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Antinomy and Exegesis in Kierkegaard

The «discourses» provided Kierkegaard with a means to work out some explicitly religious implications of the philosophical principles which were advanced in his other works. One of the most important of the principles is the distinction between subjective and objective truth. It is fair to say that works like *For Self-Examination*, *Judge for Yourselves*, *Purity of Heart* and especially *Works of Love* are from one point of view a series of variations on that distinction, whose crucial role is reinforced by the very fact of its pervasive presence in the discourses.¹ In the case of Kierkegaard, however, it is better to speak not simply of «distinction» but of «antinomy», since he typically thinks in terms of opposites. The contrast specifically between subjective and objective truth sets up an antinomy which can appear in an endless variety of guises, and since the discourses often are in effect sermons on biblical texts, it quite naturally serves as a powerful exegetical principle.

I. Subjective Truth: *The Philosophical Principle*

The literature on the distinction between objective and subjective truth is far greater than that on Kierkegaard's exegetical method. Since I would like to focus on the latter, I will not deal with all of the aspects of the distinction in its own right. Some general remarks, however, are in order, because the notion of subjective truth does raise philosophic issues underlying the religious contrast between competence and incompetence which will concern us.

Subjective truth also has an objective aspect in so far as it depends on a decision about the objective paradox of the Incarnation. And this, in turn, raises two further questions. Is the paradox so radical that it eliminates all rational content from faith and reduces it to something wholly *formal* or does faith continue to have a specific *content* along with the central paradox? This crux in exegesis of Kierkegaard himself has a bearing on our estimate of his exegesis of Scripture, for if the substance of faith is irrelevant, Scripture would presumably have to be read as irrelevant in substance

¹ Subsequent references to Kierkegaard are to the following editions: EO=Either/Or, tr. W. Lowrie, Princeton 1944; FS=For Self-Examination and JY=Judge for Yourselves, tr. W. Lowrie, Princeton 1941; WL=Works of Love, tr. H. and E. Hong, New York 1962.

as well. The much controverted passage in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* points to the formal version of subjectivity: «The one prays in truth to God though he worships an idol; the other prays falsely to the true God, and hence worships in fact an idol.»² It is not difficult to see how false prayer is not prayer to the true God at all, but the corollary that prayer to an idol could be prayer to God seems to mean that *any* belief held passionately is true. And since paradox demands the highest passion, *any* powerful formal paradox is true quite apart from its content. But Kierkegaard in fact assumes the validity of orthodox theology (though his emphases are highly selective). Hence his position seems to be that we must, after all, also *know* (objectively) what we should (subjectively) *do*. Indeed, in the discourses he repeatedly insists that since we need merely read Scripture to know what it demands, critical doubt about its meaning is evasion. To paraphrase Chesterton, Christianity has not been tried and found obscure, it has been tried and found difficult.

The paraphrase may at first sight seem inapt because if Christianity rests on paradox it surely is «obscure». But for Kierkegaard obscurity would be a *conceptual* category rendered irrelevant by paradox. Christianity accordingly is either mere nonsense or it is in a different category – that of faith and action.

A contrast between action and knowledge has reappeared in the distinction drawn by J. Austin between the «performative» and the «descriptive» or «constative» function of statements. The former is an expression of intention to act (live) in certain ways; the latter is a description of facts. The distinction has been applied to Kierkegaard, «performative» being linked to subjective, «descriptive» to objective truth.³ The distinction can be used to rid theology of a metaphysical dimension if theological statements are simply taken as performative. The theologian then abandons ontological commitments which may be intellectually embarrassing and limits himself to assertion of attitudes.

Kierkegaard himself does, in fact, go very far in treating Christianity as pure action isolated from knowledge. But performative statements inevitably carry with them a descriptive element concerning the facts that are presupposed by actions. They are therefore not purely subjective, and in Kierkegaard's subjective truth there is a similar tension between the two factors. His characteristic emphasis on action goes with rejection of arbi-

² Tr. D. Swenson and W. Lowrie, Princeton 1941, 180.

³ Cf. R. Solomon, Kierkegaard and Subjective Truth, *Philosophy Today* 21 (1977) 209f.

trariness («subjectivity» in the pejorative sense).⁴ Subjective truth thus does not renounce factual claims and withdraw into a world of pure intentions. Such renunciation would in any case not be subjective, but objective and metaphysical in as much as it would claim to *know* that (say) the Incarnation is objectively false (and therefore can be no more than a symbol for ethical commitment). Only if «objective reality» is co-extensive with «rational» can we *know* that the Incarnation is objectively impossible, but truth and reality are not exhausted by reason. The believer begins instead from uncertainty – to which the proper response is faith, not dogmatic assertion or denial.⁵ Faith is performative, then, in the sense that it does not rest on conceptual certainty about objective reality, yet it is not left without objective reference. The reality of God or of the Incarnation is *conceptually uncertain*, can only be believed and is thus irrational, but faith expresses itself in *action* of which the believer is *certain* and which reflects the *reality* of divine commands.

We live in a world of objective facts but are ourselves free to act. Indeed, Kierkegaard defines the self in terms of freedom and insists on free decision to the point of holding that the past is no more necessary than the future because both are our creation.⁶ But reality is not simply our creation; as creatures we always have as objective correlates the Creator and his revelation. Yet since we can not control either as conceptual objects, we must assume their reality, and we do so in faith, which concerns itself with objective reality (e.g. the reality of God) as truly as knowledge does, yet overcomes uncertainty not with conceptual certainty but with the certainty of active obedience. In biblical terms: the two things we can never escape are the responsibility of our competence (with the Spirit's help) to love others and our incompetence to deal with God objectively.

The difficulty with this is that Kierkegaard's assumption of Scripture's clarity and authority is not easily reconciled with subjectivity. If subjective truth simply stipulates the reality and validity of revelation or of God, it seems to be arbitrary; if it does more than this, it seems to be objective. Kierkegaard's position accordingly has been evaluated in a wide variety of

⁴ For bad subjectivity: «...the accidental, the angular, the selfish, the eccentric, and so forth, all of which every human being can have enough of. Nor does Christianity deny that such things should be gotten rid of...» *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (above, n. 2), 117.

⁵ Truth is «an objective uncertainty held fast in an approximation-process of the most passionate inwardness...the paradoxical character of the truth is its objective uncertainty» (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, above, n. 2, 182f.).

⁶ *Philosophical Fragments*, tr. D. Swenson, Princeton 1967, 95f.

ways: as radical fideism, as sophisticated rationalism, as radical skepticism, as mistaken and unconvincing, as mistaken but subtle, as essentially sound.⁷ G. Gill has distinguished three general views of Kierkegaard's concept of faith: it is non-rational (1) in so far as it is assent to actual *absurdity*, (2) in so far as it is not *mental* assent, (3) in so far as it takes account both of reason and *will*.⁸ Gill supports a modified form of the third: faith can be neither simply conceptualized nor simply treated as irrational. He then links this position to that in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, accepting Allison's contention that Kierkegaard's point there is that «subjectivity is truth» excludes treatment of subjectivity itself as a *conceptual* system.⁹ One can question Gill's further claim (213f.) that the New Testament itself already takes such a view of faith, but the interpretation he represents seems to be the most adequate account of Kierkegaard, with the proviso that «subjective» is not co-extensive with «truth.» As we have seen, Kierkegaard recognizes objective truth in its proper sphere, and faith itself has an objective referent, i.e. revelation and God.¹⁰ The idolater may be truly passionate, but he is also truly objectively mistaken.

II. Subjective truth: *The Religious Principle*

In the discourses subjectivity is not so much a response to these specific philosophic *problems* associated with the limits of reason as it is a general human *condition*. In a pastoral or «edifying» context it is transformed into a contrast between competence and incompetence. Kierkegaard saw (notab-

⁷ For recent discussion (with references to further studies) cf. D. Wiebe, Religion and Truth, The Hague 1981, 128f., and a series of articles in the International Journal for Philosophy of Religion: M. Levine, Kierkegaard. What does the Subjective Individual Risk? 13 (1982) 13f.; G. Schufrieder, Kierkegaard on Belief without Justification 12 (1981) 149f.; E. McLane, Kierkegaard and Subjectivity 8 (1977) 211f.; L. Pojman, Kierkegaard on Justification of Belief 8 (1977) 75f.; C. Evans, Kierkegaard on Subjective Truth: Is God an Ethical Fiction? 7 (1976) 288f. Cf. also Pojman, The Logic of Subjectivity, Southern Journal of Philosophy 19 (1981) 73f.; J. Thomas, Christianity as Absurd, in: The Sources and Depths of Faith in Kierkegaard, Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana, v. 2, ed. M. Thulstrup, Copenhagen 1978.

⁸ Faith is as Faith Does, in Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling: Critical Appraisals, ed. R. Perkins, University, Alabama 1981, 204f.

⁹ H. Allison, Christianity and Nonsense, Review of Metaphysics 20 (1967) 432f. The papers of D. Wren, Abraham's Silence and the Logic of Faith, 160f., and M. Taylor, Sounds of Silence, 183f. (in Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling, above, n. 8), take a similar approach.

¹⁰ Cf. G. E. and G. B. Arbaugh, Kierkegaard's Authorship, London 1968, 222f., and J. Thomas, Subjectivity and Paradox, Oxford 1957.

ly in *Works of Love*) that the «cash value» for us of the paradox of Christ as God incarnate in man comes to this: God loves the unlovable and so must we. But nothing is more inconceivable for us than to love the unlovable – it is, in fact, possible only to *do* it.

The primacy of subjective truth is a reflection of Kierkegaard's skepticism as well as of his contention that in knowing something objectively we do not reach actuality but mere possibility.¹¹ But his concerns are ultimately religious and not epistemological. The limitation of our knowledge is symptomatic of deficiency on the fundamental level of our existence: our relationship to the Creator. The primary act about man is his creatureliness, and «with respect to God man is always in the wrong» (EO II, 283). Our relationship to God is the area of our incompetence, and so the ultimate antinomy governing human existence is that between our incompetence in relation to God and such competence as we have in relation to creation. The value of the latter even at its best is limited by Kierkegaard's skepticism, and when competence or knowledge within our own sphere is illegitimately extended to our relationship to God it becomes even more illusory.

Subjective truth is tied to our incompetence, objective truth to our competence, and the latter is the sphere of what is available to us, i.e., what we can variously use, control, dispose, calculate, manipulate, order, grasp and so on.¹² Contemporary Hegelianism epitomized for Kierkegaard the human vanity at work in all of this, and he fully appreciated the extent to which denial of man's competence threatens his self-esteem and therefore arouses resistance. The power of culture – which *is* human competence on a large, institutionalized scale – comes from its confidence that truth objec-

¹¹ «Knowledge places everything in the category of possibility, and to the extent that it is in possibility it is outside the reality of existence... Knowledge is the infinite art of equivocation or the infinite equivocation» (WL 218). Cf. M. Taylor, Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship, Princeton 1975, 42f.; A. Hügli, *Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität und die Objektivität des Erkennens bei Søren Kierkegaard*, Zürich 1973, 86f. On Kierkegaard's skepticism cf. R. Popkin, Kierkegaard and Skepticism, in: Kierkegaard, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. J. Thompson, Garden City 1972; Popkin, Hume and Kierkegaard, JR 31 (1951) 274f.; R. Popkin, Theological and Religious Skepticism, Christian Scholar 39 (1956) 150f.; J. Kleinman, Kierkegaard – Some Unfinished Business, Inquiry 19 (1976) 486f.; R. Perkins, For Sanity's Sake: Kant, Kierkegaard and Father Abraham, in Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling, above, n. 8, 43f.; Hügli, 131: «Der Glaube ist die Aufhebung des Zweifels und setzt darum den Zweifel im selben Masse voraus wie der Zweifel die objektive Reflexion. Aufs Ganze gesehen erscheint der Glaube gleichsam als die doppelte Negation der objektiven Gewissheit: Der Zweifel negiert die Gewissheit des Objektiven, der Glaube die Ungewissheit des Zweifels.»

¹² Cf. B. Daise, Kierkegaard and the Absolute Paradox, JHP 14 (1976) 67.

tively conforms to its experiences, values and thought patterns. Kierkegaard uses these same terms to draw a distinction between Christianity and Christendom, the latter being the objective, cultural distortion of the former. Objective truth is in fact uncertain, dealing as it does with possibility and not with actuality. The intellectual search for objective truth is in many ways the glory of man, but it also leads to doubt, despair or vanity, as in the Middle Ages did poverty or the quest for merit. For all such self-assertive «busyness» implies that we are competent to put things in order (FS 88, JY 199f.).

The alternative to objective knowledge and its spurious competence is subjective knowledge, i.e., the simple «acting» which Kierkegaard sets against «knowing». Acting is an expression of the inadequacy of objective knowledge, and truth is subjective in the sense that when we realize that knowledge which grasps objects is drastically limited, we are left with one alternative: action. The contrast between knowing and acting in favor of the latter recalls Marx's dictum that the point is not to interpret the world but to change it. In contrast to Marx, however, Kierkegaard holds that action does not definitively create immanent reality. If it did it would simply recreate a new set of illusory «objective» facts. We act before *God* and in response to *divine* revelation. For that reason action, though it is an expression of human incompetence, is a genuine alternative and not a gesture of defiance or despair. Kierkegaard thus construes action in religious terms: it does not spring from strength but from weakness. It is not self-assured manipulation of objects but risk-taking based on decision which may well run counter to objective probability. By insisting on the negativity of life lived in accordance with subjective truth – e.g., the danger, imprudence, naivety, resignation and self-denial of Christian love – Kierkegaard dissociates it sharply from the shrewd calculation of success that ordinarily motivates action. It becomes, in effect, «crazy» action that undoes itself, for in light of our inability to control things objectively to any real purpose we can only act without assurance of results or even with assurance of failure.¹³ And then truth resides solely in the «inwardness» of the decision and the action to which it leads.

This is the basis for the Lutheran strain in Kierkegaard's ethics. The antinomy of objective and subjective truth is a variation on the sharp contrast drawn by Luther between *theologia gloriae* and *theologia crucis*.

¹³ Cf. J. Thompson, *The Lonely Labyrinth*, Carbondale and Edwardsville 1967, 198, for subjectivity as suffering.

Ethics is a matter of response to absolute commands and not conformity to a *system* of rules,¹⁴ for systems are objective self-assertion and manipulation, while absolute commands in effect cancel themselves as objects because we can deal with them only by subjective response, i.e., in action which lies outside reflection about probability. The transformation of knowledge into action does not, however, drain action of all epistemic content, because it is founded on faith and that has for Kierkegaard an intellectual content. Faith replaces knowledge with the intellectual offense of the Incarnation, which is a doctrine but one shattering any conceptual system available to us, much as the action following in the wake of faith shatters any available ethical system.¹⁵

We are, then, competent only to act, and we are not competent to do that if competence is taken to include control of results. Truth is subjective because our incompetence means that we do not truly possess objects. We do «possess» definitive eternal commands (e.g., «You shall love») and freedom to make decisions. But neither freedom nor the eternal is objective because neither is «available» to us. Divine commands are absolute and therefore cannot be rationalized, while our own free obedience is equally non-rational because as a response to the demands of eternity it, too, often violates commonsense. It might well seem that subjective acting and believing in this sense are in fact preeminently instances of self-assertion and human competence. But Kierkegaard sees faith and obedience as direct expressions of need: what we believe to be true in our extremity is given to us by the grace of the «eternal». Since the object of faith is paradox and the results of our action are doubtful, self-assertion is excluded. True acting, i.e., obedience, is the very reverse of self-assertion, as faith and subjective truth are the very reverse of self-will. Kierkegaard's position here hinges on his concept of the self. *Self-knowledge is action* (JY 120f.), «The truth is the

¹⁴ Luther connected theology of the cross with response to an unconditional offer rather than with response to a command. At the same time, all divine offers are from one point of view commands ('Believe!'), and in insisting on Christianity's fusion of absolute human responsibility with absolute divine grace Kierkegaard severely criticized contemporary Lutheranism for compromising the former. His aim was to reassert the Gospel's commands without reinstating merit. His analysis of the situation is in structure very close to his analysis of the «craziness» of Christ in JY 184f. (below, p. 35). Commonsense is willing to accept either works if their merit is recognized or grace if it is free from works. True Lutheranism is «madness» in demanding both works without merit and grace with works (FS 40f.).

¹⁵ For freedom of Christian action from systematic restrictions cf. K. Schäfer, Hermeneutische Ontologie in den *Climacus-Schriften* Søren Kierkegaards, Munich 1968, 43.

way» and therefore is the opposite of objective knowledge because it is «before God» and thus cancels «us», just as obedience – leading as it often does to worldly failure – undoes us. In this dialectic view the self is an elusive entity floating between nothing and something, or rather is at once something and nothing, or still better, is something by being nothing. We are subjects (selves) only in respect to God (*He* calls us out of nothing), but in respect to God we are also nothing (i.e., not self-assertive objects as we like to suppose but selves existing only relative to Him) and since that is what we truly are, truth is subjectivity (WL 98). In this way Kierkegaard restates the biblical condemnation of human self-confidence: if we take the act of divine creation seriously, we come to see how oddly insubstantial a thing is the self – which we can «gain only by losing.»

III. Subjective Truth: *The Exegetical Application*

This New Testament dictum, of course, fits perfectly into the antinomy between objective and subjective truth or between man's competence and incompetence, and it is interesting to see how Kierkegaard reads biblical texts in antinomic terms. *Judge for Yourselves* (161f.) provides an initial example of his exegetical strategy.

«No man can serve two masters» (Mt 6,24). Kierkegaard begins by drawing attention to the gross violation of common experience in Jesus' words. It is obvious that men can and do serve more than one master. Prudent attention to a variety of interests – money, status, etc. – is simply a reasonable way of getting on in this world. And with this he has introduced one member of his antinomy: service to a variety of masters is the objective wisdom by which we are competent to deal with the world. But the Gospel demands that «serve» be taken in a narrow sense which radically simplifies things (the theme also of *Purity of Heart*). It calls us to abandon calculation and give ourselves solely to God in disregard of consequences. That is the awful demand of «the other world», of eternity. It is a «backbreaking work» totally beyond any man's capacity, for all efforts which we make bring us not one inch closer to God. Here we recognize the other member of the antinomy – our incompetence –, and Kierkegaard goes on to elaborate his typically negative, i.e., subjective, conception of virtue in the main theme of the discourse: Christ is the pattern for a *suffering* which makes no objective sense.

In this connection he reads the mission which Christ lays on the disciples in Mt 10,42, in terms of a more intricate, double antinomy (JY 173f.).

Common sense invites us to walk the safe middle road, but just as the life of Christ was bounded by the two extremes of star and cross – exaltation and humiliation –, so the disciples were sent out with «nothing», and on the other hand: «Whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward». The greatest king on earth guarantees his emissaries water, but he cannot provide the «check payable in heaven» which is carried by Christ's disciples to reward those who show love to them. The king's messenger is thus assured of the prudent golden mean; for the disciple, on the other hand, it is absurdly a matter of feast and/or famine. Here the category of incompetence is defined in terms of extremes:

Incompetence:
 The disciple has no water
 and
 he has a heavenly account

Competence:
 the king provides sensibly
 for his emissaries' needs

The claim on eternal life is a sign of our incompetence because it is a gift of pure grace available only when we despair of our own provisions – as we do when we set out without water. The emissaries' needs, on the other hand, are met by a judicious balancing of probabilities. Kierkegaard, in other words, is operating not with a single but with a double antinomy. If Christianity were simply opposed to prudence it would be pointless foolishness. Instead it is an assertion of the Creator's primacy (He offers the heavenly account), and that renders it «foolish» in a wholly non-trivial sense.

Some pages later Kierkegaard introduces another version of double antinomy (JY 184f.). It is natural that a man who is significant attract attention and that one who is insignificant not attract attention. But because Christ «serves only one master» he «employs the resources of omnipotence in order to ensure Himself continually of being nothing.» The crazy thing about him is to be nothing and yet attract attention – crazy because of the hatred he brought on himself by saying that his kingdom was not of this world and then insisting on establishing it in the midst of this world.

Incompetence:
insignificance leads to
fatal recognition

Competence:
significance leads to recognition
and
insignificance leads to obscurity

Here we can say that the extremes are the way things go sensibly, while the Christian way is a mean foolishly combining the worst of both extremes: insignificance and recognition (i.e., hatred).

The *Works of Love* (34f.) opens with a sustained, triple reading of Mt 22, 39:

You *shall* love your neighbor
You shall love your *neighbor*
You shall love your neighbor

The first means that as an absolute command, love is valid even when it is wholly imprudent by ordinary standards. Or we may say that it displays a higher prudence, for as a requirement of eternity it alone is free from the essential instability of human love. Thus the imperative conceals an indicative – a statement of timeless fact excluding the shrewd calculation by which profane love tries selfishly to devise a way through the probabilities of time. By placing emphasis on «neighbor» in his second reading Kierkegaard treats the word as a universal term so that everyone without exception is immediately recognizable as one's neighbor. If that is true, no time can be spent first on reflecting objectively about who the neighbor specifically is. There is time only for acting, i.e., for responding to eternity. The third reading makes the same point in a slightly different way. It takes account of the category of the self which also calls directly for decision and thus exemplifies the principle that impersonal doctrine which can be held at arms's length as an object is not by itself decisive for Christianity. The self can be understood only in terms of decision, and decision (i.e., subjectivity) is rooted in the *eternal*.

In the course of this extended discussion of Mt 22, 39 Kierkegaard offers an interesting interpretation of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10). He fastens on a genuinely peculiar feature of the text: the question put to Jesus asks who one's neighbor is, but the parable shows how one is oneself a neighbor to others. «Christ does not speak about recognizing one's neighbor but about

being a neighbor oneself.» The parable, in fact, perfectly illustrates Kierkegaard's subordination of objective to subjective: to *know* one's neighbor is (properly understood) to *be* a neighbor, and unconditional compassionate action is foolish because it is rooted in indifference to temporal prudence.

The story of the Two Sons in Mt 21, 28–31 provides another variation on the central antinomy (WL 100). When their father requests them to work in the vineyard one son refuses but later goes, the other initially agrees but subsequently fails to act. The antinomy here is «promising/acting» subdivided into «promising/not acting» and «not promising/acting». Promising is all too easily within our competence (as is objective knowledge), while acting is possible only when we despair of our capacity, as Kierkegaard suggests when he notes that the son who first refused is in a better state because his very refusal (it is like an unconscious admission of incompetence) may lead to remorse and repentance, and it is from a sense of human failure that action comes. Kierkegaard adds that for his part Christ said neither «yes» nor «no». The better son was obedient only at the last, while Christ's life of complete obedience to his Father was love as pure action. He was the Son who at once promised and acted. This is yet another refinement of the pattern of antinomy: one son is better than the other, but there is radical discontinuity in kind between both and Christ. Absolute obedience lies entirely outside the category of reflective, objective «yes» or «no». A similar line of thought comes up in *Works of Love* (71f.) when Kierkegaard denies that Christianity is the last term in a (Hegelian) series of values from high to higher to highest. Christianity is, in fact, discontinuous with everything (and therefore an offense). But since its radical difference opens room for God, the consolation it offers is not a function of sorrow – i.e., is not the best we can do relative to earthly woes – but is absolute joy. As in Mt 10, 42 the disciple's extreme poverty (no water) and extreme wealth (an account in heaven) outflank the prudent man's sensible provisions on both sides, so here absolute joy and absolute offense are extremes outflanking prudence and thereby opening space for the emergence of the true, subjective self and its true joy.

«Owe no one anything, except to love one another» (Rom 13, 8). Kierkegaard notices Paul's «queer way of speaking» (WI 173) and isolates it in the notion that the lover is the debtor. Common sense demands that one who loves is *owed* love in return. But that is true only of profane love, which calculates the terms of the relationship objectively, while true love is «infinite», therefore incompetent in finite calculation of its due and actually grateful for the opportunity to love, since only through such an act can a

true subject exist. This neat dialectic is scarcely Paul's own point, but Kierkegaard is correct in detecting a flavor of paradox in the injunction. The first clause is naturally taken in the sense of *owing no debt*. But *owe* can also mean *ought* and is then construed with the infinitive, hence Paul's shift to the ethical imperative: *you owe love* = *you ought to love*. The lingering objective and calculative sense of *owe* from the first clause enables Kierkegaard to identify an antinomy between sensible calculative love and inept Christian love which in submission to the *ought*, finds *itself* in debt for what it gives.

Finally, Kierkegaard's exposition of the enigmatic passage at Joh 21, 15f. (WL 154). «Jesus said to Simon Peter, *Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?*» He said to him, *Yes Lord, you know that I love you*. A second time he said to him, *Simon, son of John, do you love me?*» He said to him, *Yes Lord, you know that I love you*.» He said to him the third time, *Simon, son of John, do you love me?*» Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, *Do you love me?*» and he said to him, *Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you*.» As true man Jesus has a genuine need for love of individuals which is expressed in his questions and in Peter's answers. But all such human love is merely objective in as much as it is a search for reassurance. Any love which has to be verified through anxious reiteration and which seeks comparison is unsure. Hence, in so far as Jesus is divine the conversation is incongruous, and Peter's awareness of the incongruity comes to the surface when he ceases giving information: in his third answer he drops the *yes* and protests that Jesus knows everything. That is to say, the questions are not simply human requests for information and tests of love; they are also divine judgments – judgments on the uncertainty of Peter's love and entirely justified since he is the man *who also denied three times*.» But as we have seen, human weakness or sorrow is the opportunity for divine strength or joy, and so the questions are not purely judgmental. Kierkegaard's allusion to Peter's denial is picked up a few pages later when he observes that Jesus was *imprudent* enough to think that the traitor and not the betrayed was in danger and saved Peter with a forgiving glance as he himself was perishing. We have here again a double antinomy like that of the indebted lover in Romans: uncertain profane love set against divine love, which *condemns* absolutely only to *forgive* absolutely.¹⁶

¹⁶ For Kierkegaard's use of intricate dialectic patterns as stylistic devices in the discourses cf. H. Deuser, Søren Kierkegaard. Die paradoxe Dialektik des politischen Christen, Munich 1974, 199f.

Subjective truth, then, renounces the claims of objective knowledge. But are we not entitled to regard Kierkegaard's own use of antinomy as itself simply another «system», designed to determine (in the case of exegesis, for example) what Scripture objectively means? Kierkegaard was at least aware of the danger and tried to meet it. His disdain for The Professor is in part directed against that possibility, and the opening section of *For Self-Examination* («The Mirror of the Word») is a specific attempt to base comprehension of Scripture on subjective truth. The theme of the discourse – the need to be doers and not mere hearers – is a commonplace, but it takes on added force in view of the connection between subjective truth and acting and their contrast jointly with objective truth. It is that connection which prevents subjective truth and exegesis from becoming objective, and it does so by making them vanish whenever we try to grasp them as correct information. Scripture is a mirror in which we must see *ourselves*, not the mirror. There are two kinds of reading: the false lover reads for an objective understanding of his beloved's letter, the true lover reads to find what he should do for her (FS 50f.). Kierkegaard criticizes traditional exegesis and dogmatic theology for in fact protecting us *from* the absolute authority of Scripture and its practical implications.¹⁷ It is impossible to know what he would have had to say about later developments of the biblical historical criticism which was destined shortly to take over the cultural prestige of dogmatics and speculative theology. His objections, at any rate, seem in principle no less pertinent to its «objective» reconstructions, and he might well have viewed it as an extension of tendencies at work in his own time.¹⁸

¹⁷ Cf. Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers, ed. and tr. H. and H. Hong, Bloomington 1967–1978 (7 vols): nos. 202; 209; 210; 211; 212; 214; 2890; 3021; 3026; 3597; for Scripture's authority 207; 212.

¹⁸ H. Gerdes, *Der geschichtliche biblische Jesus oder der Christus der Philosophen*, Berlin 1974, 36f., notes that Kierkegaard's hostility to historical criticism goes along with a very free attitude on his own part toward Scriptural history, because asserting Scripture's absolute historical accuracy may be as wrong as denying it, in as much as both attitudes focus on objective truth. The concept of «contemporaneity» helps avoid preoccupation with objective past or present. It is worth noting that subjectivity (like contemporaneity) is as a matter of exegetical procedures close to the exegetical principle of «canon within the canon.» Luther's attitude towards the Epistle of James is a familiar instance (Gerdes 123). Like Luther's radically Christocentric exegesis, Kierkegaard's subjective reading permits him to highlight the essential sense of Scripture without denying any of its form («Holy Scriptures are the highway signs; Christ is the way», Journals, no. 208). And the tension in Kierkegaard between truth which is subjective, yet has an objective correlate is very similar to the tension between Luther's insistence on the exegetical sovereignty of faith on the one hand, his appeal on the other to the objective authority of Scripture.

«Take the Holy Scriptures – shut thy door; but take also ten dictionaries, twenty commentaries, and then thou canst read it just as tranquilly and unembarrassed as thou dost read a newspaper column. If perhaps, while thou art sitting comfortably and reading, it should occur to thee, strangely enough, to raise the question, «Have I done this? do I act accordingly?»... The danger after all is not great. For, look you, there are perhaps a number of various readings, and perhaps there has just been discovered a new manuscript – good gracious!... and perhaps there are five commentators of one opinion, and seven of another... Art thou learned, remember then that if thou dost not read God's Word in a different fashion, it may be said of thee that after having devoted many hours every blessed day throughout a long life to reading God's Word, thou hast nevertheless never read – God's Word... every blessed day there comes out an interpretation more learned than the last, more acute, more elegant, more profound...» (FS 56f.).

Reading Scripture properly is obeying, and obeying is acting. Hence the antinomy of subjective and objective truth is in Kierkegaard's own terms not systematic. On the contrary, in a striking variation on Socratic ignorance, its point is precisely that it cancels itself as objective knowledge. To grasp the distinction *is* to abandon objective knowledge and to turn Scripture into action. The exegetical consequence of the distinction is that Scripture's truth, too, is subjective: we know only that we must act in obedience to commands (FS 54). Kierkegaard's choice of quasi-sermons as a literary form helps bring out the conflation of medium and message: they exhort and exhortation to action is no more a matter of *«proof»* than is God's existence in Kierkegaard's view. *«The strictly religious man is one whose life is essentially action»* (FS 37); that is the truth which emerges when exegesis is informed by subjectivity.

The broad shift from a metaphysical to an historical view of reality in Western culture was well under way during Kierkegaard's lifetime. His own thought, in fact, is symptomatic of the change, but he himself actually placed history along with metaphysics on one side to form what he regarded as the true antithesis: that between obedience and disobedience. Speculation and historical knowledge belong together because they are in the last resort expressions of human self-assertion. But understanding Scripture now becomes an awkward problem. If we read it in speculative or dogmatic terms, it is a mere sounding board for our competence, and that is equally true if we read it in terms of historical research which yields only our judgments of probability. In either case we end up with a truth that possesses cultural authority but is religiously irrelevant. Kierkegaard's solution is to respond to Scripture non-dogmatically, non-metaphysically, non-historically, and that is what his exegetical practice aims at.

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