

# THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL CHALLENGE OF KIERKEGAARD'S TRUTH IS SUBJECTIVITY PRINCIPLE: A CASE STUDY IN THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS

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## ABSTRACT

*Kierkegaard rejects the modern concept of objective knowledge and focuses instead on subjectivity, defined as 'inwardness' and 'passion' in determining what might be called 'relevant' or 'existential' truth. Truth should thus be understood as an objective uncertainty appropriated passionately by the inward reflective experience of love and faith of the reflecting and experiencing self. Such 'Kierkegaardian' primacy of existential experience (of doubt, love, anxiety, faith) in epistemology implies that one must continue to discover the truth about morality and life, as one tries to live out that truth through the existential decisions that one makes each day. The proud pursuit of objectivity without a recognition of human limitations, and the dimension of subjectivity in the process, has proved to be a dead end that emits the stench of manipulation, loss of human dignity, and finally nihilism. Understanding the limits of reason will help us avoid the pitfall of 'scientism'.*

## Keywords

Søren Kierkegaard, epistemology, truth, reason, subjectivity, science, faith

## INTRODUCTION

Kierkegaard does not accept typical, modern epistemology's concept of moral and religious knowledge, wherein philosophers focus on objective justification (evidence) for our beliefs. We continue to see this futile emphasis being used against an ever-increasing threat of nihilism and moral relativism today. However, the solution of summoning more and more intellectual, rational support for whatever ethical principles we wish to promote is not working and will not work.

Similarly, we tend to think that it is the lack of objective evidence that causes the decline in religious faith, whether individually or collectively. According to Evans, Kierkegaard poses a permeating challenge here: "If our grasp of moral knowledge is less secure, it may be because we have become less moral. If religious faith has declined, it is not because we are now more rational and demand more evidence than people did in earlier times, but because we lack the imaginative and emotional capacities to understand the power of religious beliefs."

Not the evidence itself, but rather the character of the knower should be under primary scrutiny. This, however, is difficult to promote because humans prefer the position of 'detached observers' (or, supposedly, 'objective scientists') to that of 'engaged participants' who, by their own attitudes and actions, influence the very process of knowing and thus the results of their scrutiny. Søren Kierkegaard serves as an inspiration and a valuable resource in coping with the intricately connected challenges of personal ethics and epistemology.

## THE CHARACTER OF THE KNOWER AND THE 'TRUTH IS SUBJECTIVITY' PRINCIPLE

The Kierkegaardian statement 'truth is subjectivity' is

somewhat ambiguous and can mean different things. Kierkegaard is highly suspicious of the one-sided focus on objective reflection for it leads into existential indifference (the loss of the subject and subjectivity). In his Concluding Unscientific Postscript he argues that "[t]he way of objective reflection turns the subjective individual into something accidental and thereby turns existence into an indifferent, vanishing something. The way to the objective truth goes away from the subject, and while the subject and subjectivity become indifferent, the truth also becomes indifferent, and that is precisely its objective validity, because the interest, just like the decision, is subjectivity." Truth should rather be understood as an objective uncertainty appropriated passionately by the inward reflective experience of love and faith of the self. This is what Kierkegaard considers to be the highest truth a person can attain. The reading of Kierkegaard that might prove most useful on this subject understands this statement in the sense that "[t]he quest for truth, at least the truth about the most important things, cannot be divorced from the quest to become the kind of person we need to become. The primacy of epistemology implies that we must first discover the truth about morality and life, and then perhaps we can try to live out that truth. Perhaps it is true that we can only acquire the truth as part of the process whereby we learn to live out the truth." One of the reasons why this tends to be so difficult for Christians to practice might be the nature of the process – trying to live out the truth of Christ, the crucified Messiah. Martin Luther, the German Protestant reformer, was one of the few medieval theologians to depict the Christians' experience of suffering as a key hermeneutic component in understanding Christ's message. Hinkson is right to argue that for both, "Kierkegaard and Luther alike, suffering and discipleship remove the theology of the cross from the realm of mere cognitive theory (and hence from the danger of degenerating into a theology of glory) to the personally costly realm of praxis." "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.”

This brings us to what some authors have come to call the principle of ‘experiential epistemology.’ A strong emphasis on memory, logical argumentation and confessional purity of theological education (and thus on the objective aspects of religious faith) does not reflect the new dynamics of our culture. It omits, among other things, the focus on intuition, on emotional processing of events, and the intensity of experience. In fact, it does not reflect the complexity of the process of learning. This trend is further reinforced by a growing suspicion of all meta-narratives – whether they are religious, political, or philosophical – in the fragmented world of Western post-modernism. Kierkegaard should rightly be considered a prophet in this respect. The neglect of the subject and his inner world results in ambitious projects of human ideologies at the expense of the individual. The proud pursuit of objectivity without a recognition of human limitations, and the dimension of subjectivity in the process, has proved to be a dead end that emits the stench of manipulation, loss of human dignity, and finally nihilism. Harries is right to remind us of the necessity to acknowledge the limitations of our epistemological and scientific endeavors: “to understand that what we experience is only an appearance, bound by a particular perspective, is to be already on the road towards a more adequate, and that means here first of all less perspective-bound and in this sense freer understanding. The pursuit of truth demands a movement of self-transcendence that, by leading us to understand subjective appearance for what it is, opens a path towards a more adequate, more objective understanding.” Harries doesn’t suggest that the way to go is to get lost in mere subjective fancies. On the contrary, “[t]he pursuit of truth demands objectivity. But...truth here is not thought in relation to God. When we attempt to do so we discover ourselves to be in the wrong.

### LIMITS OF HUMAN REASON – IMPLICATIONS FOR EPISTEMOLOGY

In addition to the welcomed emphasis on the nature and the importance of the knower in the process of acquiring true knowledge, Kierkegaard reminds us of the limits of human reason. It should be no surprise to finite, mortal creatures that “there are limits to human reason, limits that make it necessary for humans to respond in faith to a divine revelation if we are to reach the truth about ourselves.” There are some truths which the human mind (being naturally limited in both the scope and nature of knowledge) cannot comprehend. The best and most important example that Kierkegaard points out is the phenomenon of Incarnation (John 1:1-3.14). It would certainly be unfounded to blame Kierkegaard of irrationalism on this point. After all, the human mind as a ‘conscious reality’ remains essentially an impenetrable mystery to scientists. Both philosophy and the cognitive sciences have begun an ambitious enterprise: “to

get beyond the confines of our individual minds, with their personal histories and idiosyncrasies, to grasp how reality is in itself, right down to its ultimate principles” so that we (thinking humans) can “bring the world up close and gaze into its inner constitution, so that everything falls into place under the bright light of universal reason [emphasis added].” Yet there is a remaining sense of awe and mystery, or at least there should be. For just like the separation of spirit (that is, conscious mind with its conscious will) remains a mystery in our understanding of evolution, our minds are not able to comprehend the mystery of the uniting of spirit with matter in the event of the ‘Word becoming Flesh,’ personified in Jesus from Nazareth. Philosophers, scientists, as well as theologians should rather humbly concede that neither science nor religion can claim to give a total account of reality. Science, philosophy, and theology rather operate in different dimensions, using different perspectives to answer the same or similar questions, as McGrath suggests in his *Science and Religion: A New Introduction*. McGrath indicates: “Science does not answer every question that we might have about the world. Neither does religion. Yet taken together they can offer a stereoscopic view of reality denied to those who limit themselves to one discipline’s perspective on things. The science and religion dialogue allows us to appreciate the distinct identities, strengths, and limits of each conversation partner. It also offers us a deeper understanding of things than either religion or science could offer unaided.

### DISTINGUISHING ‘SCIENCE’ FROM ‘SCIENTISM’

Thus there are good reasons to believe that the human society would be better off if it resisted the tempting delusions of ‘scientism’ and treated science for what it actually is: a specific, distinct culture with its own methodology, presupposition, and values. Much like theology, science is “a network of material practices, built environments (including laboratories, instrumentation, etc.) , traditions of apprenticeship, and learned rituals that emerged over time, in particular configurations, in different places.” So, epistemologically speaking, science – like ethics, as well as ‘Kierkegaardian’ faith – takes place within a complex human tradition. If we agree with the previous conclusion that “we can only acquire the truth as part of the process whereby we learn to live out the truth,” then it follows that in order to acquire new scientific knowledge, the scientists themselves ‘create their own phenomena’ (so to speak) and are changed in the process of a disciplined study of nature: “While science seeks to be disciplined by nature, there is also a sense in which science creates its own phenomena. It constitutes its world through experimental performance which is a learned performance requiring its own set of virtues and skills, deft employment of instrumentation, and a kind of ‘know-how’ that is not theoretical, and perhaps not even ‘intellectual.’” This leads us to reject the unscientific assumptions of metaphysical naturalism – which is, in fact, not primarily a product of the 18th and 19th centuries but rather of the 20th century. Metaphysical Naturalism is the belief that nature is all that exists, and that all things supernatural (including spirits, souls, gods, and non-natural values) therefore do not exist. Such assumptions are really nothing but unfounded, metaphysical presuppositions at variance with the legitimate

methodological naturalism of science. What we are thus dealing with here under the disguise of science, is a distinct, materialistic philosophy of reality, promoted dangerously as the only viable – that is, ‘objective, scientific’ – account of reality. A hidden ideology is thereby portrayed as respectable science, causing people to lay down their defenses and to readily accept everything such ‘science’ has to offer.

Our Central and Eastern European societies have had a direct experience with a radically militant strand of such metaphysical naturalism in the form of the atheistic materialism of Communist ideology – with grave socio-political, economic, and especially moral consequences. Severed from faith, the pragmatic reason of the ideologists had no convincing answer to the questions: ‘what constitutes moral action?’, and ‘why should I be moral?’ This is what already in the 18th century Kant suspected in his doctrine of radical evil.

### THE FUTURE OF FAITH AND REASON RELATIONSHIP

Faith and reason, theology and philosophy, should instead be seen as different ways of organizing affects, both being reconceived as assemblages. If we follow the lead of Adkins and Hinlicky in their *Rethinking Philosophy and Theology with Deleuze: A New Cartography*, perhaps we can constructively reinvent the relation between reason (philosophy) and faith (theology) in a way that allows their proper distinction while differentiating various domains of thought on the bases of what they create. What we see in Kierkegaard is an abrupt departure from the European metaphysical tradition which favored the noetic certainty of knowledge. For Kierkegaard, truth is more than a noetic, objective category, accessible to intellectual inquiry by a thinking subject. There must be a deeper, existential basis, related to the deepest aspirations and, yes, fears and doubts of the individual – a desire permeated by passion. The truth cannot be meaningful and relevant without this ‘subjective desire,’ whose doubt is the beginning of the highest form of existence. This leads us beyond delineating the boundaries of the unknown (and the unknowable) in the negative form, all the way forward to the positive question: ‘who am I and what am I to do?’

### KIERKEGAARD’S TRUTH IS SUBJECTIVITY VS. COMMUNAL HERMENEUTICS (AUTHENTIC SELFHOOD AND TRUE FAITH – TOWARD A MORE COMPLEX SOLUTION)

“Philosophy should...dare to deploy...critical analysis of religion as conservative of fragile human shelterings over against the chaos ... acknowledging both the necessity and inevitability of ‘anchoring’ immanence in transcendence by means of religious figures...”

The current challenges in epistemology and ethics seem to be interconnected. As Evans rightly suggests: “The common threads that tie the two areas together are the recognition of human finitude and the significance of divine authority.” The humble recognition of human finitude, which includes discerning the limits of human ability to understand and then to act upon the best (most “reasonable”) understanding, leads

Kierkegaard away from the ambitious prospects of the Enlightenment. These wanted to build a secular, human “Kingdom of God” on earth by means of a free (enlightened) intellectual reflection and applied (mostly technical) sciences. We observe a definite movement in Kierkegaard’s own outlook from *Either/Or* on to his later writings, culminating, perhaps, in his *Training in Christianity* and the *An Edifying Discourse*. “‘Away from the aesthetical!’ – ‘Away from speculation!’ – ‘Back to Christianity!’ ” His situation might have been described as that of a “bird in flight. In the Preface to one of his Discourses at the Communion he said, ‘The movement aptly terminates here at the foot of the altar.’” Thus, it is in Christianity where Kierkegaard sees the necessary transcendent foundation of the human self, that is, in “true Christianity,” not the kind one finds in the Christendom of his (and, perhaps, also our) time. Kierkegaard’s Christianity entails an “authentic selfhood” marked by an “inward passion” of the self, anchored directly in transcendence (in the divine call to faith) and being re-defined and freed by the transcendent divine authority via the powerful Word of God.

Paradoxically, Kierkegaard attempts to mediate an “unmediated” encounter of the self of his readers with that divine authority. In fact, he considers it important that his proposed subtitle to *Training in Christianity* – “Endeavour to Introduce Christianity into Christendom” – be “balanced off with a footnote ‘A Poetical Endeavour – without Authority.’” He wishes to get out of the picture, so to speak, and let the authority of God’s speaking directly “afflict” the individual. Each individual must receive his/her own “revelation” from God in an event of God speaking to a human self. However, there are major difficulties with this notion, as Evans justly points out, though he himself (i.e. Evans) remains rather optimistic (lacking complexity) in the end:

Kierkegaard is a philosopher who is well-aware of the dangers posed by claims to have a revelation from God, and the philosophical difficulties such claims pose. However, he believes that the quest for authentic selfhood requires us to risk these dangers and difficulties. Human beings are not self-enclosed monads, and they cannot achieve selfhood on their own as atomic individuals. Nor can they become authentic selves simply by conforming to the roles and norms assigned them by human societies. Rather, genuine selfhood requires us to stand before God as individuals. However, we cannot relate to God without hearing God’s word, and responding to it as God’s word. Authority and authentic selfhood thus go hand in hand.

We have arrived here at what this article’s authors believe to be the most intriguing point in processing Kierkegaard’s understanding of faith and its legacy for us today. Let us now offer some critical as well as appreciative remarks. First of all, a host of critical questions emerges: How far into the depths of the abyss of selfhood should one risk going before one gets lost in the introspective adventure of talking to oneself? How do we distinguish the genuine voice of revelation from the inward projections of our hopes or/and fears? After all, “[i]t is a critical task of both philosophy and theology to expose the often concealed but nevertheless functional deities or appeals to transcendence at work in accounts of our experience and require an accounting.” Can the individual hear God’s word directly, that is, as an act of

direct conveyance, unmediated and unstained by human tradition? Or is it true that, despite one's illusory fancies, one is never only a self-enclosed monad but always a product also of an environment, of a historic tradition? After all, both God's written and proclaimed word is a mediated product of a historic tradition (e.g. apostolic writings).

Faith, indeed, is a matter of lived experience. It would be foolish to try to comprehensibly define and justify it (by means of the natural ratio and its logic), just as it would be foolish to try to justify love. It is a constant striving within an individual's existence, beyond a simple conformity to the assigned roles and norms of human societies (or the churches, for that matter). "To justify, as Kierkegaard points out, is to place the universal higher than the particular." Yet, if it is true that faith is a surprising new possibility for the despairing self of the individual, an existential anchoring of the individual in the reality of divine transcendence, then this gift of faith, indeed, of new life, is intimately bound up with the self-giving history of divine life itself. This proceeds inwardly, in the eternal act of mutual self-giving of the Father to the Son and of the Son to the Father in their Spirit, who is the bond of their fellowship of love, and outwardly, in God's *oikonomia salutis* / "economy of salvation." God's "economy of salvation" refers to the actions of a unique God, who is coming to be known as the Father, Son, and Spirit in the history of salvation, thus revealing His Triune nature. The glorious story of salvation reveals the Triune God, who redeems and reconciles His own, alienated creatures and brings them back to Himself in the midst of the drama of human history. This is the way, the only way, to speak legitimately about God as the Father of Jesus, who gives Himself to us today in the love of His and Jesus' Spirit. One can hear an echo of some of these thoughts in Kierkegaard's works, especially his late treatises, such as *Training in Christianity by Anti-Climacus* (edited by S. Kierkegaard) and *An Edifying Discourse by S. Kierkegaard*. In fact, in an early letter written to his childhood friend, Emil Boesen, Kierkegaard clearly indicated his desire to find a way into the church. He said: "The more I think about our motto: 'A church stands in the distance,' the more I too feel the truth of what you once noted, that it has come considerably closer – but more than an auditor I cannot become just yet." The church – as the community of Christ's forgiven and reconciled followers – remains in the distance, and though Kierkegaard continues yearning to find a refuge in it, and though, in the course of his life, he feels closer and closer to it, he never enters in and becomes an "insider." He stands outside, alienated and yet burning with desire; disappointed and yet driven by hope that is beyond a cognitive grasp.

### PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

Our proposal is that to properly appropriate the welcomed emphasis of Kierkegaard's "truth is subjectivity" in our confused and fragmented world of post-Christendom, we need to understand this subjectivity in its dialectical relationship with the historical objectivity of God's economy of salvation, including the communal nature of Christian faith. Kierkegaard's subjectivity is not the anthropocentric subjectivity of the subsequent existentialists but rather a theological, "Christ-centered" subjectivity. For true

theological subjectivity "is to yearn for and think in anticipation of the new epoch in a "dePlatonized" and "reMessianized mode made possible by the penetration into this here and now by the crucified and risen Messiah in the incognito of the word of the cross." Faithful individuals rediscover their new identity and agency in this new messianic movement, this tangible, historic community of Jesus and His redeemed people, in which "agency is this achieved transcendence within immanence that comes by the joyful exchanges in which Jesus binds every burdened person to Himself and therewith to one another." Paradoxically, this new agency does not lead to self-glorification of humans by means of religion in either its institutionalized or individual/subjective form. Rather, arising from Jesus' messianic passion, it incorporates each individual in this same passion, transforming them into the likeness of the Logos of God by the power of His Spirit. Such dynamic integration of the reality of a communal, messianic movement (the visible Body of Christ) with the reality of the re-created (*ex nihilo!*) authentic selfhoods of faithful believers, standing as individuals and responding to God's call ought to be the proper response to the question: in what way can Kierkegaard's faith be a paradigm for Christians living in post-Christendom, and also a post-totalitarian context?. This is not the fateful, unqualified subjectivization and psychologization of religion at the expense of its historical and objective claims (and expressions, though they be ambiguous); nor the mindless conformance to the roles and norms assigned to believers by human institutions; nor the rationalistic, moralistic, emotionalistic, or mystical seclusion of atomic individuals as "self-enclosed monads" It is rather the rediscovery of the new identity and agency of "faithful individuals" in the new "messianic movement," as we have already stated, this tangible, historic community of Jesus and His redeemed people, in which "agency is this achieved transcendence within immanence that comes by the joyful exchanges in which Jesus binds every burdened person to Himself and therewith to one another." We might call this complex concept a "communal individualism" of the totus Christus. Theologians as well as scholars of religion should redirect their attention to the communal and linguistic structures of religion, rather than staying with the mere inner, psychological experience of an individual (or a community of detached individuals). For it is precisely through these communal, liturgical, linguistic structures at the core of Christian religion that Christian doctrine assumes an indispensable role within the ongoing life of the church. The triune nature of God and the divinity of Christ are not theoretical reflections on God and incarnation, but are the ongoing, communal, ecclesiastical hermeneutical interpretation of the man Jesus of Nazareth. The ongoing task of religious interpretation gives rise to a worshipping community, gathered around the Word preached and administered in/as sacraments, that is, a community that coheres around a shared narrative and thus participates in common practices as well as a common language composed of a particular vocabulary and grammar.

We can thus agree with Hinlicky that the theology that produces the kind of self-aware and God-aware faith of the new, "ecstatic," "de-centered," authentic self of the totus Christus-communal-individualism, "works through the

coherence of the Trinitarian articles of faith to glorify the redeeming God and to extend the knowledge of salvation of the sinner by inclusion in what the American philosopher Josiah Royce eloquently named the 'Beloved Community.'" The authentic faith experience of the self needs to be firmly rooted in and balanced by the faith of a historic worshipping community, gathered around the proclaimed Word and Sacraments. The "sacramental," communal, creedal faith of a historic, "catholic-apostolic" Church needs Kierkegaard and his potent prophetic criticism invoking personal engagement and responsibility. The radical "inward" individualism and existentialism of Kierkegaard's faith needs the communal focus of the Church's creedal, ecumenical theological reflection and worship, if it doesn't want to spin off into the realm of Gnosticism. We are not advocating here an uncritical parroting of dogmatic formulae or church laws and regulations. Instead, we are pointing out the possibility and, indeed, the necessity of a dynamic, sometimes painful struggle of the faithful, suspended between the timeless laws/promises of the Biblical narrative and the temporal needs for fresh prophetic insights. As has already been said, the members of Christ's beloved community are formed by a specific language (with a distinct grammar) of the Biblical narrative. These socio-linguistic tools are the tools of the Spirit who enables the community members to maintain faithfully and critically the continuity of religious interpretation – but only under the provision that theology remains the discipline of a historic Christian community whose members have been called and (trans-)formed by God's Word through the Gospel narrative. Without this dynamic and dialectic interconnection between the individual's act of trust in the divine promises and the reality of the communal dimension of the divinely effected salvation within the beloved community of the faithful (that is, Church as a fellowship of love in accordance with the teaching of John, the apostle), Protestant churches will reap the bitter fruits of wayward individualism.

We have experienced the detrimental effects of both atomistic individualism and radical collectivism in the life of our churches and society. Those like Kierkegaard, who are willing to attribute authority directly to God and His Word, but not to any religious institution, for fear of forfeiting the authenticity of their selfhood, ought to consider the true nature of faith as an ever surprising divine gift of an unthinkable inclusion of human finite selves into the overflowing, self-giving triune community of love. One should see that the Father so desired it, that Christ who became flesh, died, and rose again because of it, and that it reflects the mighty presence of the dzoe-imparting Spirit. This triune life of love wills to include the frail human selves into a historic community of Jesus and His redeemed people, in which "agency is this achieved transcendence within immanence that comes by the joyful exchanges in which Jesus binds every burdened person to Himself and therewith to one another;" which agency does not lead to self-glorification of the human being by means of religion in any form, but rather, arising from Jesus' Messianic passion, it incorporates each individual in this same passion, transforming them into the likeness of the Logos of God by the power of His Spirit. Thus, what we deal with is the sub contrario authority of the crucified Messiah and the already-

and-not-yet anticipatory reality of salvation of the totus Christus. So, Evans is once again on target: "Authority [of the Crucified, delegated to His followers in passion] and authentic selfhood [the new, de-centered self, bound to Jesus]...go hand in hand."

Twenty-five years after the collapse of communist oppression we see new forms of totalitarianism that arise from the growing fragmentation, atomization, and manipulation in our societies. One has cause to wonder whether the death of the spirit preceded the death of the body. In order to fight this trend, we need to base our solidarity with the "other" not upon some arbitrary, agreed-upon norms of behavior, but rather upon a radical rediscovering and nurturing of the "inner self" in a new "oikonomia of relationships" fostered in the Beloved Community of Christ and his people. Thus a new oikonomia of relationships emerges as the result of this intense, radical, revolutionary, "subjective time" by the merciful inclusion in the community of the beloved with its primary focus on forgiveness. This search for a new anchor of the human experience of being offers something deeper and more radical than political allegiances. It offers an existential anchor in the universal order of things that will bring about a new quality of relationships among human beings, a new quality of human mutuality, in which the human individual will cease to be a mere instrument on the path of other's success. What is at stake is the dignity of human being – the dignity of humans in confrontation with the mechanical world of human-created machines and the fictitious autonomy and freedom of the human subject. None of the ready-made substitutes will do the trick! With economic prosperity waning, political ideologies and religious fundamentalist ideas seem to be offering the ultimate safe haven. The result, however, is but an ever-increasing fragmentation of moral vision that spills over into alienation, discrimination, and violence. It is difficult to build a democracy without genuine democrats; it is equally (if not more) difficult to build a peaceful and content society without peace-loving, content individuals, firmly rooted in values that transcends them and give them meaning. Cultivating a new social fabric requires first of all the cultivation of genuine existential responsibility in overcoming the fundamental estrangement – the core alienation – of the individual. A newly re-appropriated paradigm of faith as the passionate (and therefore also compassionate) communal existence of the forgiven and reconciled authentic self can help us individually and socially build the much desired "new oikonomia of relationships."