

# Kierkegaard

G. J. Matthey

Winter, 2011 / Philosophy 151

## *Philosophical Fragments*

- The *Philosophical Fragments, or A Fragment of Philosophy* was published in 1844, with Kierkegaard listed as being “responsible for publication.”
- The title page lists three questions to be addressed in the book.
  - “Is an historical point of departure possible for an eternal consciousness?”
  - “How can such a point of departure have any other than a merely historical interest?”
  - “Is it possible to base an eternal happiness upon historical knowledge?”

## **Reason and Revelation**

- The questions concern the consciousness that an existing individual human being might have of an eternal being, “the God.”
- In Christian theology, eternal consciousness is a consequence of the God’s revealing itself to the individual.
- The question then arises as to whether this act of divine revelation may occur “historically,” in a moment of time.
- In fact, Kierkegaard held that it did occur historically, in the life of Jesus on earth.
- If this historical event is the basis of revelation, then knowledge of God is not attained through the exercise of reason.
- But if revelation is not based on reason, the question arises as to how knowledge of a merely historical event can give rise to knowledge of the eternal.

### **Idealism and Christianity**

- The main thesis of the book is that there is no rational basis for belief in “the God.”
- This view contradicts the position of Hegel and his followers.
- But rather than attack them directly, Kierkegaard contrasts the Christian view of knowledge with that of the ancient Greeks, in the person of Socrates.
- He outlines the Socratic account of learning and shows how it does not apply to Christian revelation.
- The outcome of the book is to make an “advance” on Socrates by sketching a new way of learning, unique to knowledge of “the God.”

### **Socratic Knowledge**

- Socrates posed the paradox of learning, described in Plato’s *Meno*.
- It seems it is not possible to learn what one wishes to learn.
  - If one knows what one wishes to learn, then there is nothing to be learned.
  - If one does not know what one wishes to learn, then there is nothing to guide the process of learning.
- The Socratic solution is that what appears to be learning is only a kind of recollection of what has already been learned, but has been forgotten.
- The role of the teacher, then, is solely that of a “midwife” who jogs the memory of the learner.

### **The State of Error**

- In Christianity, the object of learning is “the God.”
- Kierkegaard claims that knowledge of “the God” cannot be attained through recollection.
- In fact, humans lack the condition for knowing “the God.”
- We begin in a state of error (sin), in which we are departing from the truth rather than advancing toward it.
- A human teacher can only point out to the learner that he is in error.
- Only “the God” can remove the condition of error and thus allow the learner to discover him.
- This decisive moment has more than the merely historical significance of the act of recollection in the presence of a “midwife.”

### **The Paradox of Socrates**

- Socrates attempted throughout his life to come to an understanding of himself.
- In the dialogue *Phaedrus*, he admitted that he had not yet succeeded in knowing himself.
- He did not know whether his nature was like that of:
  - The mythical monster Typhon,
  - Or a simpler, gentler being.
- As a result, he professed to accept the current beliefs about mythical stories, because they were extraneous to his task of knowing himself.
- Kierkegaard found this seemingly paradoxical, because Socrates was famous for being “one who beyond all other men had an insight into the human heart.”

### **The Supreme Paradox of All Thought**

- One should not think slighting of paradoxes.
- They are the source of the passion of the thinker.
- A thinker without paradox is like a lover with no feeling: “a paltry mediocrity.”
- Like loving, thinking is a passion.
- “The highest pitch of every passion is to will its own downfall.”
- Thus, The highest pitch of thinking is to seek a “collision” which would prove its undoing.
- This collision would be “the supreme paradox of all thought,” to think the thought that thought cannot think.
- Though his thinking is dulled by habit, this passion is in every individual whose thinking is about more than himself.

### **The Unknown**

- “The Reason,” when at the peak of its passion, collides with an unknown something that undermines even its own self-knowledge.
- We will call this something “the Unknown.”
- It will also be called “the God,” something which is not:
  - Another human being (as far as we know what a human being is),
  - Any other known thing.
- It would not occur to “the Reason” to prove the existence of “the Unknown.”
  - If it did not exist, it would be impossible to prove it.
  - If it did exist, it would be “folly” to try to prove it.

### **Proving that “the God” Exists**

- The attempt to prove that “the God” exists faces a dilemma.
  - If I were not certain that “the God” exists, I would not try to prove that it does.
  - If I were certain that “the God” exists, then I would be presupposing what I was trying to prove.
- Given that “the Unknown” exists, I could try to prove that it is “the God.”
- But such a proof is not a proof of existence; it is only the development of the concept of “the Unknown.”

### **Existence Proofs**

- It is generally very difficult to prove that something exists.
- The attempt to prove existence turns into a proof of consequences of the assumption that the thing exists.
- In the realm of the senses or of thought, “I always reason from existence, not toward existence.”
  - I do not try to prove that a stone exists, but rather that an existing thing is a stone.
  - A court does not try to prove that a criminal exists, but rather that an existing human is a criminal.
  - Proof of existence is of importance only for those who are concerned that the object in question only begins to exist upon the completion of the proof.

### **An Example: the Existence of Napoleon**

- Do we try to prove from Napoleon’s deeds that Napoleon existed?
- To be sure, his existence explains his deeds.
- But unless it is presupposed that the deeds are in fact Napoleon’s, the existence of the deeds does not prove that they are Napoleon’s deeds.
- The deeds could have been done by someone else.
- The only thing that can be proved from the deeds is that someone meeting a certain description (great general, etc.) did them.
- Nothing in the deeds themselves requires that they be those of the person named ‘Napoleon.’

### **The Ontological Proof of “the God”**

- Unlike the deeds of Napoleon, the works of “the God” bear an essential relation to their doer.
  - No other being could have done the deeds that “the God” did.
- This may be why philosophers have held that the essence of God involves (necessitates) God’s existence.
- Spinoza argued in this way, but his reasoning was trivial.
- His claim was that the more perfect something is, the more being it has.
- However, to be more perfect just is to have more being.
- So, the real claim is that the more being something has, the more being it has, which is a tautology.

### **Factual Being and Ideal Being**

- Spinoza’s error results from his lacking a key distinction between two ways of thinking about being:
  - Factual being,
  - Ideal being.
- It makes no sense to speak of more or less factual being: a thing either is or is not.
- “Factual being is wholly indifferent to any and all variations in essence, and everything that exists participates without petty jealousy in being, and participates to the same degree.”
- “Ideal being” admits of degrees, but it is a concept of essence, rather than existence.
- The real aim of existence proofs is to begin with the factual being of “the God” and proceed from there to his essence.

### **The Works of God**

- If one does not argue from God’s essence to God’s existence, one must proceed from factual being of something.
- What has factual being also has a certain order that might be described as:
  - The wisdom in nature,
  - The goodness in the governance of the world,
  - The wisdom in the governance of the world.

- But are these characteristics obvious from what is observed of the world?
- The same problem arises: unless it is presupposed that the world has this kind of order, it is impossible to prove beyond all doubt that it does.
- So, this kind of proof requires confidence in God's existence, which is the only thing that can overcome the gap between what is observed and the alleged explanation of it.

### **The Leap**

- It might be thought that the problem with the proof of "the God's" existence is that the conclusion does not emerge until the proof is completed.
- One must pause a moment after the process of proof, and the conclusion will leap out.
- However, the leap must be included as part of the proof itself.
- But Carneades the Academic skeptic ridiculed this kind of leap.
- Chrysippus the Stoic had attempted to overcome the sorites by suggesting that if one just pauses in counting, one will see a qualitative difference.
- Carneades replied that after the pause, one is back where one started.

### **Summary**

- If one tries to prove the existence of God without merely clarifying the concept of God or resorting to the leap, one really proves something else.
- One must either call off the whole project partly for fear of failure and partly because there is nothing adequate with which to begin.
- Such a proof would not be undertaken by the ancients.
- Socrates tried to explain the nature of the world by appeal to God (the "physico-theological" proof), but only after presupposing that God exists.
- It is his conviction of the divine existence which motivates him to discover divine purpose in the natural world.

### **Return to "The Unknown"**

- The failure to prove that "the Unknown" is "the God" makes our relation to "the Unknown" problematic.
- We must not dismiss our relation to "the Unknown" by merely asserting that it does not exist.

- “Since this itself involves a relationship.”
- “The Unknown” is correctly interpreted as a limit.
  - Even if it could be known, it could not be expressed.
- This limit both incites and torments the passion that is thought.
- But it stops “the Reason” in its tracks, whether it tries to understand “the Unknown” in terms of what it is not or in terms of what it is.

### **The Absolutely Different**

- The limit that is “the Unknown” has been expressed dynamically, in terms of how we try to approach it (proving that it is “the God.”)
- It can also be described “statically” a being what is “absolutely different” from the existing human and his reason.
- But if it is absolutely different, it has no content whereby it could be distinguished from anything else.
- “It seems on the verge of disclosure, but this is not the case.”
- “The Reason” cannot conceive of something absolutely unlike itself.
- It can only think of what is unlike itself in a relative way.
  - “The Unknown” is something superior to itself.
  - Or it might be unlike itself in a different way.
- There are, in fact, myriad ways in which what is different may be different from us.

### **“The Reason” as Confusing Itself**

- Because it cannot comprehend absolute difference, “the Reason” confuses itself by thinking many relative unlikenesses.
  - This is the basis of paganism.
- The ultimate confusion would ensue if the being that is absolutely different was presented by “the Reason” as something which is in every way like us.
  - In appearance,
  - In the conduct of life.
- In a certain sense, “the God” has brought himself as close as possible to us by being just like us.
- But because “the God” is absolutely different, “the Reason” is thus deceived by its conception of “the God.”

## Conclusion

- The unlikeness which is found in “the Unknown” is ultimately the consequence of sin and therefore something that man has brought upon himself.
- Socrates could not have reached this point because he had no consciousness of sin.
- It is only “the God” who could serve as the teacher of man, and he does so by becoming like man.
- Thus the paradox doubles up.
  - The limit posed by absolute unlikeness is now supposed to be overcome by the likeness of absolute unlikeness.
- As a result of this Paradox, “the Reason” becomes offended, reacting passively with either suffering or derision.
- In “Faith,” “the Reason” sets itself aside in the face of the Paradox.

## *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

- The lengthy *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments: A Mimetic-Pathetic-Dialectic Compilation, An Existential Plea* was published in 1846, the same year as the publication of *The Present Age*.
- Kierkegaard used the pseudonym of Johannes Climacus, who is also stated as the author of *Philosophical Fragments* (1844).
- He described the book as constituting “the turning point in my whole work as an author” (*The Point of View for My Work as an Author*).
- The work is “unscientific” in the sense that it repudiates the point of view of natural science as antagonistic to religion.
- It is “concluding” because when he published it, Kierkegaard had resolved to give up writing and become a country parson.

## **The Problem of the *Postscript***

- Kierkegaard in the *Point of View* stated that the fundamental problem of the *Postscript* is how he could become a Christian.
- In his earlier works, Kierkegaard had described how becoming a Christian involves renouncing the aesthetic life.
- In the *Postscript*, he describes a movement “away from the System, from speculation, etc.”
- The “System” is that of Hegel.



- Most of the book, then, indicts the Hegelian system as being an impediment to an individual seeking an authentic relationship to God.
- In the place of the allegedly objective system, Kierkegaard proposes a subjective orientation toward truth.

### **The Structure of the *Postscript***

- The *Postscript* is divided into two books, corresponding to two problems concerning the truth of Christianity.
  - The objective problem, which concerns attempts to prove God’s existence historically and speculatively.
  - The subjective problem, which concerns the individual’s own relation to his eternal happiness.
- The conclusion of the first book is that objective considerations cannot be sufficient to satisfy the individual’s infinite interest in salvation.
- The second book is much longer than the first and is the central point of interest in the *Postscript*.
- It is divided into two parts.
  - The first part contains (among other topics) a criticism of the Hegelian system as the basis of Christian faith.
  - The second part works out the relation of subjectivity to the truth of Christianity.

### **Systems of Logic and of Existence**

- It is of the very nature of a system that it be completed.
- Hegel advertises that he has constructed a system, but in fact it is not completed (though it will be . . . shortly), and so there is no Hegelian system.
- In what follows, Kierkegaard discusses two kinds of philosophical systems.
  - A logical system, which can be completed.
  - An existential system, which cannot be completed.
- Hegel’s fundamental problem was that he tried to introduce conclusions about existence into his logical system.
- There is a distinction between what “is” as existing and as being.
- The proper subject-matter of logic is being only.

### **Hegel's Great Error in Logic**

- The failure to distinguish between existence and being introduces a confusion into Hegel's logic.
- The novel idea in Hegel's logic is that of "movement" from one concept to another.
- Hegel's logical method is the heart of his system, so that if there is no "movement" in logic, there is no system at all.
- If the method is a failure, Hegel should nonetheless be understood as "having willed something great."
- Logic clearly cannot explain movement.
- Then how can movement explain logic?
  - The sphere of logic is concepts, and motion among concepts is impossible.

### **Logic and Existence**

- In logic, everything must be indifferent to existence.
- This is an "infinite advantage" of the logical over other forms of thinking.
- But insofar as logic is indifferent to existence, the logical must be considered a hypothesis from the standpoint of what actually exists.
- By contrast, mathematics has no relation to existence at all, but is purely objective.
- Hegel introduces existence surreptitiously into the content of logic.
- This can only be done by making logical categories abstractions from what exists, while Hegel presents them as wholly independent of existence.

### **The Starting-Point of the Logical System**

- Another problem with Hegel's system is its treatment of the starting-point of the logical system.
- One always starts with a beginning, when then ceases to be as progress is made.
- But this "true dialectical remark" is treated as a game in Hegelian circles.
- The system is supposed to begin with what is immediate and without presupposition.
- But although this is correct, there is a prior question to be asked: does the system begin immediately?

- In fact it cannot, since reflection, which presupposes the existence of the thinker, is needed before the dialectic can begin.
- This fact will prove fatal to Hegel's system.

### **The Infinitude of Reflection**

- Reflection is by its very nature infinite, without bounds.
- Yet if reflection is to arrive at a beginning, it must limit itself to that starting-point.
- In that case, reflection would have to stop on its own accord.
- But reflection cannot stop on its own accord, since the very act of stopping is a reflective act.
  - It would be like a sickness curing itself by promoting sickness as its own remedy.
- A Hegelian might respond that the sense of infinitude used here is "spurious," and that the infinity of reflection is of a kind that can bring about its own demise.
- But spuriousness is a category of ethics, or at least of aesthetics, not of logic.

### **Beginning with an Abstraction**

- The only way in which reflection can be stopped is by an act of will, a resolution to stop.
- If reflection is stopped by something else, then the beginning of the logical system begins with a presupposition: that of what brought reflection to a stop.
- The Hegelian response to this problem lies in their understanding of how a beginning is "immediate."
- It is supposed to be so because it represents the highest level of abstraction and hence is emptied of all determinate contents.
- The act of abstraction is incompatible with the beginning being absolute.
- Even if we waive this problem, there remains the fact (which the Hegelians readily allow) that beginning with a total abstraction is beginning with nothing.

### **Beginning with Nothing**

- Abstracting from everything to arrive at nothing would be a feat of great strength.
- It would in fact exhaust the strength of any human, which would not allow the dialectic to move forward.
- It is true to say that after a beginning is made, the beginning is not.
- To say that beginning is not is equivalent to saying that the beginning begins with nothing.
- So, the claim that the beginning begins with nothing is really just a disguised version of the truism that the beginning becomes nothing after the process has begun.
- But this is not the grandiose claim that a beginning is an absolute starting-point without any presuppositions.

### **Beginning with a Leap**

- The cessation of reflection cannot be reflection itself, but only an act of resolution (a “leap”) on the part of the reflecting subject.
- Without this resolution, we will have to say that we are almost to the point of beginning the system, but we have not quite made it.
- The Hegelians themselves will admit the need for a leap in the affairs of ordinary life.
- Without a leap, the thinker will be engaged in infinite reflection, and no decision that will affect his eternal happiness can be made.
- A final point about the starting-point is that Hegel seems to have had more than one starting-point and system.
  - The system of the *Phenomenology*, which is the beginning for the other systems.
  - The system of logic, which is supposed to have its own internal beginning.

### **Logic and the Logician**

- There is a further question about the relation between the logic and the thinker of the logical.
- There is the danger that the philosopher will turn himself into a ludicrous and absurd creature by identifying himself with the logical system.
  - The empirical *I* is taken to be identical to the *I* of pure thought.

- Anyone who recognizes that he is a concretely existing individual will not make this mistake, even if he has finished his logical system.
- Sound common sense reveals that Hegel behaved irresponsibly toward his youthful followers in many places.
- Those youth who come to their senses and regard Hegel's system as comical has vindicted Hegel better than "those who in deceptive asides would now make Hegel everything, now a trifle."

### **A System of Existence**

- There cannot be a system of existence for any existing finite spirit.
- There can be a system of existence for God, who has an eternal point of view.
- Every system is conclusive, but existence by its very nature is inconclusive.
- If systematic thought tries to think existence, then it must think existence as being annulled, since it would be part of a completed whole.
- What is systematic is conclusive and combines whatever it contains.
- "Existence is the spacing that holds apart."
- Existing things exist discretely at different times, so that the present state of what exists is separated from what exists before and after it.

### **The Past is Not a System of Existence**

- It may be thought that because the past is completed, what existed in the past can be incorporated into a system.
- But this is an illusion, as was noted in the *Philosophical Fragments*.
- The thinker who thinks the past as a completed system is either:
  - God, or
  - An existing finite spirit.
- The past can be part of an existential system for God, who stands outside of all time-relations.
- A finite spirit exists in the present and so would have to abolish his present existence by being absorbed into the system.
- It is not enough that he merely absent-mindedly forget that he is a living human being (which itself is comical).
- He would have to make himself into a fantastical being, into speculative thought itself.

### **Ethics and Existence**

- The identification of the self with the system is immoral, which is why Hegel's system lacks an ethics.
- But an ethics is "the very home of existence."
- A simpler philosophy would be one that directs the individual's entire attention to his existing.
- This is consistent with the saying of Lessing that God would choose the life-long pursuit of truth to having the truth in hand.
- Existence for such an individual is a continued striving, a repetition which seeks not to let the eternal slip away from it.
- "The continued striving is the expression of the existing subject's ethical life-view."
- It must not be conceived metaphysically, any more than the individual should be conceived in terms of a system.
- This is reflected in the Greek desire to be continually learning.

### **Pantheistic Systems**

- It is common for pantheistic systems (which identify God and the universe) to be criticized for abolishing freedom and the distinction between good and evil.
- But in fact, every system is pantheistic, in the sense that every system excludes existence in order to be completed.
- "No existing remainder may be left behind, not even such a tiny little dingle-dangle as the existing Herr Professor who is writing the system."
- Expositions of the system include references to existence.
- But these references serve as objections of the system, since any would-be system that includes existence is not a system.
- The solution for the system-builders is merely to record the objection within the exposition of the system and declare it completed.

### **Subject and Object**

- The idea of the system is to unite subject (or thought) and object (or being).
- Existence is the separation of subject and object, and hence of thought and being.
- A concrete existing human being is a thinker and is a being, but he is not identical to being.

- A unified subject-object would be a subject (thinking) taking itself as object (being).
- If the existing subject is to become the unified subject-object, it would have to lose its existence which separates thought from being.
- It would become a pure thinker, thought itself which thinks itself.
- But a pure thinker is not a thinking person.

### **Identifying One's Self with Humanity is Comical**

- The purported way of attaining objectivity by making the thinker the sole object of thought should not be dismissed as impious pantheism.
- Objections using ethical categories are inappropriate for criticizing metaphysical claims.
- But the unified subject-object is comical, and the comical is a metaphysical category.
- The existing person who promulgates the system identifies himself with the subject-object.
- But this is as ludicrous as to say that a human can fly, however high he can jump.
- Indeed, any person of the most lowly status can identify himself with humanity, which is ludicrous.
- It is just as ludicrous for the most able person to do so.

### **Becoming Subjective**

- Part Two of the *Postscript* begins with a chapter entitled "The Task of Becoming Subjective."
- The question of the whole work is the truth of Christianity.
- This question is not to be considered objectively in any way.
  - "An objective acceptance of Christianity is paganism or thoughtlessness."
- It must be answered only subjectively, by a decision to accept it as being true.
- This requires concentration on one's self, raising the passion of faith to its highest pitch.
- Any concern with other people interferes with the passionate relation to God.
- Therefore, the vain attempt to become the subject-object subverts subjectivity and its relation to God.

### **Truth as a Product of Thinking**

- Truth understood as the product of thinking can be understood in one of two ways.
  - Empirically, truth is the agreement of thinking with being (thought corresponds to being).
  - Idealistically, truth is the agreement of being with thinking (being is identical to thought).
- If truth is taken to be empirical, then truth is only an approximation to being, since being is always in the state of becoming.
- Truth would not be an approximation of being if being is taken abstractly.
- But then thought and being would coincide only if the thinker were an abstraction as well.
- However, other than God, the knowing spirit is an existing spirit, whose thinking can only approximate to truth.

### **Truth in the Object and in the Subject**

- Existence holds thought and being apart.
- Since the two are unified only for God, there are only two ways in which truth can overcome the separation.
  - One can disregard the subject (the thinker) and make truth lie in the object (being).
  - One can disregard the object (being) and make truth lie in the subject (the thinker).
- In the second sense, “truth becomes appropriation, inwardness, subjectivity, and the point is to immerse oneself, existing, in subjectivity.”
- Only the fantastical subject-object, and not an existing thinker, could have it both ways.
- The first way is one that always makes the existing individual insignificant (e.g., in the vast sweep of history).

### **Truth and Madness**

- The pursuit of objective truth seems to have the advantage that inwardness may take the guise of madness.
- The individual is mad insofar as his passion is aimed at a finite fixed idea.
  - Don Quixote is a prototype of this kind of madness.



- However, a passion directed at an infinite object, God, is not madness.
- Indeed, madness is independent of knowledge of objective truth.
  - A mad person might try to show he is not mad by pointlessly repeating a generally accepted truth.
  - The assertion of “the earth is round” would in other times be taken as a sign of madness.
- There is a more horrifying kind of insanity which arises from the lack of subjectivity.

### **Essential Knowing Concerns Individual Existence**

- When the subject turns entirely inward, the object vanishes from consideration.
- The existence of the subject, on the other hand, is always in view.
- The only way truth could be made objective is if the subject were the object, which is an illusion of modern philosophy.
- Passion, on the other hand, is “existence at its very highest” for the existing person.
- All “essential knowing” is related to the existing of the knower.
- So, the only essential knowing is ethical or ethical-religious, and relates to the way in which the knower exists.

### **The Paradox of Knowing the Truth**

- In relating to objects objectively, the subject does so dispassionately.
- The subjective thinker is concerned with whether he is related to the object (God) in the right way (through faith).
  - The subject tries to stand in the God-relation.
  - His passion is “an infinite passion of need.”
- Then truth is a paradox, because the thinker, an existing object in time, is trying to relate himself to an eternal object.
- He is thrown into despair because he may die before he relates himself properly to God.
- For the thinker who forgets that he is a human subject, truth not a paradox.
- But such a thinker is fantastical, merely deluding himself that he is identical to the eternal object.

### **The Objective Thinker and the Subjective Thinker**

- The truth of subjectivity need not coincide with the truth of objectivity.
- A person with (approximate) objective knowledge of God is in subjective untruth if he does not approach God with infinite passion.
- A pagan who prays before an idol lacks objective knowledge of God but may have the infinite passion and hence subjective truth.
- Someone who inquires objectively into immortality lacks certainty because he can only approximate the truth.
  - An example is the professors who possess “three proofs” of immortality but lack passionate belief in it.
- A person who believes passionately in immortality is objectively uncertain but subjectively certain.
  - An example is Socrates, who professed doubt about immortality but staked his whole life on behaving as if he were immortal.

### **Subjectivity is Truth**

- Objectivity emphasizes what is said.
- Subjectivity emphasizes how it is said.
- Aesthetically, we say that a truth becomes an untruth when uttered by a certain person—something to be interpreted comically.
- Ethically and religiously, the “how” is not found in a tone of voice, etc., but in the person’s relation to what is said.
- At its maximum, the “how” is the passion of the infinite, which is the truth.
- So, subjectivity is truth.
- With respect to time, the “how” is a striving “that is motivated and repeatedly refreshed by the decisive passion of the infinite.”

### **The Definition of Truth**

- Because subjectivity is truth, the definition of truth must given in such a way as to exclude objectivity.
- “An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth.”
- This is the highest truth for existing individuals.

- The objective uncertainty is what heightens the inward passion of inwardness.
- “Truth is precisely the daring venture of choosing the objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite.”
- Although one sees signs of the infinite in nature, there are also many things that disturbingly suggest that God does not exist.
- Subjective truth is faith: holding fast in the face of objective uncertainty.

### **The Socratic Paradox**

- The wisdom of Socrates was to have paid special attention to the knower’s being an existing person.
- The Socrates considered himself to be objectively ignorant, which turned his attention inward upon himself.
- He thought that the essential eternal truth would be attained through recollection.
- But this posed a paradox for its being known by a temporal individual.
- Plato adopted the theory of recollection while forgetting his temporality, thus becoming a speculative philosopher who fails to go beyond Socrates.
- The true advance beyond the Socratic paradox begins with the recognition that the objective is not uncertain, but positively absurd.

### **The Absolute Paradox**

- We may re-cast the Socratic ignorance into the form of the Christian ignorance.
- The reason the essential eternal truth is unknown, even by recollection, is that we are born sinners.
- It is assumed further that what is paradoxical is not the quest of a finite person to comprehend the eternal, but that the eternal becomes an existing thing.
- Now the object of faith becomes something that is absurd.
- The absurdity of the existence of the eternal poses the greatest risk of error in our thinking.
- Due to the direct relation between risk and the degree of passion, faith becomes as strong as it can be.
- By comparison, the Socratic faith is “like a witty jest.”

### **The Absurd**

- “The absurd is that the eternal truth has come into existence in time.”
- It is incomprehensible that God became a human like the rest of us.
- Someone wishing to have faith will try to make this probable, the result of long deliberation.
  - His problem is that because of his absurdity, he cannot believe it.
- The same comedy holds for the person of faith who wishes to understand it.
  - He then ceases to have faith because he almost knows of God, but never quite manages to know.
- It does not help to seek evidence in the historical events surrounding the life of Jesus.
  - The witness cannot attain certainty about the absurd, and so cannot provide evidence that it exists.
- It was shown in the *Philosophical Fragments* that “all approximation is futile.”

### **Christianity and Speculative Thought**

- Christianity has proclaimed that the eternal has come into temporal existence, belief in which can be based only on faith.
- The Christian doctrine proclaims itself as paradoxical.
  - It was offensive to the Jews.
  - It is considered foolish by the Greeks.
  - It is absurd to the understanding.
- The incarnation cannot be explained, and it is odd to think that it would have come into the world needing to be explained by speculative thinkers.
- The inwardness of subjectivity is expressed most strongly in the paradox that subjectivity first appears as untruth, yet subjectivity is truth.

### **God’s Elusiveness**

- The author goes on to criticize speculative thought in various ways, finally arriving at the conclusion that the present day has so much knowledge that it has forgotten existence and inwardness.
- He notes that these things are best described indirectly.
- In fact God himself communicates with us indirectly, since although his works everywhere around us, we can find him only in subjectivity.

- Pagan thought seeks to find God in the world.
- Once this is seen to be a failure, there is a break in our direct relationship to God.
- God's elusiveness allows us to avoid untruth and forces us to find truth where it lies, in our inwardness.

### **Failing to Find God**

- God is so hidden that people can lead perfectly normal "human" lives without ever knowing God inwardly.
- They can imitate the behavior of others in their worship, going through all the motions.
- By analogy, someone who did not know manners could go to a party, observe how all the other party-goers behaved, and then behave just like them.
- Such people would say at the end of their lives that they have never been aware of God.
- Yet had God presented himself directly, perhaps in the form of a striking green bird, he would have known God and not had to imitate anyone.
- People who do not know God inwardly are merely a parody of truly human existence.
  - "It is really the God-relationship that makes a human being a human being."

### **Elusiveness and Omnipresence**

- It is "divine cunning" that there is nothing remarkable in God's presence in the world.
- God's invisibility is God's omnipresence.
- Christianity recognizes that it is impossible for God to exist in some remarkable natural form, in which case he would not be everywhere.
- Nor does one find God in the totality of nature.
- The meaning of nature is rather found in the observer of nature himself.
- It is unthinkable that spirits can relate to one another directly, with regard to the essential truth.
- All outward means of persuasion can at best lead people to a semblance of truth.
- But only by turning inward can we find the real essential truth.

### ***Either/Or***

- Kierkegaard published his first philosophical work, *Either/Or*, in 1843, under the pseudonym “Victor Eremita.”
- The choice posed in the book was between an immoral “aesthetic” life and a moral life.
  - Volume I consists of a series of pieces by the aestheticist “A.”
  - Volume II contains letters from Judge Wilhelm (or William) to A, attempting to persuade him that the moral life is superior to the aesthetic.
- Kierkegaard considered the disjunction to be exclusive insofar as a choice of how to live: there could be no “mediation.”
  - “There is only one situation in which either/or has absolute significance, namely when truth, righteousness, and holiness are lined up on one side, and lust and base propensities and obscure passions and perdition on the other.” (Volume II, “Equilibrium”)

### ***Fear and Trembling***

- In the same year as the publication of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard published *Fear and Trembling* and *Repetition*.
- *Fear and Trembling* was published under the pseudonym of “Johannes de Silentio.”
- The primary topic of the book is religious faith, as exemplified in Abraham, who consented to God’s command that he kill his own son, Isaac.
- The opening sections recount the story.
- The rest of the book considers three “problems,” showing the “dialectical consequences” of the story “in order to see what a tremendous paradox faith is” (“Problemata: Preliminary Expectoration”).
  - Is there such a thing as the teleological suspension of the ethical?
  - Is there such a thing as an absolute duty toward God?
  - Was Abraham ethically defensible in keeping silent about his purpose before Sarah, before Eleazar, before Isaac?

### **Abraham’s Trial**

- The Old Testament recounts the story of Abraham, to whom God promised a son.
- Abraham persisted in his faith that God would give him a son, even when his wife Sarah was beyond her child-bearing years.

- Eventually, Isaac was born to Sarah and was the joy of Abraham's life.
- But God tempted Abraham, ordering him to kill Isaac as a sacrifice.
- Abraham maintained his faith throughout and was prepared to kill Isaac.
- At the last moment, God rescinded his command, and Abraham lived happily with Isaac until his death.

### **Earthly Greatness and the Greatness of Faith**

- According to Kierkegaard, if everything that is great were the product of "a wildly seething power," and all life ended in oblivion, there would be nothing but despair.
- Life would then be "empty and comfortless."
- Greatness can be obtained in many ways.
  - Through power.
  - Through wisdom.
  - Through hope.
  - Through love.
- But the greatness of Abraham lay in his faith, which leaves behind all these earthly means of greatness.
  - His strength was impotence
  - His wisdom was folly.
  - His hope was madness
  - His love was self-hatred.

### **Infinite Resignation and Faith**

- Those who would explain the righteousness of Abraham's action by saying he did it "for the best" leave out the essential element—Abraham's dread.
- Abraham's situation is paradoxical, because it pits his infinite passion of faith against his extraordinary love for his son.
- A way to avoid this dread would be to give up Isaac for lost, resigning one's self from happiness in the finite world in favor of one's relation to the infinite God.
- But this infinite resignation is only a "surrogate for faith."
  - If God spared the son for such a person, he could not be happy with him, knowing that he had giving him up for lost.
- The movement of faith is for one to believe that, although it is absurd, through the power of God he will reclaim what had appeared lost.

### **The Knight of Faith**

- The “knight” of infinite resignation gains eternal consciousness, which imparts to him a demeanor of aloofness and superiority.
- The “knight” of faith could be indistinguishable from anyone who has not even made the movement of infinite resignation, since he has returned to the finite.
- To renounce the finite in favor of the infinite and then to expect to get it back because it is absurd, is a prodigious feat.
- The absurd is considered impossible, not merely improbable, because it is precisely because of its impossibility that the movement of resignation is made.
- Faith is debased unless it is considered as a prodigy in this way.

### **Suspension of the Ethical**

- The ethical is the universal, which applies to all persons at all times.
- The universal is not an end (*telos*) for something else, but is an end in itself.
- The task of every person, with respect to the ethical, is to behave in accordance with its universal norms.
- Action in accordance with his own singular ends in opposition to the universal *telos* is sin.
- If the ethical is the highest end, then conforming to it is the eternal salvation for a person.
- One may suspend some action in order to serve the highest end.
- But one may not surrender the ethical in favor of some higher end (teleologically suspend it), on pain of contradiction.

### **Hegel’s Error Concerning Faith**

- Hegel conceived the ethical as the highest *telos*.
  - “Since duty is thus abstract and universal in character, it should be done for duty’s sake” (*Philosophy of Right* Section 133).
- In that case, someone who acts as an individual and not in accord with the universal is engaged in “a moral form of evil.”
- The individual should be annulled in the universal.
- If he is not, then he is in either:
  - In a state of sin.



- In a state of spiritual trial.
- Faith takes as its *telos* something other than the universal.
- So Hegel should condemn Abraham's faith.
- Abraham was intending to act contrary to the universal, intending to murder his son.

### **Faith and the Universal**

- Faith is the paradox that the individual may be higher than the universal yet not be in sin or spiritual trial.
- If the universal is the highest *telos*, then the only departure from the universal would be a state of sin or spiritual trial.
- In that case, if there is faith, it has always existed.
- The notion that the universal is the highest *telos* was recognized by the Greeks, so Christian faith constitutes a break from the "pagan" thinking of the ancients, which is otherwise meritorious.
- Since Hegel studied the Greeks, he should not have concealed this fact in his writings.
- If faith is conceived as something that has always existed, then it never really has existed.
- Most people who talk of faith do not know what they are talking about.

### **The Paradox of Faith**

- Faith is the paradox that a single individual who is subordinate to the universal becomes superior to it, by means of the universal itself.
- The relation of the single individual to the universal cannot be "mediated" by thought in any way, since mediation occurs only by bringing individuals under a universal.
  - Thus, an individual's action might violate one universal end but be justified in the service of a higher universal end.
- Abraham is either a murderer by universal norms or a man of faith who rises above the universal.
- The superiority of the individual to the universal is impervious to thought.
- The paradox of faith should not be confused with spiritual trial, in which an individual subordinate to the universal would assert his superiority to it.

### **Teleologically Suspending the Ethical**

- One might wish to explain Abraham's situation in terms of a tragic hero suspending of one ethical norm for the sake of a higher ethical norm.
  - Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter to please the gods and thereby saves the nation from their wrath.
  - Brutus must follow the law and execute his son for his misdeeds.
- But if there were no higher end for which these children are to be sacrificed, killing them is unethical.
- If the fathers were to say in their agony that the children would not really die, no one would understand them.
- Abraham suspended the ethical for a *telos* higher than any found within the realm of the ethical.
- He is great because of his personal virtue, not because of his ethical virtue.
  - He was willing to kill his son for God's sake, and therefore for his own sake.

### **Abraham and the Tragic Hero**

- If the divine is merely the ethical, as in paganism, the tragic hero does not enter into a private relationship to the divine.
- But Abraham did try to stand in a private relationship to the divine, and he could not describe that relationship because all description is in terms of the universal.
- The tragic hero is reassured by the certainty that he must do what he does in order to serve a higher end.
- The consequences of Abraham's failure to stand in that relationship would be catastrophic, in that he would have sacrificed his happiness for nothing.
- Abraham is admirable but at the same time appalling.
  - One weeps for the tragic hero.
  - But one does not weep for Abraham, because one does not understand what he is doing.

### **The Problem of Verification**

- There is an apparent problem for the knight of faith: how does he verify that the purported higher end is legitimate?
- He cannot appeal to the universal, since the end is higher than the universal.
- It might be thought that legitimacy is to be judged by the results of faith.
- But results come after the act, and so if one must judge by results, one will never act at all.
- Also, because the end is higher than the universal, yet the results are found in the finite realm of the universal, no finite consequences of the act are adequate to judge it.
- Greatness is to be judged by the act itself, not by its outcome.
- The anxiety and distress which were the trial of the great person are what allow admiration, rather than envy, of them.

### **The Case of the Virgin Mary**

- The Virgin Mary was as great a person as ever lived.
- What is it that makes her great?
- It is not simply because she, among all women, was favored by God to be the mother of his son.
- What makes her great, and worthy of being the mother of God, is her commitment to God
- She is made greater because she endured “the anxiety, the distress, the paradox” in giving birth to God’s son just as she might to any human being.
- She does not need any admiration by the world, just as Abraham does not need the tears of the world.
- The poet shows why the tragic hero deserves the tears of others, but it is greater when the knight of faith says “Do not weep for me, but weep for yourself.”

### **Summary of the Discussion**

- Either Abraham was intending to commit murder or he was serving an end higher than the ethical.
- This is a paradox that cannot be mediated.
- How Abraham got into this situation, and how he stayed in it, cannot be explained.

- The tragic hero can accomplish his ends through his own effort, with the advice of others.
- No one can become a knight of faith through his own effort, and there is no one to give him any advice.
- Although faith is a marvel, nobody is excluded from having it.
- Faith is a passion, and passion is what unites all human life.

### **Other Important Writings**

- Two of Kierkegaard's books help complete Kierkegaard's account of religious faith.
  - *The Concept of Dread*, by "Vigilius Haufniensis" (1844).
  - *The Sickness Unto Death*, by "Anti-Climacus" (1849).
- *The Concept of Dread* (or of *Anxiety, angst*) explores the psychological basis for the doctrine of original sin.
- The basic idea is that *angst* is a feeling we have when we recognize the myriad possibilities that our freedom opens up for us.
- Our *angst* leads us to behave sinfully without knowledge of what sin is.
- In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard identifies sin with the psychological state of despair.
- Despair is the result of the conflict between our finitude and our infinite relation to God.