The Epistemology Of Soren Kierkegaard

by Siegbert W. Becker

Few religious thinkers of the nineteenth century have captured the imagination of our time as has Soren Kierkegaard, whose native pessimism, flowing perhaps from his voluntary and involuntary frustrations, has made him an apostle of our own age, which on its own admission finds it hard to believe that all things work together for good to them that love the Lord. Kierkagaard has been called the "melancholy Dane," and the title fits him well. Martin says that he never knew what human happiness was.[1] Theodor Haecker has tried to show that in large measure his melancholy stemmed from his deep consciousness of a physical deformity, which he tried to hide as much as possible and which he in some way associated with guilt of some sort.[2] At the same time, it seems well established that melancholy was a family trait, especially prominent in Kierkegaard's father. Fear, dread, doubt, and despair haunted Kierkegaard almost all the days of his life, and it might be said that it is this that makes him speak so convincingly to much o f the religious world of our time, which is beginning to have at least a few doubts about its own competence to meet life victoriously in its own strength.

Soren Kierkegaard[3] was born in Copenhagen in 1813. His father, Mikael Kierkegaard was a wealthy retired linen merchant, a man of deep piety, whose melanaholy stemmed from a fear that he had committed the sin against the Holy Ghost. As a poor boy, herding cattle on the heaths of the island of Jutland, cold and hungry, he had stood on a hill and cursed God. Soon after this he began to prosper, so that he was able to retire with considerable wealth in middle age. His very prosperity he saw as a sign that God had forsaken him. He was married at the age of thirty-eight, but two years later his wife died. Martin says that after the death of his first wife, he entered into an illegitimate connection with his housekeeper, whom he then subsequently married. They had seven children, of whom Soren was the youngest born when his father was fifty-six years old. Five of these children preceded the father in death, and, with the exception of Soren and his brother, Peter, no member of the family lived beyond the age of thirty-three years. Kierkegaard himself expected to die at the age of thirty-three, which was one of the reasons for the feverish haste with which he wrote.

His father wanted Soren to become a pastor and at the age of seventeen, after a particularly somber childhood, he entered the University of Copenhagen. Here he became aquainted with the works of Hegel, whose philosophy at first attracted and then repelled him. While at the university, he departed more and more from the religious faith of his youth and plunged himself into a life of dissipation. It was during this period of his life that his father confided to him the secret sins of his life. The revelation caused Soren to rebel against all authority for a time, but after a few months of dissolute living, he returned home and was reconciled to his father, who died a few years after this, in 1838, having left an indelible mark upon his son.

What Martin calls "the second great formative influence of his life," his engagement to Regine Olson, took place in 1840, when he was 27 years old. Kierkegaard was in love with her, but for some reason or other he began almost at once to feel that the engagement was a mistake. Perhaps his sense of his own guilt as well as the guilty secret of his father's life, his consciousness of his physical deformity, and his melancholic disposition all contributed to this decision. At any rate, in spite of Regina's protests, the engagement was broken off after about a year.

Kierkegaard now had little to bind him to this world. His father and mother as well as five of his brothers and sisters were dead and Regine Olson had finally been put off. His father had left him a fortune large enough so that he had no need to concern himself about his daily bread. He therefore devoted himself completely to what he considered his God-given task, arousing and awakening the Christians of his time to an understanding of what Christianity really meant. Whether he ever understood the real nature of Christianity or not is difficult to determine. Some of the things which he says certainly seem to indicate that for Kierkegaard

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[1] H. V. Martin: *Kierkegaard, the Melancholy Dane*, Philosoghical Library, New York, 1950, p. 13.

[2] Theodor Haecker: *Kierdegaard, the Cripple*, Philosophical Library, New York, 1950.

[3] For the sketch of Kierdegaard's life, I am indebted to H. V. Martin, op. cit., and R. Jolivet: *Introduction to Kierkegard*, E. P. Dutton and Co., New York.

Christianity was little more than a life of more or less pietistic self-denial. There are strong ascetic tendencies in his thought. He revolted against the cold formalism and the intellectual respectability of the Lutheran State Church, and it cannot be denied that here he had just grounds for complaint. Like his younger contemporary Ibsen, he saw the members of the State Church as people who said that they believed in Him who had borne for them the cross and the lance and who therefore concluded that they had full leave to dance. He was attracted by the ascetic piety of the Roman Church, so much so that many students of Kierkegaard, Protestant and Catholic, are of the opinion that had he lived he would have gone over to Rome.[4] His theology, while it is cast in a Lutheran mold, certainly has Romanistic overtones. Walter Lowrie, in a rather paradoxical note to one of Kierkegaard's *Edifying Discourses*, says, "S. K. firmly believed in the *Lutheran doctrine* of man's impotence to do anything to deserve salvation—but he hold it in a *Catholic sense*, as is evident in *The Works of Love*."[5] Yet in one of his last books he wrote, "A man is justified by faith, and therefore, in God's name, to hell with the Pope and all his auxiliary assistants."[6]

It will be clear from all this how difficult it is to pin down precisely what the position of Kierkegaard was in this matter. And what is true here could be duplicated in a hundred other areas. Like Karl Barth, his thought is always on the wing and it takes a sharp eye and a good aim to bring it down. And when it is once neatly laid out before us cold and dead, Kierkagaard would himself disown it.

After his break with Regina a steady stream of literary production flowed from his pen. It will be sufficient for our purposes merely to list his books with their dates.

1841 - *The Concept of Irony*
1843 - *Either/Or*
1843 - *Repetition*
1843 - *Fear and Trembling*
1843-1845 - *Edifying Discourses*
1844 - *Philosophical Fragments*
1844 - *The Concept of Dread*
1845 - *Stages on Life's Way*
1846 - *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript*
1847 - *Edifying Discourses*
1847 - *The Works of* Love
1848 - *Christian Discourses*
1848 - *The Point of View*
1849 - *The Sickness Unto Death*
1850 - *Training in Christianity*
1851 - For *Self-Examination*

In the last years of his life he issued several pamphlets attacking the leaders of the State Church. In 1855, in the midst of this battle, he died, at the age of 42. His funeral sermon was preached by his brother, Peter, who was at that time a Bishop of the State Church.

The Irrationalism of Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard has been called "the apostle of absurdity."[7] This title he deserves, for his whole approach toward religious knowledge is one that treads reason underfoot. Macintosh calls this position irrational,[8] but it

[4] Martin: Op. cit., p. 108; Jolivet: Op. cit., p. 206.
[5] Soren Kierkegaard: *Training in Christianity*, (trans. by Lowrie), Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1947, p. 266.
[6] Martin, op. cit., p. 108.
[7] Marjorie Grene: *Dreadful Freedom*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1948, p. 15.

might more correctly be termed antirational. In this he was a true child of the Lutheran Church. Luther repeatedly rejected reason both as a source of religious knowledge of the true God and as a competent judge of religious truth. "*Ratio inimica fidei*" is a constantly recurring theme in Luther's thought. His favorite designation of reason was the terms "the devils mistress." Scorn for the judicial capacity of reason is a note which repeatedly recurs in conservative Lutheran theology.

This antinomy between reason and revelation in Lutheran theology is set forth in the title of a book published in 1941 by Theodore Engelder of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, which was called "*Reason Or Revelation?*" Kierkegaard would have been pleased with the title even though there are many things in the book with which he would not agree. Again and again he makes the point that a choice must be made between the two, that one cannot have both. It must always be "either-or" and never "both-and."

We might quote just a few passages from Engelder which will show the position of Lutheran theology in this matter. He says, for example, "He (the Scriptural theologian) is not disturbed by logical discrepancies that appear. It is not his business to satisfy his reason[9].... Christian theology can bear all manner of logical absurdities and mathematical impossibilities."[10] In another place, in speaking of the doubts that come to a Christian, he writes, "We cannot answer them by means of logic. But we have an answer, and that is: Faith is above logic.... 'I spit on the philosophy that cannot see beyond "two plus two equals four"'... There are ways of truth other than the way of logic.... And when she (human reason) now tells us that, according to the laws of psychology, fear, real fear, and trust, real trust, cannot be in the same heart ... we say: A plague upon your philosophy."[11]

Kierkegaard's position is similar to this. The rational approach to religious knowledge he rejects absolutely. He reacted strongly against the Hegelian philosophy which tied all thought into a neat package without any loose ends in a system of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. This philosophic oonstruct he constantly ridicules as "The System" and he says that Hegel would have been a great man if after he had finished the system he would have stepped back and looked at it and said that it was after all just a mental exercise, and nothing more. But as it is, Hegel is only a comic figure.

Kierkegaard insisted that by speculation we can never find God or attain to any knowledge of Him. Speculative philosophy is not the way to find the truth.[12] He is opposed to the use of logic as a way to attain to religious knowledge.[13] "The speculative philosopher", he says, "is perhaps at the farthest possible remove from Christianity." [14]

Yet he is influenced by the Hegelian system. He retained the dialectic method of Flagel, but he rejected every attempt at synthesis of the opposing thoughts expressed in the thesis and antithesis. He allows them to stand without making any effort to reconcile them. In fact, he sets himself implacably against any *attempt* at synthesis. His philosophy has therefore been called "the theology of paradox." It should be noted that Kiarkagaard did not invent this word, nor was he the first to call attention to this feature of the Christian faith. In the seventh century, St. Germanus wrote a hymn on the Incarnation which began with the words, "Μέγα καί παράδοξον Θαύμα." Martin Luther had written of the Incarnation, "Now, to be sure, we Christians are not so utterly devoid of all reason and sense as the Jews consider us, who take us to be nothing but crazy geese and ducks, unable to perceive or notice what folly it is to believe that God is man and that in one Godhead there are three distinct Persons. No; praise God, we perceive indeed that this doctrine cannot and will not be perceived by

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[8] D.C. Macintosh: *The Problem of Religious Knowledge*, Harper, New York, 1940, Chapter XIX.
[9] Theodore Engelder: *Reason or Revelation*, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1941, pp. 96-97.
[10] Ibid. p. 129.
[11] Ibid. p. 170.
[12] E. Sivertsen: *Faith and Reason in Soren Kierkegaard's Philosohpy of Religion*, Doctor's Dissertation, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, chicago, 1949, p. 95.
[13] Ibid. p. 96.
[14] Soren Kierdegaard: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, (translated by Swenson and Lowrie), Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1944, p.193.

reason."[15] In fact, Luther goes so far as to say, "If harmonizing were in order, we could not retain a single article of faith."[16] He hold that the articles of faith are against all philosophy.[17]

Even the term "dialbotical theology" can be traced back to Luther. He says, for example, "In the hour of death and perils we find that we are but poor dialecticians and cannot stand our ground.... But a good dialectician distinguishes between the Law and the Gospel; he admits that he has not fulfilled the Law, but declares: From this premise the conclusion does not follow that I must despair and be damned. For the Gospel bids me believe in Christ and trust in His works and righteousness."[18] In another place, he writes, "Be a good dialectician and tell the Law: Stay where you belong."[19]

This refusal to synthesize, to look for explanations of irreconcilable opposites, Kierkegaard regarded as the chief difference between his philosophy and the philosophy of Germany. He writes, "Danish philosophy, if there can some day be talk of such a thing, will differ in this respect from the German, that it will not begin with nothing, or without all presupposition, nor explain everything by mediating; but on the contrary, it will begin with the proposition: that there are many things between heaven and earth which no philosophy has explained."[20] This same refusal to mediate between thesis and antithesis, this refusal to synthesize, is expressed in the *Journals*, where he says, "The idea of philosophy is mediation—Christianity's is the paradox."[21]

The greatest of all paradoxes for Kierkegaard is the incarnation, the fact that God is man and that man is God in Jesus Christ. The acceptance of this truth is for Kierkegaard the essence of Christian faith. In the *Concluding UnscientificPostscript* he says, "What is now the absurd? The absurd is—that the eternal truth has come into being in time, that God has come into being, has been born, has grown up, and so forth, precisely like any other individual human being, quite indistinguishable from other individuals."[22] This is the "absolute paradox."[23]

Here Kierkegaard's position begins to show tendencies which seem to break with the historic orthodox Lutheran position. It is true that Lutheranism has always seen the incarnation as a paradox, but it seems rather strange, in view of Kierkegaard's strong sense of sin, that he did not see that the central paradox for Lutheranism is the antithesis between Law and Gospel, God's hatred and wrath against all sinners on the one hand, and His love and grace for all sinners on the other. That Kierkegaard did not recognize this is doubly strange since it is here that the paradox becomes most intimately tied up with the problem of man's salvation. This is the paradox which is above all others "existential." It may be that this paradox did not appeal to Kierkegaard because it comes too close to being solved at least in a measure, for human thought in the cross of Christs where "righteousness and peace have kissed each other." And by all oddss Kierkegaard had to have *unsolved* and *insoluble* paradox. Anything less would rob faith of anything to which it might cling.

Kierkegaard emphasized this paradoxical nature of Christianity because he opposed the conditions which had made the Christian faith a respectable thing. To make Christianity *reasonable* was to him treason to Christianity.[24] Precisely this unreasonableness of Christianity was the offense against which the cultered educated, but unbelieving world of the first century stumbled. If Christianity is not an offense to our intellectual faculties then there is something wrong with it. "The early Christians knew that their faith was not intellectually respectable, and they believed against the understanding; the modem Christian, after hearing the sermon of a Liberal Protestant clergyman or reading a Catholic treatise on 'natural theology' is tempted to believe because the understanding assents to what is presented. But to believe because the understanding assents is in reality *not*

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[15] *Luther's Works*, St. Louis ed., X, 107.
[16] Quoted by Engelder, op. cit., p. 125.
[17] *Luther's Works*, St. Louis ed., XXII, 1024.
[18] Ibid. IV, 2077f.
[19] Ibid. IX, 26.
[20] Grene, op. cit., p. 20.
[21] R. Bretall: *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1946, p. 14.
[22] Op. cit., p. 188.
[23] Ibid. p. 195.
[24] Bretall, op. cit., p. xxiii.

to believe."[25] Any attempt to prove the truth of Christianity on rational grounds is unbelief pure and simple. Kierkegaard would reject apologetics in every form as being unworthy of a real Christian. That there is a great deal of truth in his protest cannot be denied. It does seem rather strange that Christians who believe the Scriptures should spend a great deal of time trying to prove that the book of Jonah is true because there is scientific evidence that whales *can* swallow men.

On the other hand, one cannot escape the feeling, and this, I believe, is the only way that one can deal with Kierkegaard, that the Danish philosopher not only rejects reason as a source or a judge of truth, but that he goes far beyond this and intends actually to rob reason of any function in the Christian faith. Even reason in it apprehending powers, as a means of grasping divine truth in revelation is rejected. This would seem to be one of the reasons for his rejection of the Scriptures as the source or authority for the Christian faith. In the *Philosophical Fragments* he takes the position that the traditional idea that the knowledge of God is conveyed to us through the instrumentality of the Scriptures and the historical revelation is false teaching.[26] All that is necessary of the truth of Scripture is the fact of the incarnation.[27] This is too much even for Emil Brunner, who says, "It was therefore an exaggeration ... when the great Danish thinker maintained that in order to become a Christian, in order to establish the Christian faith, there was no longer any need of 'narrative' or record; all that was required was to state that God become Man."[28]

Right here we begin to detect a latent rationalism in Kierkegaard. For all his disapproval of reason, there is no question that his whole concept of religious knowledge is philosophically based. It certainly does not rest on the Word of God, on the Bible. And while he vehemently rejects the idea that the truth comes by speculation he does hold that it comes by reflection. The difference, in the final analysis, is hard to detect. It is difficult to see how, if the objective revelation in the Scriptures is surrendered, some form of rationalism can be avoided. To speak of revelation in that case may well be a subtle way of rationalizing away one's own rationalism. In the *Journals*, there is a significant remark to the effect that mysticism has not the patience to wait for God . Is revelation,"[29] It would seem, however, that Kierkegaard's way is the way of the mystic mixed with the "patience to wait." Kierkegaardts method certainly gives the impres sion of being a mysticism with critical overtones, a mysticism in slow motion, as it were. H. R. Macintosh calls attention to the fact that Kierkegaard's terms for God have a "disagreeable resemblance to the well-known phrases of pantheistic mysticism."[30]

The judgment of James Collins, while it differs radically from that of most comentators on Kierkagaard, ought, I believe, to be given serious consideration. He rejects the idea the Kierkegaard is irrational in his approach, and he says, "Whatever the ambiguity surrounding his attitude toward philosophy Kierkegaard's mind is clearly set forth in regard to the rationalism-irrationalism controversy, He accepts neither horn of the dilemma, but the popularity of rationalism among his own contemporaries led him to emphasize its shortcomings just as strongly as those of rationalism."[31]

It would seem that in Kierkegaard's constant protest against reason, there lies a certain deference to reason. He is right, of course, in insisting on the sacrifice of the intellect, but it is to be questioned whether the Christian is still overly digsturbed by the paradoxical nature of the Christian faith. It ought to be remembered that while Paul says that Christ Crucified is foolishness to the Greeks, he also says that to them that are called He is the wisdom of God. The very fact that Kierkegaard is willing to give up everything in Christian revelation as we have it in the Scriptures except the incarnation would seem to indicate that he is more interested in establishing a rational paradox than in proclaiming a message of salvation. At any rate, the lady doth protest too much, me thinks. It is impossible to read the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* without the feeling that for all its antirationalism, here is a theology which is rationallyorientated. I do not doubt that H. R. Macintosh is right

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[25] Ibid.
[26] Sivertsen, op. cit., p. 129.
[27] H. R. Macintosh: *Types of Modern Theology*, Nisbet, London, 1949, p. 243.
[28] Emil Braunner: *The Christian doctrine of God*, westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1950, p. 35.
[29] Bretall, op. cit., p. 12.
[30] Op. cit. p. 239.
[31] James Collins: *The Existentialists*, Henry Regnery co., Chicago, 1952, p. 11.

when he says that for Kierkegaard "the way into the Kingdom lies through the simple crucifixion of intelligence."[32] That is why the incarnation bare and simple is enough for him. To accept this is to crucify reason totally.

Marjory Grene has caught this deference to reason also in her book, *Dreadfull Freedom*, in which she writes, "The source both of the weakness and the strength of Kierkegaard's philosophy is his love of paradox. Paradoxes are sometimes true and sometimes false, but he cherished them for their own sake. Granted that the paradox of the God-man did really hold deep meaning for him; that is clear from the power of the *Fragments*, where the question is explicitly focused from the start on that particular 'absolute' paradox.... But much of Kierkegaard's writing seems to be motivated not so much by an insight into the philosophical or religious appropriateness of paradox to a peculiar problem as by sheer intellectual delight in the absurd for its own sake."[33] She quotes Kierkegaard to the effect that "a thinker without a paradox is like a lover without passion—an inconsiderable follow." to which she adds the remark that "the thinker who loves the absurd for its own sake is, in his own way, a questionable character, for he may easily turn out as much falsity as truth or as much nonsense as sense."[34] For Kierkegaard the "absurd," and the "absurd" alone is the proper object of faith.[35] He does not want proofs for faith, in fact, he insists upon clearing away anything that may have any appearance of evidence first, and then believing. It is for this reason, unquestionably, that he rejects all history as a source of religious knowledge and particularly attacks Scripture as a ground upon which faith rests.

Kierkagaard's Existentialism.

Kierksgaard's opposition to reason was really directed against an exclusively intellectualistic view of God and man. He recognizes the competence of reason to deal with things. He had no quarrels for example, with the scientific method as long as it limited itself in its dealings to plants and animals and stars, but, he says, "such a soientific method becomes especially dangerous and pernicious when it would encroach also upon the sphere of spirit."[36]

The approach of science to reality he calls abstract or objective thinking. This method yields reliable knowledge about things, but it never attains to actual existence and it does not involve the personal relationship between the known and the knower. It is completely disinterested.

There is another type of thinking besides abstract thoughts and this he calls "pure thought." For this type of thinking he has nothing but scorn. It is the speculative thinking of the idealistic philosophers. The great mistake of "pure" thought is that it identifies thought and being. Kierkegaard is so completely dualistic in his epistemology that he holds that thought by itself is nothing real. It is nothing but thought. It is "pure." For this reason, a purely intellectual approach to reality can never succeed because the way between pure thought and existence is forever closed. At best, such an approach can tell us what is possible, but it can never present existence to us.

The only proper way to approach reality is by the avenue of existential thinking. This is the way in which the person relates himself personally to that which he knows. Existential truth is far more than a product of cognition, although reflection and cognition are involved. But Kierkegaard will not let his reason abstract itself from the rest of his personality. He will not be a mind floating around aimlessly in the realm of pure thought. That may be a good game to play when one has nothing better to do, but we should recognize that it is nothing more than playing and in that case too much damage will not be done.

Kierkegaard held that the rationalistic view of man is unbalanced because it fails to take into account the rest of personality. Kierkegaard's opposition was not so much to reason as such but rather to the rationalism

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[32] Op. cit., p. 247.
[33] Op. cit. pp. 35-36.
[34] Ibid.
[35] D. C. Macintosh, op. cit., p. 329.
[36] Swenson and Lowrie: *Kierdegaard's Unscientific Postscript*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1944, p. xv.

which deprived the emotions and the will of their proper function in the discovery of truth. The passions of man, his will, has to be given their proper place in the acquisition of truth. For Kierkegaard the apprehension of truth was not primarily a cognitive process. It was rather a state of being in which the whole person with all his faculties was involved. Anything less than this is an abstraction-process which can never put us into touch with the truth. He insists that the "existential situation cannot be transcribed within an abstract system of pure thought."[37]

This, too, was a protest against the cold intellectualism religion of the State Church. For Kierkegaard there was something wrong with a religion that could speak of Christ as the God-man and as Savior and still be so completely untouched by this truth. In his efforts to correct this deplorable religious situation, he leaned over too far in the other direction. One gains the impression from Kierkegaard that the objective side of truth is completely valueless. Here again he is unconsciously influenced far more than he realizes by the idealistic epistemology which he abhors. Kierkegaard was a metaphysical realist and he believed strongly in the objective reality of God, but for him this was always the second step rather than the first, and in this his approach is thoroughly idealistic. If we keep this in mind, we realize that there is a reason why the modern existentialists are to a great degree atheistic and militantly atheistic.

It is because of his idealistic background and his dualistic approach that in irreconcilable tension builds up in his epistemology. Collins says that Kierkegaard's position is "nonidealistic rather than irrational, although he does not see that systematic explanations can be made on a non-idealistic basis."[38] It was perhaps this dualism which prevented him from becoming a thorough going mystic. D. C. Macintosh sees this same problem in the thought of Kierkegaard, for he writes, "If, however, Kierkegaard had been able to shake off the weight of the nineteenth century's Kantian dualistic inheritance, he might have been able, by means of thinking which was at once 'existential' and objectively philosophical, to have held to the partially immanent, divinely functioning presence of an only partly transcendent God, revealed in nature and in man, but especially in the ethico-religious experience of deliverance from evil."[39]

Blackham, in his *Six Existential Thinkers* has a graphic paragraph which describes the problem with which Kierkegaard was wrestling. He writes, "The critical philosophy of Kant answers the primary question of modern philosophy (what can I know?) in a way which challenges all and satisfies none. If thought forms its object by arranging and interpreting appearances according to principles shared by all minds as such in their common constitution, and can never know the thing-in-itself which is the ground of appearances, the inter-subjectivity of the established sciences is accounted for, but its value as knowledge of reality is equivocal and the road is open to scepticism and nihilism. Hegel, in the most audacious and ambitious effort of modern philosophy to establish the unity of thought and Being, tried to show that thought is able to think its object because all nature and all history are in themselves means by which thought becomes an object to itself, just as I know myself by what I have become. The structure of thought and things is homogenous throughout. His prodigious demonstration of this thesis showed Kierkegaard not that the rational is the real but that pure thought is pure fantasy. Thoughts and things are not homogenous. Thought is abstracting from existence in a philosophy of history is dealing with itself and not with existence; the actualities of becoming which make the real process and cannot be thought are lost sight of and escape, leaving the thinker with is illusion. Hegel, therefore, does not do better than Kant."[40]

Kierkagaard himself emphatically rejects the identification of thought and being in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, where he insists that "a valid thought is a possibility and every further question as to whether it is real or not should be dismissed as irrelevant."[41] In the same work, he writes, "The philosophical principle of identity is precisely the opposite of what it seems to be; it is the expression for the fact that thought

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[37] J. Collins, op. cit., pp. 9-13.
[38] Op. cit., p. 13.
[39] D. C. Macintosh, op. cit., p. 333.
[40] H. J. Blackham: *Six Existential Thinkers*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., London, 1952, pp. 6-7.
[41] Op. cit., p. 292.

has deserted existence altogether, that it has emigrated to a sixth continent where it is wholly sufficient to itself in the absolute identity of thought and being. Pure thought has won through to a perfect victory, and has nothing, nothing to do with existence."[42]

Pure thought, according to Kierkegaard, is absentminded. The pure thinker forgets what it means to be a human being. "Pure thought is a phantom. The trustworthiness of sense has been demonstrated by modern idealism to be nothing more than an illusion. The real subject of knowledge is never the cognitive subject, because by the process of cognition we never got beyond the possible. The only true subject of knowledge is the ethically existing subject.[43] The ethically existing subject thinks indeed, but he thinks everything in relation to himself. This is what Kierkegaard has in mind when he repeats over and over the axiom that "Truth is subjectivity."

There must be in all true knowledge an inwardness that relates all things to the self. The existing individual is never able to transcend himself. All objectivity is therefore an illusion.[44] "The only reality to which an existing individual may have a relation that is more than cognitive," (which alone therefore can be adequate), "is his own reality, the fact that he exists; this reality constitutes his absolute interest."[45] It will be clear why Kierkegaard is thrown back on faith as the only way, the only means of appropriating religious knowledge. Faith is the organ, and the only valid organ, by which knowledge and truth can be laid hold of. For Kierkegaard, "religious knowledge is a matter of a faith that is pure subjectivity, and a risk, and a leap, because the incarnation is a paradox, contrary to reason, and therefore a rational uncertainty."[46]

There is nothing in the objective historical record of Scripture which compels or even produces faith. The impetus that prompts the leap of faith so that it grasps that which is epistemologically and objectively uncertain lies within the person himself. It lies in what Kierkegaard chose to call the passion of man. It is the dread and fear which is awakened by the consciousness of sin which finally drives a man to plunge into the abysmal darkness to lay hold of God who in that moment reveals Himself as the only possible Savior. Only the person who fools this driving need of God, the person whose whole being, intellect, will, and passion, cries out for the living God, only he really knows God. The knowledge of God is therefore conditioned by a knowledge of sin. When the sinner labors under the burden of sin, then there is no more speculation about proofs for God's existence. In such a situation there will be no more pretense of knowing God empirically or rationally, for now the knower knows God in the only way that He can truly be known, namely existentially. What this seems to mean is that the sinner knows that God must be, and that He must be Savior and Redeemer, or else the sinner is simply left with nothing in which to rest.

In the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard gives the following definition of truth. It is an "objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness,"[47] This is the highest truth attainable for an existing individual. This definition of truth also is a description of faith. He says, "Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am capable of grasping God objectively I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this, I must believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith."[48] Because this is the nature of faith and of religious truth, therefore Gods who is wholly other, and who is therefore beyond our objective cognition, can.never be found by philosophical speculation, nor is it possible to find God in an objective revelation. It is only the person with a deep passion for God who really knows Him, even while he says, "*If* there is a God."

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[42] Ibid. p. 295.
[43] Ibid. pp. 280-281.
[44] Ibid., p. 176ff.
[45] Ibid., p. 177.
[46] Sivertsen, op. cit., p. 105.
[47] Op. cit., p. 182.
[48] Op. cit., p. 182.

Because of this it is difficult to see why Kierkegaard makes so much of revelation. The knowledge of God really comes by reflection on our own inwardness. Sivertsen says that according to Kierkegaard, the Christian truth has always been in the individuals, but attempts have been made to force it on the individual from without by the doctrines based on the divine authority of the Bible.[49] The need of man forces man rather from within to postulate the existence of God. God is simply "the Limit" to which the being of man comes when he is faced with this problem. Yet we cannot think God for the finite is not capable of the infinite. And yet we are infinitely interested with out whole being to think God Here lies a paradox and also the need f or the greater paradox that God should become Man. What Kierkegaard calls revelation is hard to distinguish from what others have called intuition of the imaginative type.

This emphasis of Kierkegaard on the subjective, on existential knowledge, is certainly one that cannot be ruled out of court. The Church of his time and the Church of our time needs this reminder always, for there is nothing more deadly than a cold, dispassionate academic approach to the truth of God. This knowledge of God must be related to our whole life and being. And yet when Kierkegaard comes close to sneering at all objective truth, when he finds the truth of God within the individual, by revelation, of course, but still within the individual, then the emphasis has become unhealthy. There is something pragmatic in the axiom, "That is truth which is truth for thee," And while the Christian faith may be called a risk, a leap, it is surely not a leap into an abyss of darkness, but, thank God, it is rather a leap to the impregnable rock of God's objective revelation in the Holy Scriptures. In spite of what he says, it is to be wondered whether Kierkegaard did not remain a Christian in spite of his philosophy.

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[49] Op. cit., p. 127.

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