religiousness A must first be present in the individual before there can be any question of becoming aware of the dialectic of B."² Being Socratically religious is thus a sort of precondition for becoming a Christian. Or, to put it more positively, religiousness B fulfills religiousness A.

Kierkegaard often depicts Socrates as exemplifying religiousness A. In The Sickness Unto Death, Anti-Climacus exhorts us "never [to] forget

¹Idem, Postscript, p. 259.

²Ibid., p. 497.

that Socrates' ignorance was a kind of fear and worship of God."¹ Climacus agrees: "Socrates was in the truth by virtue of his ignorance, in the highest sense in which this is possible within paganism."² "In an intellectual sense," adds Johannes de Silentio (pseudonymous author of Fear and Trembling), "[Socrates] did make the movement of infinity."³ At other times, however, he doubts whether religiousness A has ever been exemplified. Nonetheless, he clearly regarded it as a possibility for any human being because "it has only human nature in general as its assumption."⁴

Natural religion, then, is the knowledge of God that every human being has the potential to develop without the aid of revelation, religious authority, or any particular religious tradition. A revelation is the disclosure of something previously hidden or inaccessible. In the religious sphere, revelation is God's self-revealing activity through which he makes known his nature as well as his purposes for and relationship to humanity. The greater the emphasis in a given religion on God's transcendence, the more stress is usually placed on our need of revelation to know God. It may be that even to the extent that God is immanent within human consciousness we remain indirectly dependent on God to recognize his presence and activity. In this discussion, however, I will restrict the definition of revelation to include that which we could

¹Idem, [Anti-Climacus], The Sickness Unto Death, p. 99.

²Idem, [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 183.

³Idem, [Johannes de Silentio], Fear and Trembling [with Repetition], trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 69.

⁴Idem, [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 496.

not know or discover about God through the natural capabilities and tendencies we possess as human beings. We are endowed with some degree of religious autonomy. Indeed, a distinctive feature of Kierkegaard's approach is that we can either cultivate or ignore the potential we each have to develop a God-relationship.

Occasionally, transcendent revelation (the disclosure of what is beyond the powers of humankind to discover) is called "special revelation" to distinguish it from "general revelation." General revelation is God's partial self-disclosure through the created order, his providential dealings in nature and throughout human history (for example, miracles), and the moral sensitivity more or less present in all of us. The difficulty with creation is that it admits various and even opposing interpretations. To one observer, nature may exhibit an order and beauty such that only a being of infinite wisdom and power could have fashioned it. The theist who views nature as the work of God sees it through the lenses of an "ideal interpretation," an interpretation not given in the encounter with nature by itself.¹ To another observer, however, the cosmos may appear so random and chaotic that for her it constitutes evidence against the existence of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent Being.

Furthermore, God's providential dealings in nature and throughout human history are open to the same approximation process and uncertainty inherent in historical judgments generally. Even when the probability of an event having occurred is high (as has been said of the resurrection of Jesus), Kierkegaard considers the slightest degree of reasonable doubt, attached to even the most reliable of historical judgments, sufficient to

¹Ibid., Philosophical Fragments, p. 52.

disqualify that event as a decisive basis for hope in an eternal happiness. He deems man's religious aspirations far too important to be founded on probabilities, curiously maintaining that our knowledge of God can and should be among the most certain elements of our lives.

Along with revelation, natural religion precludes any religious authority extraneous to the individual. A religious authority is someone thought to possess a unique or unusual degree of religious insight or awareness. This awareness can be a result of some revelation peculiar to that person. The apostle Paul, for example, believed that he had encountered the resurrected Christ while traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus, and declared later that his message "is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ."¹ Other men and women have made similar claims. Also, religious authority can be attributed to a document by virtue of its origin or association with some authoritative individual. In either case, knowledge obtained through a religious authority circumvents an individual's natural religious potential. Such a source of knowledge is therefore excluded from the raw materials of the natural religious life.

Finally, in addition to precluding religious authority, natural religion does not presuppose any particular religious tradition. It is true that Kierkegaard is primarily interested in the problem of becoming a Christian. But his reflections on natural religion are not dependent on the truth or falsity of Christianity. Indeed, Johannes Climacus (the "author" of the Postscript, which contains lengthy discussions of Socratic

¹Galatians 1:11-12 (New International Version).

religion) himself denies that he is a Christian. His interest in the confusion between Christianity and speculative philosophy is a sporting one.¹ The only presupposition of natural religion is the universal nature and potential that exists in everyone regardless of descent or religious predilections. That Kierkegaard draws most of his illustrations from Christianity, even in the pseudonymous works, should neither surprise nor alarm us, since it was with Christianity that he was most familiar.

The next chapter elucidates how, according to Kierkegaard, an individual develops an intuitive awareness of God in the sphere of natural religion. In brief, God can only be known by the individual who develops the peculiarly human capacity Kierkegaard calls "inwardness, . . . that lonely wellspring which exists in every man, that wellspring in which the Deity dwells in the profound stillness where everything is silent."² The most strenuous and intense form of inwardness is faith. Though faith of a sort is required to know God, Kierkegaard usually links faith sensu eminentiori ("in an eminent sense") with Christianity--the paradoxical revelation of the God-man Jesus.³ The natural knowledge of God is essentially a process of self-discovery. Inwardness is self-knowledge, or the process of becoming "a self." To become a self is indeed "the greatest concession made to man, but at the same time," cautions Anti-Climacus, "it is eternity's demand upon him."⁴

¹Kierkegaard [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 216.

²Ibid., p. 163.

³Ibid., p. 184-5.

⁴Idem, [Anti-Climacus], The Sickness Unto Death, p. 154.

CHAPTER II

THE NATURAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

According to Kierkegaard, in the sphere of natural religion, the knowledge of God is conditioned by an individual's capacity for inwardness. In this chapter, after discussing the "divine elusiveness" and the meaning of "inwardness," I analyze the structural or formative elements of the natural religious life. In the extremity of self-knowledge, an individual grasps the eternal, infinite, and possible aspects of the human "self." In this moment of self-discovery, the individual also encounters God. After analyzing Kierkegaard's view, I conclude the chapter with an evaluation of the propriety of his way of construing the natural knowledge of God.

The Divine Elusiveness

"Every life is religiously designed."¹ So says Vigilius Haufniensis, pseudonymous author of The Concept of Anxiety. What he means is that every individual, simply by virtue of being human, has an innate potential to develop a religious consciousness. Haufniensis (along with Kierkegaard) is well aware that not all (indeed few) realize this potential, and that many are not even conscious of the spiritual dimension of human existence. Anti-Climacus laments that

¹Kierkegaard [Vigilius Haufniensis], The Concept of Anxiety, p. 105.

only that person's life is wasted who went on living so deceived by life's joys and sorrows that he never became decisively and eternally conscious as spirit, as self, or, what amounts to the same thing, never became aware and in the deepest sense never gained the impression that there is a God and that "he," he himself, his self, exists before this God¹

In the Fragments, Climacus depicts the human understanding as driven by a "paradoxical passion" to collide with "something that thought itself cannot think," thereby willing its own downfall.² What the understanding confronts in the moment of this collision is "the unknown," which Climacus casually refers to as "the god." "In paganism," Kierkegaard concurs, "God was regarded as the unknown."³ Climacus defines paganism as the idea "that God is related to man directly, as the obviously extraordinary to the astonished observer."⁴ The difficulty is that God is elusive:

For no anonymous author can more cunningly conceal himself, no practitioner of the maieutic art can more carefully withdraw from the direct relationship, than God. He is in the creation, and present everywhere in it, but directly He is not there.⁵

"God," Kierkegaard remarks in his Journals, "is at one and the same time infinitely close to man and infinitely far away."⁶ If God exists, why is he so elusive? The answer has to do with both the nature of God (the object of religious knowledge) and the corresponding character of the "God-relationship."

¹Idem [Anti-Climacus], The Sickness Unto Death, p. 26-7.

²Idem [Johannes Climacus], Fragments, pp. 37-9.

³Idem, Journals and Papers, 2:100.

⁴Idem [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 219.

⁵Ibid., p.218.

⁶Idem, Journals and Papers, 2:154.

It is plausible to suppose that God (if such a being exists) cannot be known by just anyone in just any old way. The same is true in other areas of human knowledge. We ordinarily expect knowledge to be obtainable in some way, but we do not ordinarily expect everyone to be equally in a position to obtain it. For instance, the existence of various rare species of animals or of subatomic particles can be verified only by a trained naturalist or physicist, respectively. As C. Stephen Evans explains, "In every case the nature of what is known seems to dictate the conditions under which it can be known and the capacities the knower must have."¹ The object of religious knowledge is God. Since God is a spirit, he eludes direct sense perception. Instead, to know God, the knower must develop other capacities, capacities peculiarly appropriate to the object of religious knowledge.

The divine elusiveness is consistent with the possibility of true relationship to God, which is a spiritual (inwardly developed) relationship. "But the spiritual relationship to God in truth, when God refuses to deceive, requires precisely that there be nothing remarkable about the figure."² Climacus suggests that God is "so unnoticeable, so secretly present in His works" that a man could live out his life as a husband and father, a respected citizen and captain of the hunt, but for all that never really become aware of God's reality.

Such a man might perhaps know many things, perhaps even know the System by rote; he might be an inhabitant of a Christian country, and bow his head whenever the name of God was mentioned; he would perhaps also see God in nature when in company with others who saw God; he would be a pleasant society man--and yet he would have been deceived

¹Evans, p. 153.

²Kierkegaard [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 220.

by the direct nature of his relationship to the truth, to the ethical, and to God.¹

Were God to grant a direct relationship, our society man's attention would doubtless be aroused "if God, for example, had taken on the figure of a very rare and tremendously large green bird, with a red beak, sitting in a tree on the mound, and perhaps even whistling in an unheard of manner."² Or perhaps he would take notice if God appeared "in human form . . . [in] the figure of a man six yards tall."³ In the religious sphere, however, a direct relationship between God and man--both spiritual beings--is impossible. "God is spirit--and man's task is to be transformed to spirit; but spirit is opposed to being related to God by way of external evidence."⁴ The point is that although the natural knowledge of God is immediate in a way analogous to sense perception, it is nevertheless not an encounter in sense experience. Rather, in the sphere of natural religion, one encounters God as an object of contemplation.

Climacus marvels that in an age so dominated by direct communication "it occurs to no one to register a complaint against God."⁵ Kierkegaard maintains nonetheless that the divine elusiveness is both "God's sublimity" and "the infinite love of God."⁶ When a person mistakes some

¹Ibid., p. 219.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 220.

⁴Idem, Journals and Papers, 1:105-6.

⁵Idem [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 217.

⁶Idem, Journals and Papers, 1:106.

sensible object for God, she fails to grasp God's true nature, and thereby also fails to enter into a true God-relationship.

But the spiritual relationship to God in the truth, i.e. in inwardness, is conditioned by a prior eruption of inwardness, which corresponds to the divine elusiveness that God has absolutely nothing obvious about Him, that God is so far from being obvious that He is invisible.¹

God's invisibleness is his omnipresence. Nature is the work of God, and God's presence permeates nature, yet God is not directly present in his creation. "Only when the individual turns to his inner self, and hence only in the inwardness of self-activity, does he have his attention aroused, and is enabled to see God."² In his Journals, Kierkegaard likens the divine elusiveness, and the corresponding nature of the God-relationship, to a seduction: "God is cunning, so to speak; he is the invisible one who quite secretly is responsible for the development of a person's life in this way, but God gives no sign"³

The impossibility of a direct relationship to God highlights the limitations of objective reflection. Objective reflection sometimes takes the form of abstract thought, which always points away from existence. It takes care of existential problems by leaving them out. The problem is that God does not exist in abstract thought. "Immanently (in the imaginative medium of abstraction) God does not exist or is not present; he is--only for the existing person is God present."⁴ God's presence can only be known by the individual who approaches it with existential pathos,

¹Idem [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 219.

²Ibid., p. 218.

³Idem, Journals and Papers, 2:112.

⁴Ibid., 2:97.

by one who brings the existence of God into concrete relation with his own existence as an object of subjective reflection ("concrete thought").

The contrast is between two different modes of approaching existential problems. Whereas objective reflection "is directed to the problem of whether this object is the true God," subjective reflection "is directed to the question whether the individual is related to something in such a manner that his relationship is in truth a God-relationship."¹

Recall Climacus's startling claim that "if only the mode of this relationship is in the truth, the individual is in the truth even if he should happen to be thus related to what is not true."²

To illustrate the above point, Climacus proposes another thought experiment:

If one who lives in the midst of Christendom goes up to the house of God, the house of the true God, with the true conception of God in his knowledge, and prays, but prays in a false spirit; and one who lives in an idolatrous community prays with the entire passion of the infinite, although his eyes rest upon the image of an idol: where is there the most truth? The one prays in truth to God even though he worships an idol; the other prays falsely to the true God, and hence worships in fact an idol.³

In a footnote, he adds the important qualification that the question, again, is about essential truth, "truth which is essentially related to existence,"⁴ and in which personal appropriation plays a major role. The idolater is "in [the] truth" from a subjective point of view by virtue of his passion, even though from an objective standpoint the immediate object

¹Idem [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 178.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p.179-80.

⁴Ibid., p. 178.

of his devotion is something sensible, and therefore false. The "false spirit" of the individual "in the midst of Christendom" places him outside the truth (from a subjective standpoint). Though his conception of God is objectively true, his false relationship to God makes him an idolater. (Kierkegaard undoubtedly modeled the latter individual after the majority of his learned countrymen.)

What is the "inwardness of self-activity" in which one somehow receives the ability to "see God?" In The Concept of Anxiety, Haufniensis ("The Watchman of Copenhagen") alludes to Judge William's remark in Either/Or that "the true autodidact is precisely in the same degree also a theodidact."¹ In his Journals, Kierkegaard agrees with Julius Muller that in creating man God "theomorphizes." Therefore, not everything a person comes to believe about God on the basis of self-reflection should be dismissed as anthropomorphic. Otherwise (quoting Muller), "God could not have made man more unqualified to know him than by creating him in his image."²

Anti-Climacus equates becoming "a self" with resting "transparently [that is, without self-deception] in the Power that established it."³ Climacus agrees that "it is the God-relationship that makes a man a man."⁴ Ethically speaking, it is every individual's responsibility to become a self, which presupposes that every person is born with the potential to become one. It is this potentiality to become a self (a spirit) that is

¹Idem [Vigilius Haufniensis], The Concept of Anxiety, p. 162.

²Idem, Journals and Papers, 1:29.

³Idem [Anti-Climacus], The Sickness Unto Death, p. 14.

⁴Idem [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 219.

"awakened in inwardness to become a God-relationship."¹ "Spiritual development is self-activity,"² and this self-activity involves actualizing one's self in an ethical sense. In Either/Or, Judge William relates such a moment of self-actualization:

So when all has become still around one, as solemn as a starlit night, when the soul is alone in the whole world, then there appears before one not a distinguished man, but the eternal Power itself. The heavens part, as it were, and the I chooses itself--or rather, receives itself.³

In the sphere of natural religion, knowledge of God is essentially self-awareness or self-knowledge, knowledge of what it is to exist humanly, to be a self. The distinctive feature of Socratic religion, or the religion of immanence, is that man has the truth within him already. Correspondingly, the failure to develop one's innate potential to acquire a God-relationship is a failure of self-knowledge. In mature adults, this failure always involves some measure of self-deception, refusing to acknowledge something more or less evident about one's self. Vigilius Haufniensis (another of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms) calls the state of such a person "the absence of inwardness." "If the absence of inwardness were brought about mechanically [that is, as a result of processes beyond one's control]," he adds, then "all consideration of it would be wasted effort."⁴ However, inwardness belongs to self-reflection, and the lack of it is rooted in a failure of self-knowledge in which the individual is

¹Ibid., p. 221.

²Ibid., p. 309.

³Idem [Victor Erimita], Either/Or, 2 vols., trans. Walter Lowrie and Howard A. Johnson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 2:181.

⁴Idem [Vigilius Haufniensis], The Concept of Anxiety, p. 144.

active, and for which the individual is therefore in some sense responsible. What, then, is inwardness, and how does turning to one's "inner self . . . in the inwardness of self-activity" enable one to "see God?"¹

Inwardness

"God is a subject," writes Climacus, "and therefore exists only for subjectivity in inwardness."² In his own account of how he became interested in the misunderstanding between speculative philosophy and Christianity, he observes that despite "the great increase in knowledge," his contemporaries had "forgotten what it means to exist, and what inwardness signifies."³ Though the notion pervades his writings, Kierkegaard does not provide us with a straightforward definition of inwardness. Haufniensis, pseudonymous author of The Concept of Anxiety, does make "a few remarks for orientation" regarding inwardness in a section from that work entitled, "Anxiety as Sin or Anxiety as the Consequence of Sin in the Single Individual."⁴

Aware of the difficulty of constructing a definition of inwardness, Haufniensis elects "in the meantime" to say that it is "earnestness." "Inwardness is precisely the fountain that springs up unto eternal life, and what issues from this fountain is precisely earnestness."⁵ He notes

¹Idem [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 218.

²Ibid., p. 178.

³Ibid., p. 223.

⁴Idem [Anti-Climacus], The Concept of Anxiety, pp. 146-154.

⁵Ibid., p. 146.

with satisfaction the lack of even a single definition of earnestness. Like other existential concepts, earnestness cannot be defined directly without misleading those for whom the definition is intended. A lover would hardly be satisfied with a definition of love, just as one who "lives in daily and festive communion with the thought that there is a God" would hardly be content with a definition of what God is. The same is true of earnestness, "which is so earnest a matter that even a definition of it becomes a frivolity."¹ Haufniensis defends his refusal to offer a definition of earnestness as proving "much better than any conceptual development that I do know in earnest what the discussion is about," and not based on the "fear that some supershrewd speculator might become suspicious of me, as if I did not quite know whereof I speak."²

In his "remarks," Haufniensis points out that earnestness has a dispositional character. But it is not like any ordinary disposition. It is "a higher as well as the deepest expression of what disposition is."³ In this sense, it constitutes the core of one's personality, provided that it is directed toward the proper object. One can be earnest about all manner of things, from the national debt to a performance at the theater. Indeed, an individual's "worth" may be gauged by discerning what sorts of things she is earnest about. The primary object of earnest is properly oneself, "and whoever has not become earnest about this, but about something else, something great and noisy, is despite all his earnestness

¹Ibid., p. 147.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 148.

a joker."¹ One who becomes deeply earnest about the wrong sorts of things is comical in the sense that the level of interest or concern expressed is incongruous with the relative importance of the object. One who has "become earnest in the right place," however, "will prove the soundness of his spirit precisely by his ability to treat all other things sentimentally as well as jokingly."² Properly directed earnestness enables one to bring one's concerns into harmony by not assigning a disproportionate level of concern to the relative (finite) ends of life. Genuine earnestness is first and foremost a deep and abiding concern (a passion) for one's own existence.

Inwardness, then, is an enduring concern for one's own concrete existence. It also includes the concerns that become the ground of the God-relationship in the fully developed personality. Furthermore, the concerns that mold the personality in the existential pathos of inwardness are not present in an individual from birth--"no one is born with earnestness."³ They must be developed, and a human being is capable of resisting or even thwarting their development.

The development of inwardness is largely the cultivation of certain passions or concerns. The concerns that are the ground of the God-relationship in the sphere of natural religion pertain to the distinctive and essential elements of human existence. It is the task of the subjective thinker "to transform himself into an instrument that clearly

¹Ibid., p. 150.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

and definitely expresses whatever is essentially human."¹ Thus, the cultivation of these concerns is in an important sense a process of self-discovery, of discovering the "essentially human" aspects of one's self. What does the self have to discover about itself in order to "see God?" Kierkegaard answers this question in terms of the synthesis of the elements that constitute the self: the dialectical pairs temporal/eternal, finite/infinite, and freedom (possibility)/necessity.

The Eternal, the Ethical, and the Absolute Telos

The first aspect of the self to consider is the dialectical pair temporal/eternal. A key concept in Kierkegaard's phenomenology of the religious life is "the eternal." "Inwardness," says Haufniensis, "is . . . eternity or the constituent of the eternal in man," and "whoever has not understood it altogether concretely, lacks inwardness and earnestness."² Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms use the expression "the eternal" in several distinct ways.³ The uses relevant to this discussion are those that pertain to human existence. There are two senses of "the eternal" that we need to consider: "the eternal" as a constituent of human existence, and "the eternal" as the goal or end of human existence.

The former of the two senses of "the eternal" applies to the initial moments of subjective awakening (that is, of self-awareness or inwardness). Intellectually, an individual contemplates eternity in the

¹Idem [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 318.

²Idem [Vigilius Haufniensis], The Concept of Anxiety, p. 151.

³delineated in Evans, pp. 59-64.

guise of "universal possibilities."¹ But a human being, as an exister, is one who not only thinks but acts. Therefore, the individual also reflects on some of these possibilities as possibilities for action, with some more worthy of fulfillment than others. So the initial encounter with "the eternal" is the birth of ethical awareness. In this sense, ethics is "the essential anchorage for all individual existence," and has "an indefeasible claim upon every existing individual."² Moreover, in the course of ethical reflection, one becomes cognizant of certain possibilities for action as timeless, unchanging, and universally binding, in a word, eternal. "Whoever does not apprehend the eternal validity of the ethical . . . does not really apprehend the ethical."³ "The ethical is the very breath of the eternal."⁴

In the Postscript, Climacus makes it clear that knowledge of the eternal--conceived as absolutely binding moral obligations (ethical values)--is an exercise in self-knowledge. "For the study of the ethical," he avers, "every man is assigned to himself."⁵ Though the individual discovers the ethical through self-reflection, the ethical also points to another:

The ethical is . . . a correlative to individuality, and to such a degree that each individual apprehends the ethical essentially only

¹Ibid., p. 61.

²Kierkegaard [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, 119.

³Ibid., p. 128.

⁴Ibid., p. 136.

⁵Ibid., p. 137.

in himself, because the ethical is his complicity with God. (Italics mine.)¹

The eternal moral qualities an individual discovers as an exister he conceives as grounded in God. In this way, ethical self-understanding culminates in a God-relationship. "The true distinction between good and evil . . . exists only in the individual, and in the last analysis only in each individual in his God-relationship."²

When a person exercises his freedom as a responsible agent in accord with his ethical duty as he perceives it, God's reality becomes apparent to him. "Freedom is the true wonderful lamp;" writes Climacus, "when a man rubs it with ethical passion, God comes into being for him."³ The attribute of God that comes to light in the context of an individual's "eternal consciousness" is God's role as moral ruler and judge.

In the world-historical process as this is viewed by human beings, God does not play the role of sovereign; just as the ethical fails to appear in it, so God also fails to appear, for if he is not seen as sovereign he is not seen at all.⁴

To the human being with ethical passion, God appears as Lord.

The ethical task is to realize one's self as a being with eternal significance. Ethical passion is "willing to the utmost limits of one's power" to actualize the moral obligations one encounters in the course of existence. In this sense, human existence is "a successive process in which the individual can recognize and attempt to actualize 'the eternal'

¹Ibid., p. 138.

²Ibid., p. 139.

³Ibid., p. 124.

⁴Ibid., pp. 139-40.

(ethical values)."¹ Ethical existence is implicitly a religious existence. Nevertheless, it is possible to live the ethical life without recognizing that in doing so one is also relating one's self to God. The first sense of "the eternal" is closely linked to the second, in which "the eternal" is conceived as the goal or end of human existence. In realizing "the eternal" in this second sense, an individual's existence takes on an explicitly religious dimension.

"The ethical," writes Climacus, "is and remains the highest task for every human being."² The mark of pure ethical passion is its utter disregard for "results."

The true ethical enthusiasm consists in willing to the utmost limits of one's powers, but at the same time being so uplifted in divine jest as never to think about the accomplishment. As soon as the will begins to look right and left for results, the individual begins to become immoral. The energy of the will is slackened³

There nonetheless "comes into being for the individual who becomes subjective" (that is, the individual whose personality is molded by ethical passion) the concept of a "highest reward, an eternal happiness."⁴ An eternal happiness is the end or goal of ethical existence. This is the second important sense of "the eternal" as it applies to human existence, the thought of which "possesses a power and weightiness in its consequences, a responsibility in the acceptance of it, which perhaps will

¹Evans, p. 72.

²Kierkegaard [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 135.

³Ibid., p. 121.

⁴Ibid., p. 146.

recreate life in a way that is feared."¹ A passion for one's own eternal happiness

consists in the transformation by which everything in the existence of the individual is altered, in and through, his mode of existence, so as to bring it into conformity with this highest good.²

To conceive of an eternal happiness as a reward seems to violate our intuitions about the ethical life. A person with pure ethical passion is supposed to strive to fulfill his moral obligations without regard for the results. But if we view an eternal happiness as internal to the ethical life itself, the tension is resolved. In general, some rewards are external to whatever they are rewards for, such as the practice of giving a child a nickel for every good grade on her report card. Other rewards are more intimately connected, or internal to their antecedent activities. For Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle's famous consulting detective, to solve a case is its own reward. No reward could be finer than the opportunity to exercise his formidable deductive powers in unraveling the clues to another mystery. Similarly, an eternal happiness is internal to ethical existence. An eternal happiness is thus "conceived as the perfect, endless realization of the eternal moral qualities man discovers as an exister and conceives as realized in God."³

This way of describing an eternal happiness is derived from Climacus's somewhat less direct attempt to characterize it in the Postscript. He refrains from straightforwardly defining the "highest good." "What is immortality?" he argues,

¹Idem [Vigilius Haufniensis], The Concept of Anxiety, p. 139.

²Idem [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 348.

³Evans, p. 63.

is essentially not a learned question, rather it is a question of inwardness, which the subject by becoming subjective must put to himself. Objectively the question cannot be answered, because objectively it cannot be put, since immortality precisely is the potentiation and highest development of the developed subjectivity.¹

Though he balks at offering anything like a concise, definitive description, Climacus does provide a few criteria for distinguishing the ethically pure concept of an eternal happiness.

The first of these criteria is that an eternal happiness cannot be "aesthetically" defined. Climacus is aware that many such purported definitions exist.

When a so-called religious personality pleases to picture an eternal happiness in all the magic colors of the imagination, it means that he is a runaway poet, a deserter from the sphere of the aesthetic, who claims the privilege of native citizenship in the realm of the religious without even being able to speak its mother tongue.²

The "mother tongue" of the religious life is the ethical. Climacus caricatures the man who asks for a description of an eternal happiness "'while I shave,' as one describes a woman's beauty, the royal purple, or distant landscapes."³ But no such attempt to bring the eternal under "aesthetic categories" is possible.

"It is quite consistent," continues Climacus, "that the highest pathos of the essentially existing human being [that is, an eternal happiness] should correspond to what is aesthetically the poorest of all conceptions." From an ethical perspective, it is appropriate that the individual "not be tempted to waste his time in picturing and imagining, but rather be impelled to [ethical] action." Furthermore, we should not

¹Kierkegaard [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 154.

²Ibid., p. 349.

³Ibid., p. 351.

be surprised to discover an aesthetic person (one who lacks ethical and religious passion) for whom this idea of an eternal happiness is unappealing. As Climacus observes,

It has been said wittily, and [from an aesthetic point of view] . . . quite correctly, that angels are the most tiresome of all creatures, that eternity is the longest and most wearisome of all days, even a single Sunday being sufficiently boring; and that an eternal happiness is an everlasting monotony, so that even the unhappiness of the damned is to be preferred.¹

The second distinguishing mark of the ethically pure concept of an eternal happiness is that the concern for one's own eternal happiness is qualitatively distinct from concern for temporal, relative (finite) ends. "All relative volition is marked by willing something for the sake of something else," something external. Devotion to the "highest end," however, "involves a volitional concentration in the highest sense. . . . The highest end must be willed for its own sake."² To will a finite (temporal) end absolutely is a contradiction, since there must come a time when it can no longer be willed. "But to will absolutely is to will the infinite, and to will an eternal happiness is to will absolutely, because this is the end which can be willed every moment."³ In this sense, an eternal happiness is "the absolute telos."

The individual whose existence expresses the proper relation to an eternal happiness as the absolute telos remains in the realm of finite (relative) ends. But his relation to those ends should not be the focus of his existence. "The individual is in truth in the relative ends with

¹Ibid., p. 352.

²Ibid., p. 353.

³Ibid.

the direction toward the absolute telos; but he is not so in them as to exhaust himself in them."¹ One who is "exhausted" by relative ends has no room in his life to pursue the highest good, unless the absolute telos is "mediated"--"placed on a level with everything else" so that it becomes just "one end among many." Climacus parodies the individual whose list of personal achievements lumps an eternal happiness together with

the dignity of an aldermanic title, to be known as a clever worker at the office, to be the first ranking lover in the dramatic club, almost an expert on the violin, a champion rifle-shot, a member of the Hospital board, [and] a noble father carrying himself with dignity.²

Such an individual is "in short . . . a devil of a fellow," a person who "has time for everything . . . [and] can both do all this and at the same time find leisure to direct his life toward the absolute telos."³

The absolute telos cannot be "mediated" without abrogating its unique status as the highest good. A person's duty

is to exercise the absolute relationship to the absolute telos, striving to reach the maximum of maintaining simultaneously a relationship to the absolute telos and to relative ends, not by mediating them, but by making the relationship to the absolute telos absolute, and the relationship to relative ends relative.⁴

This distinction "is just the thing to clear a space about the eternal end, so as to make room for it, just as a marshal clears the way for a procession. It keeps the mob of relative ends at a distance."⁵ To have a relative relationship to relative ends is to be prepared to renounce

¹Ibid., p. 359.

²Ibid., p. 39.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 364.

⁵Ibid., p. 369.

everything (all "finite satisfactions") "in favor of an eternal happiness."¹ "The first genuine expression for the relationship to the absolute telos . . . , " then, is "total renunciation."² The individual whose life expresses a relationship to the absolute telos is resigned to suffer the loss of everything temporal in order to realize "the eternal":

What the conception of God or an eternal happiness is to effect in the individual is, that he transforms his entire existence in relation thereto, and this transformation is a process of dying away from the immediate."³

A third and final distinguishing mark of the ethically pure concept of an eternal happiness "as an absolute good" is "being definable solely in terms of the mode of acquisition." "There is nothing to be said of an eternal happiness except that it is the good which is attained by venturing everything absolutely."⁴ The "mode of acquisition" of an eternal happiness is ethical action. To make an absolute venture is to commit one's self with the entire passion of one's being to an idea that is, from an objective standpoint, an uncertainty. True ethical passion requires that the individual risk everything in a daring venture, not with "a tumultuous shriek, however reckless," but with "a quiet consecration which makes sure of nothing beforehand."⁵ If the end is certain, then one does not venture, but merely makes an exchange--in this case a moral

¹Ibid., p. 350.

²Ibid., p. 362.

³Ibid., p. 432.

⁴Ibid., p. 382.

⁵Ibid., p. 133.

existence for an eternal happiness. Nevertheless, "the absolute telos exists for the individual only when he yields it an absolute devotion."¹

To summarize, as the self-aware individual encounters "the eternal," her existence takes on an ethical dimension. Ethical passion develops into a passion for an eternal happiness (an eternal life of moral purity). This knowledge of "the eternal" aspect of the self is at the same time a knowledge of God: the "one who distinguishes absolutely [that is, between an eternal happiness and temporal, finite ends] has a relationship to the absolute telos, and ipso facto also a relationship to God."² This claim rests on the plausible assumption that the best way to view moral obligation is to construe it as relation between persons.³ Human beings typically experience moral obligations as commands, the source of which is personal. In the sphere of natural religion, God is conceived as the ground or source of absolutely binding moral obligations.

In Fear and Trembling, Johannes de Silentio comments on this kind of religious knowledge:

The ethical is the universal, and as such it is also the divine. Thus it is proper to say that every duty is essentially duty to God. . . . The duty becomes duty by being traced back to God, but in the duty itself I do not enter into relation to God. . . . If in this connection I then say that it is my duty to love God, I am actually pronouncing only a tautology, inasmuch as "God" in a totally abstract sense is here understood as the divine--that is, the universal, that is, the duty.⁴

¹Ibid., p. 355.

²Ibid., p. 369.

³Evans, p. 157.

⁴Idem [Johannes de Silentio], Fear and Trembling [with Repetition], p. 68.

Johannes de Silentio is particularly interested in the border between natural religion (the religion of immanence) and transcendent religion (Christianity). He agrees with Climacus that one encounters God in the context of ethical self-knowledge. The self-knower encounters God as the law giver to whom one is somehow accountable.

The Infinite

The remaining dialectical pairs to consider in our effort to understand what (according to Kierkegaard) the self must discover about itself to "see God" are infinitude/finitude and freedom (possibility)/necessity. In The Sickness Unto Death, Anti-Climacus describes the self as "the conscious synthesis of infinitude and finitude . . . whose task is to become itself, which can be done only through the relationship to God."¹ To become a self is to become "concrete," which signifies that one is neither simply infinite nor simply finite, but a synthesis of both. The process of becoming a self involves "an infinite moving away from itself in the infinitizing of the self, and an infinite coming back to itself in the finitizing process."² The finite is thus the "limiting" constituent of the self, and the infinite is the "extending" constituent. To remain at either extreme is to be in despair.

To lack finitude is to despair at the extreme of infinitude. Imagination is the "infinitizing" faculty of a person. The infinite is the fantastic, the limitless--whatever carries a person away from herself and/or her circumstances. Anti-Climacus analyzes the infinitizing faculty

¹Idem, [Anti-Climacus], The Sickness Unto Death, pp. 29-30.

²Ibid., p. 30.

with respect to three human activities: feeling, knowing, and willing. When feeling becomes fantastic, it becomes more and more abstract from any concrete particular object. In the end, it becomes "a kind of abstract sentimentality," and therefore less and less human--the self gradually loses itself. Knowing that has become fantastic divorces itself from the actual state of affairs, ignoring selected points of reality. Unless accompanied by a proportional increase in self-awareness, knowledge tends to lead the knower further away from rather than nearer the self. Finally, willing that has become fantastic fails to actualize its intentions to the extent that it is possible to do so in a given stretch of time. Instead, it "loses itself" in intentions by failing to actualize at least some portion of them. In the end, it "ceases to be will, becomes volatilized in promises and resolutions that amount to nothing--and thereby the same is the case with the self, whose will it is."¹

The self in the despair of infinitude (whether with respect to feeling, knowing, or willing) "leads a fantasized [sic] existence . . . continually lacking its self, from which it only moves further and further away."² In a religious existence, the God-relationship is "infiniteizing." Hence, though a God-relationship is essential to actualizing one's full humanity, it also presents a danger. Unless a person is thoroughly conscious of his existence as concrete--bounded to some extent by his finitude--the God-relationship "can so sweep a man off his feet that his

¹Kierkegaard, marginal notation in draft of The Sickness Unto Death. See Kierkegaard [Anti-Climacus], The Sickness Unto Death, p. 149.

²Ibid., p. 32.

state is simply an intoxication."¹ Avoiding this form of despair requires a healthy awareness of one's own limitations. At the opposite extreme lies the form of despair in which one utterly lacks infinitude--the despair of finitude.

"To lack infinitude," says Anti-Climacus, "is despairing reductionism, [ethical] narrowness."² To lose one's self by becoming "finitized" is to become totally immersed in worldly and temporal (that is, finite) affairs. It is to shrink from becoming a self before God, and instead to become "like the others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man."³ Whereas the despair of infinitude is a reflection of a fantastical God-relationship, the despair of finitude reflects a thoroughly "secular mentality" in which the consciousness of God is totally absent. The antidote for the despair of finitude is an increase in the self's awareness of its infinitude. To see how an awareness of infinitude can lead to an awareness of God, we need to introduce the final pair of contrasting elements that constitute the self: freedom (possibility)/necessity.

The Possible

The dialectical pair possibility/necessity is a specific application of the infinitude/finitude dialectic to the questions: "What shall I do with my life? Who can I be? Who can I not be?"⁴ Anti-Climacus points

¹Ibid., p. 32.

²Ibid., p. 33.

³Ibid., p. 34.

⁴John Douglas Mullen, Kierkegaard's Philosophy (New York: New American Library, 1981), p. 49.

out that "just as finitude is the limiting aspect in relation to infinitude, so also necessity is the constraint in relation to possibility."¹ The self is a possibility in the sense that it must become itself. Conversely, to the extent that the self is itself, that is to say, is just what it is, it is "the necessary." As before, to be at either extreme is to be in despair.

To lack necessity is the despair of possibility. In the despair of possibility, the self "runs away" with a variety of possible selves it could become. Ultimately, craving possibility, the self becomes overwhelmed. "More and more becomes possible because nothing becomes actual." In the end, "everything becomes possible" in the finite realm. Anti-Climacus identifies this as "the point at which the abyss swallows up the self." What the despairing individual lacks is "the power to obey, to submit to the necessity in one's life, to what may be called one's limitations."² One must learn to curb possibility by reckoning with necessity, with a realistic assessment of who and what one is at the present time.

On the other hand, to lack possibility is the despair of necessity. "To lack possibility means either that everything has become necessary for a person or that everything has become trivial."³ The only remedy for life's hopelessness in this situation is to "get possibility." Possibility can sometimes be created by "the ingeniousness of the human imagination." But the person who is honestly (that is, without self-

¹Kierkegaard [Anti-Climacus], The Sickness Unto Death, p. 35.

²Ibid., p. 36.

³Ibid., p. 40.

deception) "brought to his extremity" realizes that "humanly speaking, there is no possibility."¹ In isolation, the human individual lacks the resources to overcome the despair of necessity. "In despair his soul's despair fights to be permitted to despair, to attain, if you please, the composure to despair, to obtain the total personality's consent to despair and be in despair."² The self's awareness of its finitude (necessity) drives it to despair. But without some way to satisfy its need for possibility, the self is unwilling to completely let go of the finite--it lacks "the composure to despair." For the person at this extremity, "only this helps: that for God everything is possible."³ As the self-transparent individual grapples with finitude, determinism threatens to suffocate or extinguish the self. Belief in the God for whom all things are possible enables the self to breathe.

Of course, that God makes all things possible should not catapult the self to the opposite extremity in which everything is possible (the despair of possibility). The God disclosed through the despair of necessity is a God who is benevolent, a God who can be trusted. That God is trustworthy should be especially clear to the person who has a developed awareness of "the eternal"--of one's duty to conform to the moral obligations one discovers in the course of existence, and conceives as emanating from and perfectly realized in God. The trustworthiness of the God who is both the source of possibilities and the ground of ethical reality is assured.

¹Ibid., p. 38.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 39.

In addition to God's trustworthiness, the self-aware person realizes something else about God's nature. "For prayer," argues Anti-Climacus, "there must be a God, as self--and possibility--or a self and possibility in a pregnant sense."¹ Prayer is a form of interaction with God. Possibility "in a pregnant sense" is real possibility, possibility that can become actuality. For the determinist, either God does not exist, or God's will determines every event. In either case, interaction with God is impossible. Prayer requires that there be possibilities. Hence, the God for whom all things are possible is a God with whom human beings are capable of interacting. "That God's will is the possible makes me able to pray."²

Anti-Climacus's phenomenology of despair with respect to the dialectical pair freedom (possibility)/necessity concurs with Haufniensis's treatment of anxiety in a section of The Concept of Anxiety entitled, "Anxiety as Saving Through Faith." Anxiety is the emotion that accompanies viewing one's circumstances as insecure in some respect in which one desires security.³ Haufniensis equates the individual who is "educated by anxiety" with one who is "educated by possibility . . . according to his finitude."⁴ "Anxiety," he explains, "is neither a category of necessity nor a category of freedom; it is entangled

¹Ibid., p. 40.

²Ibid.

³Roberts, "The Socratic Knowledge of God," in International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Anxiety, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1985), p. 135.

⁴Kierkegaard [Vigilius Haufniensis], The Concept of Anxiety, p. 156.

freedom."¹ Anxiety is "the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis [that is, the self] and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself."² Anxiety accompanies the awareness of possibility, the moment in which freedom becomes "entangled" in possibility.

Furthermore, Haufniensis distinguishes "anxiety about something external"--"about men and finitudes"--from "the anxiety of the possible."³ The anxiety of the possible "consumes all finite ends and discovers all their deceptiveness."⁴ Finite ends are all the worldly and temporal affairs in which the self is tempted to lose itself in the despair of finitude. "For freedom, the possible is the future,"⁵ and the deceptiveness of finite ends is that they can all be taken away in the future, at any moment. "In possibility, all things are possible," and the one who "graduates from the school of possibility . . . [knows] that the terrible, perdition, and annihilation live next door to every man."⁶ The one who recognizes the insecurity of finite ends as a whole experiences the anxiety of the possible.

Through the anxiety of the possible the soul learns to rest in Providence. "Anxiety enters into his soul and searches out everything and

¹Ibid., p. 49.

²Ibid., p. 61.

³Ibid., p. 157.

⁴Ibid., p. 155.

⁵Ibid., p. 91.

⁶Ibid., p. 156.

anxiously torments everything finite and petty out of him."¹ In the end, the soul's shrewd attempts to negotiate its anxiety through "innumerable calculations" and "clever combinations vanish like a witticism."² Rather than entrust itself to finite ends, the soul learns to entrust itself to Providence, entering into a God-relationship.

Evaluation

Kierkegaard's thesis is that the natural knowledge of God is a product of self-knowledge, or the process of becoming a self. In Judge for Yourselves!, he calls this the process of "becoming sober." To become sober "is to come to oneself in self-knowledge, and before God, as nothing before Him, yet infinitely, absolutely, under obligation."³ On his account of human existence, the self is constituted by a synthesis of contrasting elements. To "see God" the individual must reckon with the eternal, infinite, and possible aspects of the self. One cannot truly be a self willingly and without despair unless one acknowledges one's dependence on God. "Only by being before God can a man entirely come to himself in the transparency of sobriety."⁴ In a discourse entitled "Man's Need of God Constitutes his Highest Perfection," Kierkegaard elaborates on the connection between self-knowledge and the knowledge of God:

In so far as a man does not know himself, nor understand that he can

¹Ibid., p. 159.

²Ibid., p. 161.

³Idem, For Self Examination and Judge for Yourselves!, p. 120.

⁴Ibid., p. 122.

of himself do nothing, he does not really become aware, in any deeper sense, that God exists.¹

A man who does not know himself may understand who God is. He may even invoke God's name in the midst of the crises of his life. Yet "he is in a manner piously deceived if he deems himself on this account clearly conscious of God's existence"2

Kierkegaard assumes that the self-knower is able to generate the concept of God out of his self-knowledge. But is this really possible? Roberts takes up this question in his article on the Socratic knowledge of God. He divides experiences of God into two kinds: mediated and unmediated. Our experience of God is mediated when, for example, we see God's glory reflected in a glorious sunset, or in the starry heavens on a clear, moonless night. On the other hand, some experiences of God do not involve perceptions of any sort. We sometimes experience God simply by contemplating him. In either case, there seems to be "no experience of God apart from the concept of God."³ But is it correct to assume that a person without at least a minimal concept of God already in his "repertoire" is capable of generating it in the extremity of self-knowledge?

However unlikely it seems, Roberts admits this as a possibility. There is nothing particularly problematic in the suggestion that the

¹Idem, Edifying Discourses, 2 vols., trans. David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1962), 2:154.

²Ibid., p. 155.

³Roberts, "The Socratic Knowledge of God," in International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Anxiety, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1985), p. 145.

concept of "Providence" or of "the ground or source of absolutely binding moral obligations" could arise spontaneously. After all, a great many of our ideas arise in this way. Our idea of causation is perhaps the clearest example. When we experience a constant conjunction of two events, we quite naturally think that they are connected by some sort of cause. Though empiricists (like Hume) and rationalists (like Kant) disagree over where this idea comes from and what its epistemic credentials are, both admit that we have an ineluctable tendency to believe in causation under such circumstances. Similarly, when we see other people behaving in the way we do in a wide variety of situations, we cannot resist the idea that they exist, that they are like us and not cleverly constructed robot duplicates of real people. Kierkegaard is saying something analogous about how the concept of God arises in the extremity of self-knowledge.

Of course, Kierkegaard is not suggesting that a person could simply sit down and use his imagination to invent "something a relationship with which would satisfy his deepest emotional needs."¹ Nor does he imply that one could, solely on the basis of self-knowledge, come up with anything like a fully developed theistic concept of God. Admittedly, one who grows up in Christendom, or Judaism, or Islam has an enormous advantage over one who has no concept of God to start with.² But there appears to be no reason to think that such a deficit would preclude the concept of God arising spontaneously in moments of self-transparent reflection.

¹Roberts, "The Socratic Knowledge of God," p. 146.

²Ibid.

Kierkegaard also maintains that one does not simply generate the concept of God in the context of self-reflection; one experiences God's presence. This point is crucial for Kierkegaard. But is it an appropriate way of characterizing the natural knowledge of God? Is it not rather the case that, in the extremity of self-knowledge, "the individual comes to realize his need for God (or for a God with certain characteristics), and then postulates God as an object of belief which satisfies this perceived need?"¹ In defense of Kierkegaard, Roberts considers both "the epistemic peculiarities of meeting God in experience," and "the similarity between the knowledge of God and other knowledge to which we are pressed by 'psychological' exigency."²

In the Socratic realm, we encounter God as an object of contemplation, and it is a part of the very concept of God that he is present. So to contemplate God is to contemplate a person in whose presence we live. Furthermore, "the compellingness in the psychological situation of the extremity of self-knowledge is analogous to the compellingness in the normal psychological situation of interaction with other human beings."³ In a moment of intense conversation, it is nearly impossible to be epistemically tentative about your interlocutor's existence. Similarly, "a person who is lucid about himself cannot be tentative about the existence of God."⁴ The self-transparent individual does not postulate God's existence; he stands in God's presence.

¹Ibid., pp. 144-5.

²Ibid., p. 147.

³Ibid., p. 149.

⁴Ibid.

One of the interesting consequences of Kierkegaard's account of natural religion is that belief in God will seem strenuous or difficult only to the individual caught in the grip of a certain way of thinking common among intellectual people. He frequently parodies the person who believes only what can be proven objectively. How depressed this person must feel "when he hears a naive and simple man talk about the existence of God."¹ What this person lacks is precisely inwardness. Kierkegaard repeatedly stresses, however, that belief in God is (or should be) a natural and proper outcome of personal growth--actualizing one's innate potential to become a self. In a footnote excised from one of his books prior to publication, he even says that "there [has] never been an atheist, even though there certainly have been many who have been unwilling to let what they knew (that the God exists) get control over their minds."² Evans points out that this astonishing remark should not be understood in the straightforward sense that everyone consciously assents to God's existence. Instead, one should read it the way one would read the sort of claim a depth psychologist makes. "Not everyone actually knows God's reality, but everyone has the potentiality to do so, a potentiality which the individual himself senses obscurely but can willfully block."³

In addition, as Evans has argued, "it seems plausible that if there were a God of the sort Christians and Jews believe in, and if knowing about God were vital for human beings to attain fulfillment, the God would

¹Kierkegaard [Vigilius Haufniensis], The Concept of Anxiety, p. 140.

²Idem, Journals and Papers, 3:662.

³Evans, Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript", p. 151.

make himself knowable in the sort of way . . . [Kierkegaard] sketches."¹ One of the virtues of viewing belief in God as grounded in subjectivity or inwardness is that it shifts the focus away from intellectual prowess and places it on a person's capacity to express moral and religious passion. Human beings are on an equal footing with respect to their capacity for inwardness. Human equality is thus protected, and the knowledge of God is not made to depend on a person's ability to follow abstruse philosophical arguments. Because every human being has an equal share in being human, "the relationship to God is identical for all men."²

Finally, as I mentioned earlier, the natural knowledge of God lacks much of the detail typically associated with a fully developed theistic concept of God. In the sphere of natural religion, the individual encounters the eternity and infiniteness of God in the course of becoming aware of "the eternal" and "the infinite" aspects of the self. The self-aware individual also conceives of God as the ground or source of the moral law. As such, God is seen as benevolent and trustworthy. As the guarantor of "possibility," God is known to be personal--a being with whom one is capable of interacting. Though all of these elements are consistent with traditional theism, they comprise only a small (albeit significant) subset of the qualities theists typically attribute to God. Of course, this is just what we should expect, given that Kierkegaard thinks of natural religion (religiousness A) as a precondition for religiousness B. The natural knowledge of God is fulfilled or consummated

¹Ibid., p. 155.

²Kierkegaard [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 204.

in the "transcendent" sphere of "paradoxical" religion, namely Christianity.

Summarily, on Kierkegaard's account of the structural or formative elements of the natural religious life, the natural knowledge of God arises in the extremity of self-knowledge--the individual's awareness of the eternal, infinite, and possible aspects of the human "self." In discovering the truth about himself, the individual realizes his affinity with a transcendent reality. Kierkegaard construes this realization as an encounter with God. In the next chapter, I explore two related peculiarities in his treatment of religious belief: his disdain for inductive or probabilistic arguments ("proofs" of God's existence), and his insistence that the existence of God can nonetheless become apparent to a person with a unique kind of certainty, one grounded in Kierkegaardian subjectivity.

CHAPTER III

CERTITUDE AND INWARDNESS

The natural knowledge of God is rooted in a person's self-knowledge. The genuinely self-aware individual knows that God exists. Belief in God is thus a product of subjective reflection. Kierkegaard detaches religious belief from objective considerations--from "evidence" or probabilistic arguments. Indeed, he seems to think that such considerations distract a person from the real ground of belief in God, namely, one's capacity for inwardness or subjectivity. In this chapter, I argue that while Kierkegaard correctly rejects the attitude that belief in God is rationally permissible only to the extent that it is supported by objective considerations, he overstates his criticisms. I suggest that objective arguments can complement subjective concerns without thereby becoming the basis of religious belief. I also explore Kierkegaard's analysis of the proper ground of the religious believer's certitude with respect to God's existence, which he links to his notion of inwardness or subjectivity. Finally, I juxtapose Kierkegaard's views on belief in God with those of several contemporary philosophers of religion. I conclude that while Kierkegaard would undoubtedly reject the underlying assumptions made by contemporary probabilistic theologians and atheologians, he seems to agree with Alvin Plantinga on some basic issues in the philosophy of religion. Plantinga's "Reformed Epistemology"

provides a helpful framework for understanding Kierkegaard's account of belief in God as conditioned by an individual's capacity for inwardness.

Certitude, Probability, and Inwardness

Vigilius Haufniensis observed of the nineteenth century that whereas "in one direction truth increases in scope and quantity, and partly also in abstract clarity, . . . in the opposite direction, certainty constantly declines."¹ Ironically, as sincere and intelligent people produced "new, exhaustive, and absolutely correct" proofs of immortality and the existence of God (both truths essentially related to existence), their reality seemed more in doubt than ever. These clever people were in the grip of the objective tendency--the tendency to approach every potential object of knowledge as grist for the mill of objective reflection. The difficulty is that, from an objective standpoint, essential truth--that is, moral and religious truth--is uncertain. Interestingly enough, Kierkegaard maintains that God's existence can nevertheless become clear to a person "with a certainty of a very different order."² In his Journals, he compares the certainty one can have about the truth of Christianity to that appropriate to the knowledge that God exists, reminding himself that with respect to the former "I cannot ask for a greater and different certainty than that which I have with respect to assurance about the existence of God."³ Kierkegaard seems to think that the quest for certitude is not misguided as such; but the attempt to base

¹Kierkegaard [Vigilius Haufniensis], The Concept of Anxiety, p. 139.

²Idem, Edifying Discourses, 2:155.

³Idem, Journals and Papers, 1:107.

it upon dispassionate, disinterested reflection is not only inappropriate, but in Climacus's words, "a supreme theme for crazy comedy."¹

What does Kierkegaard think is the ground or basis of this unique assurance available to existing individuals with regard to God's reality? To begin with, it is clearly not grounded in knowledge derived from the external senses. When we believe that our senses are working properly in an appropriate environment--that is, an environment for which they were designed--we are typically quite certain of the reality of what we encounter in sense experience. "Is it possible," asks Kierkegaard, "to have empirical certitude of a relationship to God?" The question is rhetorical, because God is a spirit, and "it is impossible to have a relationship [with a spiritual being] other than a spiritual relationship."² He repeats the same point in On Authority and Revelation. There he states that "it is nonsense to get sensible certitude of the fact that God exists, since God indeed is spirit."³ The unique object of religious knowledge precludes the possibility of "sensible certitude."

Kierkegaard is equally clear that certitude about the existence of God cannot be based on objective arguments or proofs. With regard to essential truths in general, proofs are never decisive. In ethical and religious contexts, proofs "approximate" the truth:

The existing individual who chooses the objective way enters upon the

¹Idem [Johannes Climacus], Fragments, p. 43.

²Idem, Journals and Papers, 1:107.

³Idem, On Authority and Revelation, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 109.

entire approximation-process by which it is proposed to bring God to light objectively.¹

But this project cannot succeed, "because God is a subject [that is, a person], and therefore exists only for subjectivity in inwardness."²

Again, the peculiar relationship between the knower and the thing known is such that certitude cannot be grounded in objective arguments.

Kierkegaard's disdain for proofs of God's existence is well known, and should be considered in light of his defense of the possibility of a direct or intuitive awareness of God. "The idea of proving the existence of God," he writes in his Journals, "is of all things the most ridiculous." Either God exists, or he does not exist. If God exists, "then one cannot prove it . . . [any more] than I can prove that a certain human being exists." If God does not exist, then of course "it cannot be proved at all."³ His contempt for proofs as a source of the knowledge of God is rooted to a large extent in his conviction that we do not in fact know God in this way. The knowledge of God is far more immediate than the knowledge that results from objective reflection. Knowledge of the latter sort is "mediated," or inferential. With regard to the existence of God, no proof is epistemically fruitful. Properly speaking, we do not "infer" God's existence. Rather, we encounter God as an immediate object of contemplation. Belief in God is thus grounded in an individual's experience of God. Kierkegaard's concept of knowledge (at least in so far as it pertains to the knowledge of God) is one of knowledge by

¹Idem [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 178.

²Ibid.

³Idem, Journals and Papers, 2:93.

acquaintance--direct personal "involvement with and participation in the truth."¹

Far from removing doubts, Kierkegaard thinks that the proofs actually generate doubts. Ironically, the more reasons the doubter adduces for the existence of God, the stronger his doubts become.

To present doubt with reasons with the intent of slaying it is like giving to a hungry monster one wants to be rid of the delicious food it likes best.²

Besides playing into the hands of the atheist or agnostic, giving an argument for God's existence is (at least for the believer) tantamount to blasphemy. God is present, and

to prove the existence of one who is present is the most shameless affront, since it is an attempt to make him ridiculous; but unfortunately people have no inkling of this and for sheer seriousness regard it as a pious undertaking. But how could it occur to anybody to prove that he exists, unless one had permitted himself to ignore him.³

To try to prove God's existence is to assume that an argument is needed to recognize a truth that is, as it were, "right before one's nose."⁴

Kierkegaard also seems to think that there is something misleading (and possibly even deceptive) about offering proofs for God's existence.

And how does the existence of the god emerge from the demonstration? Does it happen straightaway? Is it not here as it is with the Cartesian dolls? As soon as I let go of the doll, it stands on its head. As soon as I let go of it--consequently, I have to let go of it. So also with the demonstration--so long as I am holding on to the demonstration (that is, continue to be one who is demonstrating),

¹Evans, "Kierkegaard's Attack on Apologetics," Christian Scholar's Review 10 (1981): 324.

²Kierkegaard, For Self Examination and Judge for Yourselves!, p. 88.

³Idem [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 485.

⁴Evans, "Kierkegaard and Plantinga on Belief in God," Faith and Philosophy 5 (January 1988): 27.

the existence does not emerge, if for no other reason than that I am in the process of demonstrating it, but when I let go of the demonstration, the existence is there.¹

The interesting point of this passage is that God's existence can be known, but not by proof. The proof is even a hindrance. As soon as it is set aside, "the existence is there."

Evans suggests that what lies behind this passage is Kierkegaard's view of logical argument. The result of a demonstration is never the existence of something, but merely "the consequences of a concept,"² in other words, "what propositions are entailed by, consistent with, or inconsistent with other propositions."³ So the process of demonstration "becomes an expanded concluding development of what I conclude from having presupposed that the object of the investigation exists."⁴ A person's acceptance of the conclusion of a logical argument depends on his prior acceptance of the truth of its premises. But the latter is not ultimately a matter of logic, "since if premises cannot be known in some way other than by logical arguments, no logical arguments can be known to be sound."⁵ Consequently, even if there are sound arguments for God's existence,

. . . the individual's acceptance of the conclusion is still not ultimately a function of the argument, but of something else, which

¹Kierkegaard [Johannes Climacus], Fragments, p. 42-3.

²Ibid., p. 40, translated in Evans, Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript", p. 150.

³Evans, Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript", p. 150.

⁴Kierkegaard [Johannes Climacus], Fragments, p. 40.

⁵Evans, Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript", p. 150.

does not consist of logical argument, that something else being the way one knows the premises of the argument to be true.¹

For the existence of God to emerge, the individual must "let go of the demonstration", that is, admit that his acceptance of the conclusion is rooted in something more than the demonstration alone. Climacus calls this additional element--"this letting go"--a "leap" to emphasize that apart from a subjective contribution, proofs never establish the existence of anything. "Therefore," he explains, "whether I am moving in the world of sensate palpability or in the world of thought, I never reason in conclusion to existence, but I reason in conclusion from existence."²

I believe that Kierkegaard has overstated his attack on theistic arguments. To begin with, it is unfair to suppose (as Kierkegaard seems to) that all (or even most) apologists merely pretend to give arguments, concealing the real grounds of their belief, when in fact what they do is presuppose God's existence from the outset. Kierkegaard is probably also mistaken in his supposition that everyone who offers arguments for God's existence assumes that their premises can be known to be true by anyone in an entirely disinterested fashion, though some philosophers of religion indeed think that a really good argument requires premises of this sort. For example, Richard Swinburne defines a "good" inductive (non-demonstrative) argument as one whose premises are "known to be true by those who dispute about the conclusion."³ It may be that there are no arguments of this sort for God's existence. When confronted with a valid

¹Ibid.

²Kierkegaard [Johannes Climacus], Fragments, p. 40.

³Richard Swinburne, The Existence of God (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 7-8.

argument for God's existence from premises he knows to be true, the atheist might choose to give up one or more of the premises rather than admit the conclusion.

In addition to obscuring the possibility of open and evenhanded apologetics, Kierkegaard's repudiation of proofs as a basis for existential claims casts a shadow over a legitimate, if less ambitious purpose for theistic arguments. In cases of genuine doubt, theistic arguments can help clear away specific obstacles to belief in God. Kierkegaard seems to think that every instance of doubt is willful, spiritual insubordination. Though it may be that most of the doubts people have about God's existence are of this sort, it is by no means obvious that honest, intellectual doubt is nonexistent. Theistic arguments can help resolve such doubts (however rare) without thereby becoming the basis of the individual's belief in God.

Kierkegaard's bid to counter his contemporaries' reliance on objective reflection to the utter neglect of subjective considerations seems to have clouded an appreciation for theistic arguments that he might otherwise have admitted. His dismissal of objective, speculative knowledge is engineered to highlight his claim that God can be known as an object of subjective reflection. Evans ably sums up Kierkegaard's scorn for proofs:

The proofs throw dust in your eyes and while you are blinking take from your hands a method of knowing which can give you real bread, and substitute a method of knowing which can only give you stones.¹

Briefly stated, Kierkegaard's basic complaint seems to be that in constructing proofs we exchange the certain for the uncertain--"we give up

¹Evans, "Kierkegaard's Attack on Apologetics," p. 325.

the most certain of all things for the various alluring tasks of approximation knowledge."¹

In the Postscript, Climacus credits Socrates with recognizing the dangers here.

When Socrates believed that there was a God, he saw very well that where the way swings off there is also an objective way of approximation, for example by the contemplation of nature and human history, and so forth. His merit was precisely to shun this way, where the quantitative siren song enchants the mind and deceives the existing individual.²

Climacus is thinking of objective arguments as attempts to show that God's existence is probable. By constructing probabilistic arguments (the "objective way of approximation"), the individual hopes to negotiate the objective uncertainty of God's existence. Kierkegaard often calls this attitude "shrewdness." The shrewd individual misuses deliberation as a ploy to avoid decisive action. "In general," marvels Climacus, "it is quite inconceivable how ingenious and inventive human beings can be in evading an ultimate commitment."³ In The Concept of Anxiety, Haufniensis equates unbelief and the mockery of religion with a "lack of certitude" rather than, as one might expect, a "lack of content." Lack of certitude is linked, not with a failure of the understanding, but with a state of anxiety about the content of what one already knows.⁴ This anxiety expresses itself directly or indirectly in various ways: "as mockery, as prosaic intoxication with common sense, as busyness, as enthusiasm for the

¹Kierkegaard [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 137.

²Ibid., p. 188-9.

³Ibid., p. 379.

⁴Idem [Vigilius Haufniensis], The Concept of Anxiety, p. 139.

temporal," and so on.¹ Instead of making a commitment, the individual becomes anxious, "and anxiety can contrive a hundred evasions."²

Most of the time, Kierkegaard uses "belief" to refer to something more than intellectual assent. In his Journals, he says that the existence of God "cannot be 'proved'--it must be believed."³ The same idea is developed in several places by Climacus. For example, in the Postscript he claims that it is impossible to believe what is probable. Suppose that a man wishes to believe something important about his existence (such as that God exists, or that "the eternal truth has come into being in time"), but "wishes also to safeguard himself by means of an objective inquiry and its approximation-process."⁴ Suppose further that he is able to render the belief candidate highly probable with respect to the objective evidence.

Now he is ready to believe it, and he ventures to claim for himself that he does not believe as shoemakers and tailors and simple folk believe, but only after long deliberation. Now he is ready to believe it; and lo, now it has become precisely impossible to believe it. Anything that is almost probable, or probable, or extremely and emphatically probable, is something he can almost know--but it is impossible to believe.⁵

In this passage, "belief" connotes unreserved commitment, which Climacus thinks is prevented if belief is based on probabilistic arguments. As

¹Ibid., p. 152.

²Ibid., p. 154.

³Idem, Journals and Papers, 2:155.

⁴Idem [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 189.

⁵Ibid.

Kierkegaard remarks elsewhere, "religiously considered, the man who never let go of probability never committed himself to God."¹

In the Fragments, Climacus defines belief as "an act of freedom, an expression of will."² As a straightforward claim about belief, this statement is false. In many situations, we cannot simply decide what to believe or what not to believe, as though granting or withholding assent were subject to our direct control. The context, however, makes it clear that a straightforward voluntarist reading of this passage is incorrect. Climacus is discussing the objective uncertainty of beliefs about what has "come into existence"--matters of fact such as "the world has existed longer than five minutes," or "other people exist." He has in mind the Greek sceptics who doubted "not by virtue of knowledge but by virtue of will."³ To explain the fact that people commonly commit themselves (or find themselves committed to) beliefs that are objectively uncertain, Climacus suggests that "doubt can only be terminated in freedom, by an act of the will."⁴ Belief and doubt are thus "opposite passions." Of course, not every instance of doubt is traceable to a willful reluctance to assent to an objective uncertainty. At least some of the time we lack (or think that we lack) the relevant data or experience upon which to base a decision. The point of the contrast here between belief and doubt is that sometimes the best way to be sure about something is to resolve to believe

¹Idem, For Self Examination and Judge for Yourselves!, p. 116.

²Idem [Johannes Climacus], Fragments, p. 83.

³Ibid., p. 82.

⁴Ibid.

it. Moreover, we are personally responsible for both what we believe and, just as importantly, what we choose not to believe.

In a footnote, Climacus explains that belief always involves an element of risk. Wanting to avoid risk is like wanting "to know with certainty that one can swim before going into the water."¹ Kierkegaard calls this attitude "prudence." He sees prudence as "an excuse to avoid the venture and its strenuousness."² A venture is "the precise correlative of an [objective] uncertainty."³

If I am in truth resolved to venture, in truth resolved to strive for the attainment of the highest good [an eternal happiness], the uncertainty must be there, and I must have room to move, so to speak. But the largest space I can obtain, where there is room for the most vehement gesture of the passion that embraces the infinite, is uncertainty of knowledge with respect to an eternal happiness, or the certain knowledge that the choice is . . . [from an objective standpoint] a piece of madness: now there is room to move, now you can venture!⁴

Human existence is thus "an enthusiastic venture in uncertainty."⁵

Moreover,

when one lets go of probability in order to venture in reliance upon God, one has to acknowledge to oneself what is implied in this letting go of probability, namely, that when one thus ventures, it is just exactly as possible that one will be victorious as that one will be defeated.⁶

There are no guarantees of objective certainty with respect to the most important questions of life. The existing individual must venture, he

¹Ibid., p. 83.

²Idem [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 381.

³Ibid., p. 380.

⁴Ibid., p. 381.

⁵Ibid., p. 355.

⁶Idem, For Self Examination and Judge for Yourselves!, p. 117.

must believe. The person who ventures "in reliance upon God" understands something about the one on whom he is depending, namely that God is reliable. Therefore he does not venture "blindly." To rely upon calculations of probability is to rely upon oneself rather than God. Kierkegaard is reminding us that this is not an appropriate posture for the religious person to adopt.

Kierkegaard maintains that "without risk there is no faith." Faith is the correlate of truth viewed as "an objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness." This, he suggests, is "the highest truth attainable for an existing individual."¹ Moral and religious truth is grasped with certainty through concerned existence, not detached, speculative inquiry. As Climacus puts it, "If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe."²

We are now in a position to see clearly what constitutes the ground of certitude with regard to essential truth for the existing individual. Certitude must be understood "in an entirely concrete sense." That is, it can be attained "only by and in action."³ The ground of certainty, like the solution to certain doubts, lies not in reflection, but in resolution. God's reality can be grasped with certainty through personal commitment, not abstract thought. The only "proof" possible for the existence of "the absolute ethical good" (immortality) is "the individual himself expressing

¹Ibid., p. 182.

²Ibid.

³Idem [Vigilius Haufniensis], The Concept of Anxiety, p. 138.

it existentially in existence."¹ Likewise, "one proves [God's] presence by an expression of submission, which may assume various forms according to the customs of the country--and thus one proves God's existence by worship . . . not by proofs."² Kierkegaard is not suggesting that worship constitutes anything like a logical argument for the existence of God. Rather, worship is an outward indicator of God's reality. Also, it is not that what was once an objective uncertainty suddenly becomes an objective certainty. The objective uncertainty cannot be negotiated. Rather, the believer apprehends God's reality with a unique and different certainty, a certainty grounded in the individual's subjectivity. Kierkegaard thus places "personal commitments--subjectivity in a Kierkegaardian sense--into the heart of the knowing process."³

Probabilistic Theology and Atheology

Kierkegaard's approach to belief in God contrasts sharply with that of contemporary probabilistic theologians like Richard Swinburne and Basil Mitchell, and probabilistic atheologists like John Mackie. These philosophers presuppose that belief in God (in so far as it is rational) is properly the result of an argument, and that it rests on a cumulative body of objective evidence. They reflect precisely the attitude toward religious belief that Kierkegaard so vehemently denounces in his writings, and therefore provide an illuminating contrast to his point of view.

¹Idem [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 379.

²Ibid., p. 485.

³Evans, "Kierkegaard and Plantinga on Belief in God," p. 31.

Swinburne thinks that human beings have a moral obligation to hold true beliefs about religious matters. "The primary obligation on a man is to pursue religious inquiry with diligence, and to hold whatever religious belief that inquiry suggests."¹ The best way to fulfill this obligation (indeed the only way), he thinks, is to hold rational beliefs. A belief is rational for Swinburne if it is likely to be true for what he calls "epistemological reasons." The reasons he takes to be epistemologically relevant to rationality are based on objective considerations. Beliefs fail to be rational when they are "based on evidence in the wrong way," or "based on the wrong sort of evidence." In either case, evidence is essential to rational belief.

By "evidence" Swinburne means a person's "basic propositions" together with his initial degree of confidence in them. Basic propositions are propositions that are either (a) given in immediate experience, or (b) such that they strike a person as true on the basis of reason (i.e., analytic truths). As he sees it, a person starts with evidence--"basic propositions which seem . . . to report experience or merely be intuitively right" These basic propositions "interact to give rise to other beliefs which men believe to be rendered probable by the evidence."² So according to Swinburne, a person believes a proposition p "if and only if . . . [he] believes that the total

¹Swinburne, Faith and Reason (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 102.

²Ibid., p. 44.

evidential situation available to him makes p more probable than any alternative."¹

Swinburne calls an argument whose premises make the conclusion probable a "correct P-inductive argument." In an age of religious scepticism, however, what interests people "are arguments to the existence (or non-existence) of God in which the premises are known to be true by men of all theistic or atheistic persuasions."² He therefore defines a "good P-inductive argument" as any argument "from premises known to be true by those who dispute about the conclusion."³ The basic idea, then, is that there is some body of evidence (the intersection of what we all know) such that on it, theism is to be judged more probable or improbable than any alternative. Swinburne's approach to theistic belief is shared by John Mackie. In his book, The Miracle of Theism, Mackie states that "after we have taken several different non-deductive arguments for and against the existence of a god and examined them separately, we must also consider their cumulative effect and decide what conclusion is the better supported by the evidence as a whole."⁴

At the end of his inquiry, Swinburne draws the following conclusion:

On our total evidence theism is more probable than not. An argument from all the evidence considered in this book to the existence of God is a good P-inductive argument.⁵

¹Ibid., p. 19.

²Idem, The Existence of God, p. 7.

³Ibid.

⁴John Mackie, The Miracle of Theism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 7.

⁵Swinburne, The Existence of God, p. 291.

Mackie, on the other hand, draws the opposite conclusion:

In the end, therefore, we can agree with what Laplace said about God: we have no need of that hypothesis. . . . The balance of probabilities . . . comes out strongly against the existence of a god.¹

Though they disagree over which proposal the evidence supports (theism or atheism), Swinburne and Mackie are both thinking of theism as a hypothesis -- a "large-scale theory of the universe" offered to explain some body of evidence. Swinburne himself draws attention to the fact that his application of confirmation theory exploits "the close similarities which exist between religious theories and large-scale scientific theories."² Regarding an argument from religious experience, Mackie claims that "here, as elsewhere, the supernaturalist hypothesis fails because there is an adequate and much more economical naturalistic alternative."³

Even Basil Mitchell's more sober account of religious belief reflects the assumption that theism is relevantly like a scientific hypothesis. Mitchell concedes that "it is not possible to prove traditional Christian theism or to render it probable in any strict sense of the word."⁴ He therefore thinks that the case for the reasonableness of theism must be "cumulative." Accordingly,

what has been taken as a series of failures when treated as attempts at purely deductive or inductive arguments could well be better understood as contributions to a cumulative case. On this view the theist is urging that traditional Christian theism makes better sense

¹Mackie, p. 253.

²Swinburne, The Existence of God, p. 3.

³Mackie, p. 198.

⁴Basil Mitchell, The Justification of Religious Belief (Oxford: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1973; reissued New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 39.

of all the evidence available than does any alternative on offer, and the atheist is contesting the claim. The dispute concerns what Gilbert Ryle calls 'the plausibility of theories' rather than proof or probability in any strict sense.¹

Though he recognizes that for an argument to be rational it need not conform to the requirements of proof or strict probability, he nevertheless accepts that the rationality of belief in God depends in an informal way on the explanatory power of theism.²

Kierkegaard would certainly reject the assumption that belief in God is rationally permissible only to the extent that it provides a good explanation of some body of evidence. To construe theism in terms of a scientific hypothesis is a symptom of the "objective tendency." More importantly, to base belief in God on probabilistic reasoning is to forsake the subjective way of knowing, conditioned by an individual's capacity for inwardness, and replace it with "the objective way of approximation."

Swinburne acknowledges that, as far as he is concerned, the most that anyone can do to insure that their beliefs are true is to have what he calls rational₅ beliefs. An individual S has a rational₅ belief "if and only if S's evidence results from past investigation which was adequate and inductive standards which have been submitted to adequate criticism, and S has investigated adequately whether his evidence makes his belief probable."³ (A person's "inductive standards" are the beliefs he holds

¹Ibid., pp. 39-40.

²A theory's explanatory power is, borrowing Swinburne's definition, the extent to which "it entails or makes probable the occurrence of many diverse phenomena which are all observed to occur, and the occurrence of which is not otherwise to be expected." The Existence of God, p. 53.

³Swinburne, Faith and Reason, p. 54.

about "what makes what probable." These may or may not be explicit, but nevertheless govern the weighing of evidence and assigning of probabilities.) As he puts it,

Only by acquiring more evidence which is true, representative, and relevant, by checking my inductive standards and what they show (and not suppressing evidence or distorting inductive standards), can I turn my belief into one which really has a high degree of probability on all my evidence. And ensuring that I have a very probable belief is all that I can do towards ensuring that I have a true belief--for a very probable belief is one which is, very probably, true.¹ (Italics mine.)

To find out whether theism is true, according to Swinburne, the best (indeed the only) strategy to adopt is to consider the evidence. Kierkegaard emphatically denies that objective reflection is the only pathway to truth for human beings. Indeed, with respect to essential truth (the truth that is essential for a person to possess--moral and religious truth), the appropriate way to find out what is true is to engage in subjective reflection, a way of knowing that involves the whole person, not just his intellect.

Swinburne and Mackie (and, to a lesser extent, Mitchell) are captivated by an ideal of rationality whose origin dates back at least as far as John Locke.² According to the Lockean ideal, the best way to insure the greatest number of true beliefs in the long run is to follow the dictates of reason. The only mediate beliefs that we are permitted to hold are those which upon careful sifting of the total evidence we see to

¹Ibid., p. 72.

²For my understanding of Locke, I lean heavily on Nicholas Wolterstorff, from whose graduate seminar at the University of Notre Dame (Spring 1987) I draw upon here. See also his "Migration of Theistic Arguments," in Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 38-81.

be either entailed by that evidence or probable with respect to that evidence. Locke was perhaps the first to articulately issue the evidentialist challenge to the religious believer. Locke's ideal of rationality rests on a classical foundationalist theory of knowledge, according to which the only basic propositions a person is permitted to hold are those that are either incorrigible or self-evident. Since the proposition "God exists" is neither incorrigible nor self-evident, the rational permissibility of belief in God depends entirely on its evidential moorings.

Swinburne, Mackie, and Mitchell each presuppose evidentialism, according to which theistic belief requires evidence.¹ Kierkegaard clearly rejects evidentialism. Evidence is not essential to belief in God. Furthermore, attending to evidence actually distracts a person's attention away from the proper way to know God, namely, by cultivating inwardness. Probabilistic theologians and atheologians also tend to assume that it is not possible for a human being to believe in God with certainty (a probability of one). Swinburne admits that "although reason can reach a fairly well justified conclusion about the existence of God, it can only reach a probable conclusion, not an indubitable one."² Kierkegaard is aware that belief in God cannot be certain in anything like a classical foundationalist sense (that is, by being incorrigible, self-evident, or evident to the senses). But, as we have seen, it can

¹Unlike Locke, however, they do not embrace classical foundationalism, at least not explicitly.

²Swinburne, The Existence of God, p. 2.

nevertheless be certain in a different way, a way grounded in an individual's subjectivity.

Kierkegaard and "Reformed Epistemology"

Kierkegaard's views on belief in God agree in important respects with those of another, twentieth century critic of probabilistic theology and atheology, Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga also thinks that the arguments of probabilistic theologians (like Swinburne) and atheologians (like Mackie) are relevant only if we think of belief in God as or as like a sort of scientific hypothesis. But why do that? "Perhaps," he suggests, "it is perfectly rational to take belief in God in the way we ordinarily take belief in other minds, material objects, and the like. Why isn't it perfectly sensible to start with belief in God?"¹ In other words, why can't belief in God be "properly basic" for the theist?

In "Reason and Belief in God," Plantinga introduces the idea of a "noetic structure." A person's noetic structure is "the set of propositions he believes, together with certain epistemic relations that hold between him and these propositions."² Some beliefs are such that a person believes them, but not on the basis of any other beliefs he holds. These beliefs comprise the foundation of a person's noetic structure. If it is rational for a person to hold a given belief in this manner, then that belief is properly basic for that individual. So Plantinga's claim that belief in God can be properly basic amounts to the claim that it can

¹Alvin Plantinga, "Is Theism Really a Miracle?" Faith and Philosophy 3 (April 1986), p. 133.

²Idem, "Reason and Belief in God," in Faith and Rationality, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 48.

be rational for the theist to include belief in God in the foundation of his noetic structure.

According to Plantinga and "Reformed Epistemologists" then, "certain beliefs are properly basic in certain circumstances; [and] those same beliefs may not be properly basic in other circumstances." In addition, "there are widely recognized circumstances in which belief in God is properly basic."¹ Plantinga goes out of his way to emphasize that it does not follow from the claim that belief in God can be properly basic that it is groundless. A belief is properly basic only in certain conditions:

These conditions are, we might say, the ground of its justification and, by extension, the ground of the belief itself. In this sense, basic beliefs are not, or are not necessarily, groundless beliefs.²

These "justification-conferring conditions" confer prima facie rather than ultima facie, or all things considered justification on properly basic beliefs. Thus, having a characteristic sort of experience plays an important role in both the formation of some basic beliefs, and their justification.

There are, Plantinga maintains, "many conditions and circumstances that call forth belief in God," including "guilt, gratitude, danger, a sense of God's presence, a sense that he speaks, [and] perception of various parts of the universe." A complete job, he thinks, "would explore the phenomenology of all these conditions and of more besides."³ In this regard, Kierkegaard contributes to Plantinga's case. Kierkegaard's phenomenology of the formative or structural elements of natural religion,

¹Ibid., p. 74.

²Ibid., p. 80.

³Ibid., p. 81.

in which belief in God is conditioned by inwardness, responds to Plantinga's call for a fuller phenomenology of the various "justification-conferring conditions" that constitute the ground of belief in God. An individual's awareness of the eternal, infinite, and possible aspects of the self in the extremity of self-knowledge gives rise to belief in God. Self-awareness (of a specific sort) can be a "justification-conferring condition" in Plantinga's sense. Kierkegaardian subjectivity can be, in Plantinga's terms, the ground of a properly basic belief in God. In a recent article, Evans makes the same comparison. He agrees that "Kierkegaard's view of inwardness or subjectivity as conditioning the knowledge of God provides an illuminating way of fleshing out Plantinga's suggestion that belief in God, though not based on arguments or evidence, is nonetheless grounded and in some sense justified."¹

Though they seem to agree that objective or propositional evidence is not essential to belief in God, Plantinga does not share Kierkegaard's expressed contempt for theistic arguments. Although the mature theist's belief in God is not (or, at any rate, should not be) based on theistic arguments, they can nonetheless serve to bolster and confirm belief in God. He no longer thinks that good arguments are only those whose premises a person is obliged to accept on pain of irrationality. He doubts that any arguments are coercive in that sense. Arguments for God's existence do not, properly speaking, give rise to belief in God. Plantinga nonetheless affirms that they provide the theist (and others) with helpful clues about how to think about various questions from a theistic perspective. For example, with respect to the question "Why is

¹Evans, "Kierkegaard and Plantinga on Belief in God," p. 37.

there something instead of nothing?" the familiar cosmological argument suggests that, from a theistic point of view, the cosmos depends upon God for its creation and continued existence. In a similar way, "moral" arguments for God's existence suggest that the best way for the theist to understand morality is to think of it as emanating from God. This approach to theistic arguments is discernable in Kierkegaard's Fragments. As I have already mentioned, in the course of denying that proofs demonstrate that something exists, Climacus remarks that what they really do is develop "the consequences of a concept." Unfortunately, Kierkegaard's denial that they can serve as anything like a basis for belief in the existence of God seems for him to have included the abrogation of even such a limited role for theistic arguments in religious belief.

Concluding Summary

Kierkegaard has nonetheless underscored something important about human knowledge. At least in some areas, knowing involves more than detached, objective inquiry. Knowledge and certainty are not confined to the deliverances of reason. To ascertain the truth that is essential for human existence (moral and religious truth), Kierkegaard prescribes a method of reflection rooted in the individual's subjectivity--his "emotional cosmos of convictions, wishes, hopes, and feelings, his entire range of inward sensibility."¹ With regard to essential truth, the conditions of certitude are moral and spiritual, not intellectual (at least not entirely).

¹Paul Holmer, Introduction to Edifying Discourses: A Selection, by Soren Kierkegaard (New York: Harper and Row), pp. xv-xvi.

The natural knowledge of God (which includes belief in the existence of God) is an instance of the subjective way of knowing, conditioned by an individual's capacity for inwardness. In the extremity of self-knowledge, the individual discovers the eternal, the infinite, and the possible, thereby realizing his affinity with and dependence on God. Kierkegaard construes this realization as an encounter with God, the awakening of a God-relationship. His attack on speculative philosophers' attempts to make God an object of objective reflection tends to cast these two ways of knowing in opposition to one another. His remedy for an overdose of objectivity concerning life's most important questions (such as personal immortality and the existence of God) thus obscures the legitimate (albeit limited) place for objective considerations in an individual's quest for the truth with regard to these issues. Properly understood, however, subjectivity and objectivity are not alternatives. Rather, they are complementary modes of approaching existential problems. For the religious believer, objective arguments augment subjective considerations. They can therefore buttress the reasonableness of theism, without thereby becoming (as Kierkegaard seemed to think they must) the ground of belief in God for an existing person. This way of thinking about objective arguments is not, I think, inconsistent with Kierkegaard's emphasis on the decisiveness of subjectivity with regard to essential truth.

Kierkegaard's writings constitute an elaborate corrective for a certain attitude toward truth claims, an attitude as prevalent today as it was in mid-nineteenth century Denmark. The objective tendency is difficult to resist. Yet Kierkegaard attempted to do so, pointing out to his contemporaries (and us) that "the ethical and the ethico-religious are

so very easy to understand, but on the other hand so difficult to do."¹
 Though he recognized "the imperative of understanding," he also realized the supreme importance of appropriation, of finding "a truth which is true for me." "This," he wrote in his Journals at the age of twenty-two,

is what I needed to lead a completely human life and not merely one of knowledge, so that I could base the development of my thought on--yes, not on something called objective--something which in any case is not my own, but upon something which is bound up with the deepest roots of my existence, through which I am, so to speak, grafted into the divine, to which I cling fast even though the whole world may collapse. This is what I need, and this is what I strive for.²

He exposed the intellectual hubris of his age, and to this day reminds his readers that the truth cannot merely be grasped by the reason, it must also be lived.

¹Kierkegaard [Johannes Climacus], Postscript, p. 417.

²Idem, Journals and Papers, 5:35.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Evans, C. Stephen. "Kierkegaard and Plantinga on Belief in God." Faith and Philosophy 5 (January 1988): 25-39.
- _____. "Kierkegaard's Attack on Apologetics." Christian Scholars Review 10 (1981): 322-332.
- _____. Kierkegaard's "Fragments" and "Postscript". Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1983.
- _____. Subjectivity and Religious Belief. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982.
- Holmer, Paul. "On Understanding Kierkegaard." In A Kierkegaard Critique, pp. 40-53. Edited by Howard A. Johnson and Niels Thulstrup. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962.
- Kierkegaard, Soren [Vigilius Haufniensis]. The Concept of Anxiety. Translated by Reidar Thomte in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- _____. [Johannes Climacus]. Concluding Unscientific Postscript. Translated by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941.
- _____. Edifying Discourses. 2 vols. Translated by David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1962.
- _____. [Victor Erimita]. Either/Or. vol I. Translated by David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson with revisions by Howard A. Johnson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959.
- _____. [Victor Erimita]. Either/Or. vol II. Translated by Walter Lowrie with revisions by Howard A. Johnson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972.
- _____. [Johannes de Silentio]. Fear and Trembling [with Repetition]. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- _____. For Self Examination and Judge for Yourselves!. Translated by . Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974.
- _____. Journal and Papers. 7 vols. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1967-78.

- _____. [Johannes Climacus]. Philosophical Fragments. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.
- _____. The Point of View for My Works as an Author: A Report to History. Translated by Walter Lowrie. New York: Harper and Rowe, 1962.
- _____. [Constantin Constantius]. Repetition [with Fear and Trembling]. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- _____. [Anti-Climacus]. The Sickness Unto Death. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- _____. [Hilarius Bookbinder]. Stages on Life's Way. Translated by Walter Lowrie. New York: Schocken Books, 1967.
- _____. Two Ages. Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.
- Lowrie, Walter. A Short Life of Kierkegaard. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1942.
- Mackie, John. The Miracle of Theism. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Malantschuk, Gregor. Kierkegaard's Thought. Edited and Translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971.
- Mitchell, Basil. The Justification of Religious Belief. Oxford: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1973; reissued New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.
- Mullen, John Douglas. Kierkegaard's Philosophy. New York: New American Library, 1981.
- Plantinga, Alvin. "Is Theism Really a Miracle?" Faith and Philosophy 3 (April 1986): 109-134.
- _____. "Reason and Belief in God." In Faith and Rationality, pp. 16-93. Edited by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff. Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 1983.
- Roberts, Robert C. "The Grammar of Sin and the Conceptual Unity of The Sickness Unto Death." In International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness Unto Death, pp. 135-60. Edited by Robert L. Perkins. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987.
- _____. "The Socratic Knowledge of God." In International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Concept of Anxiety, pp. 133-52. Edited by Robert L. Perkins. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1985.

_____. "Some Remarks on the Concept of Passion." In International Kierkegaard Commentary: Two Ages, pp. 87-106. Edited by Robert L. Perkins. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1984.

Stengren, George. "Connatural Knowledge in Aquinas and Kierkegaardian Subjectivity." Kierkegaardiana X: 182-189.

Swinburne, Richard. The Existence of God. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

_____. Faith and Reason. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.

B7, F10