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Finding God Over 70,000 Fathoms

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Finding God over 70,000 Fathoms

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Introduction

Historical figures are often caricatured into cartoon characters that, while maybe representing a partial truth about them, are an oversimplification of one characteristic of that person or that person's thought. For instance, romantics have often vilified Benjamin Franklin as the cutthroat, "time is money" businessmen who drove American capitalism to the point of work being the only worthy pursuit in life. However, Franklin also wrote poetry and satire in addition to his business, political, and scientific ventures. These oversimplifications run rampant in the field of philosophy. Søren Kierkegaard is a philosopher who has not escaped this misrepresentation. The picture often painted of Kierkegaard is that he is an irrationalist. Faith is not rational, and requires a "leap of faith," otherwise known as just willing yourself to believe something that is not rational. When one reads the works of Kierkegaard, one finds that such an easy statement about Kierkegaard is not so applicable. This paper is going to dive in to this question of rationality through the perspective of Søren Kierkegaard: Is faith irrational?

The point I will be arguing is that Kierkegaard is not actually an irrationalist. I see his arguments in support of Christianity to be beyond the realm of what he saw as human reason, which has its limits, and so rationality and irrationality are more of a distracting side show in his discussion of faith. I will be arguing that Kierkegaard did not think that Christian faith was rational or irrational, but happened independently of rationality. Reason had a place within a person's existence to work out the minutiae of spheres that could be asked about in an objective way, but objective rationality was a non-existent specter that could not

come to any subjective truths concerning Christianity. The truth of Christianity for Kierkegaard was not about objectivity. Throughout this paper, I will have to cover Kierkegaard's basic theology, going over the paradox, passion, offense, the Incarnation, the single individual, revelation, and Christendom. The final section will contain the culmination of my argument, in examining faith and my idea that I have called the "Root Paradigm." Before we begin, we must make two important notes and examine the argument I will be arguing against.

Preliminary Notes

The first of these is the use of pseudonyms in Kierkegaard's work. This paper will not enter into any discussion of the pseudonyms used by Kierkegaard. While these are important to note, this author sees a congruent enough strand of theology running through all the works here cited to create a reasonable outline of his philosophy. If more time were allowed, this would certainly become a factor in the following analysis.

The second thing to note is the distinction between rationalism and reason. Rationalism, as embodied by the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, is the philosophical system used to attain truth through rational means. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, rationalism is, "Any philosophy magnifying the role played by unaided reason, in the acquisition and justification of knowledge."¹ Reason is more of the logical reasoning within different philosophical systems. Reason is using logic to come to different conclusions within the philosophical school you work within, whether it be empiricism, rationalism, etc. Rationalism is a school of

¹ Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 318.

philosophy by itself. Reason is the use of logic to deduce truths within those schools of thought.

Chapter 1: The Counter-Argument

The counter argument is often placed into a false dichotomy. Faith *has* to be either rational or irrational. Kierkegaard did not support the role rationality played when devising religious truth, and so he is painted as the opposite; an irrationalist. His critics do not see the fact that the choice between rationality and irrationality is a simplification and a false-dichotomy. Some of these critics include Herbert Garelick, Brand Blanshard, and Alastair Hannay.

Blanshard is a fierce critic. He states that, "...The Christian supposes that Jesus as Christ existed...it is a rationally impossible position."² In Garlick's interpretation, when one comes to face the paradox, one does not set reason and the understanding aside, they believe in spite of reason. "...Realizing the rational impossibility of the Paradox one nevertheless believes *against* his reason."³ For Garlick, the Christian faith is antithetical to reason and rationality.

For Garelick, as well as other critics such as Blanshard and Hannay, the irrationality of Kierkegaard comes down to their interpretation of the Paradox. The Paradox is seen as a logical contradiction. "The leap of faith is a daring, passionate non-rational commitment to the paradoxical and the unintelligible."⁴ Blanshard sees it as a purely passionate commitment to believing and living out something that one

² Herbert M. Garelick, *The Anti-Christianity of Kierkegaard: A Study of Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965), 29.

³ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴ Brand Blanshard, "Kierkegaard on Faith," in *Essays on Kierkegaard*, ed. Jerry H. Gill (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Company, 1969), 114.

knows to not be rational. It doesn't matter that the Paradox does not follow the laws of logic; one must commit to it. Hannay makes the same observation. Hannay speaks of Kierkegaard's writing about the deity and its attributes of both having existed in time, yet still being eternal. He continues to say, "Here the paradox presents itself as a direct breach of the general logical principle that nothing can simultaneously have and lack the same property."⁵

These three critics all have the same critique of Kierkegaard: they see the Paradox to be a logical contradiction. This sets the scene for us to start looking at Kierkegaard's theology.

Chapter 2: The Paradox & Passion

The first thing we have to cover is the basic Christology of Kierkegaard. This pertains to his ideas of the paradox and offense. We have to keep in mind that we only have the space to scratch the surface, but Kierkegaard's theological writing was so self-involved, winding in and out of itself that we will find all of his ideas are interconnected and essential to his overall philosophy.

The idea of the paradox is one of the central points through which the rest of Kierkegaard's theology is diffused. We must first look at the general idea of the paradox, after which we will work through the ideas, and move on to thinking about Jesus Christ as a paradox:

But one must not think ill of the paradox, for the paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion: a mediocre fellow. But the ultimate

⁵ Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 107.

potentiation of every passion is always to will its own downfall, and so it is also the ultimate passion of the understanding [*Forstand*] to will the collision, although in one way or another the collision must become its downfall. This, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think;⁶

Kierkegaard assumes a person must be passionate about something. If a person is not passionate about something, then they barely live their life. Everyone is passionate about something because everybody is an existing human being (provided they live with passion, which is not something everyone does). “Existing, if this is not to be understood as just any sort of existing, cannot be done without passion.”⁷ Passion aims to destroy itself. It wants itself to fall. For the understanding then, for thought, the ultimate culmination of this is to think something that cannot be thought. This is how it brings itself down. Kierkegaard frequently refers to Jesus Christ as the paradox of the God-man. The underlying idea here is that God entered into time to become a single individual. The eternal became temporal. This flies in the face of human reason. The paradox is the ultimate passion of thought; a thought that cannot be thought. The relationship between the paradox, the understanding and faith is described below:

How, then, does the learner come to an understanding with this paradox, for we do not say that he is supposed to understand the paradox but is only to understand that this is the paradox. We have already shown how this occurs. It occurs when the understanding and the paradox happily encounter each other in the moment, when the understanding steps aside and the paradox gives itself, and the third something, the something in which this occurs (for it does not occur through the understanding, which is discharged, or through the paradox, which gives itself-consequently *in* something), is that happy

⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. & ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 37.

⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. & ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 311.

passion to which we shall now give a name, although for us it is not a matter of the name. We shall call it *faith*. This passion, then, must be that above-mentioned condition that the paradox provides; ⁸

This quotation gives us quite a lot to examine. According to Kierkegaard, Jesus is the God-man. He is a paradox. He does not seem to make sense. How could Jesus have been both man and God? It is a seeming mystery. A human being encounters Jesus in what Kierkegaard calls the moment, which is the moment that the eternal intersects the temporal. In this moment, a human being tries to understand Jesus, the paradox, the God-man. However, when a person realizes that they are not able to understand the paradox but only that it is a paradox, it is the understanding that steps aside, and the person accepts the paradox as it is. This is done in faith, which is given as a gift.

“...the paradox specifically unites the contradictories, is the eternalizing of the historical and the historicizing of the eternal.”⁹ The paradox unites the contradictories. The paradox is a union of things that do not seem to belong to each other; no one would ever think that they would belong with each other. It may not be natural for them to be together; this is the paradox. But the question we have to ask ourselves is how we should envision these contradictories in the paradox. The natural assumption is to picture these as formal, logical contradictions. This is the way most of Kierkegaard’s critics claim they are meant to be. An example of this would be a square circle. Purely by the ideas represented by these words, they are at odds. It is impossible for a square to be in the shape of a circle according to the definitions we give these words. According to the Kierkegaard scholar Stephen

⁸ Kierkegaard, *Fragments*, 59.

⁹ Kierkegaard, *Fragments*, 61.

Evans, “On this reading, Kierkegaardian faith requires the sacrifice of the intellect, the suicide of reason.”¹⁰ It is clear that Kierkegaard never wanted the *suicide* of reason or the *sacrifice* of the intellect, for the understanding steps aside as we have seen in quotations above. The understanding survives, yet it takes a break from the play of the game to allow faith to receive the paradox; it yields its playing time to faith and sits out on the bench for a rest.

Evans does not believe that Kierkegaard is talking about a formal, logical contradiction, and presents a solid case supporting it. “...we must recognize that the term ‘contradiction’ is not used solely or even mainly in this period to refer to a logical contradiction.”¹¹ Evans goes on to write about the way that Hegel and his followers used the term during the time period. Today we often think of a “contradiction” in the way that I wrote of above; a logical contradiction such as a square circle. This is the way that Kierkegaard’s critics have portrayed him, as we saw earlier. Hegel used the term “...‘contradiction’ to refer to any relation of opposition.”¹² Nature contained complexities that might have seemed to be logical contradictions, but both in fact were involved in nature, such as irregularity and regularity.¹³ This is the way in which Kierkegaard uses the term, “...to refer to some relation of incongruity or experienced opposition.”¹⁴ In the words of Kierkegaard

¹⁰ C. Stephen Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason: A Kierkegaardian Account* (Grand Rapids & Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 81.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

himself, “The God-man is an individual human being-not a fantastic unity that has never existed except *sub specie aeterni* [under the aspect of eternity]...”¹⁵

Another piece of evidence Evans presents is that for the absolute paradox to be such as it claims to be, “...it must be unique; the incarnation must somehow qualify as *the* absurd.”¹⁶ A formal, logical contradiction is not unique. We could think of several examples of formal contradictions that, by definition, cannot exist. The Incarnation is one-of-a-kind. There is nothing like this in history. We saw in a previous quotation that faith happens when the understanding steps aside of its own will, and, in faith, one believes the Incarnation. But what happens when a person does not believe the Incarnation? This is where Kierkegaard speaks of the idea of Offense.

Chapter 3: Offense

What is offense for Kierkegaard? “The relation, the relation of personality to Christianity, is not to doubt or to believe, but to be offended or to believe.”¹⁷ We can see from this quotation that offense is, essentially, the opposite of faith. It is a refusal of faith; it is a reaction against faith. It is also more than just doubt. Offense, in today’s usage, rings of a visceral reaction against a statement, or a person, or an ideology, etc. It is not just doubting and not believing the Christian message, but it is a strong reaction *against* the message of Christianity.

¹⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, trans. & ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 126.

¹⁶ Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason*, 83.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, *Practice*, 81n.

If the understanding does not step aside to believe the paradox in faith, then the person's reason is offended:

There is so much talk about being offended by Christianity because it is so dark and gloomy, offended because it is so rigorous etc., but it would be best of all to explain for once that the real reason that men are offended by Christianity is that it is too high, because its goal is not man's goal, because it wants to make man into something so extraordinary that he cannot grasp the thought; ¹⁸

A person cannot even grasp the thought that Christianity wants the person to think, and a common reaction to this is to have their reason offended. Who could contemplate, reasonably, that God, the eternal, entered time and became an individual human being? It's too difficult to even think! God entered time to become a lowly, rejected servant? Impossible!

The root of the paradox, however, is the idea that God came down and became a human being. Jesus Christ was both man and God. "Essentially offense is related to the composite of God and man, or to the God-man. Speculation has naturally considered itself able to 'comprehend' the God-man-as one can very well comprehend..."¹⁹ How is one supposed to understand this? It doesn't seem as though a person would be able to comprehend these two seemingly contradictory things. However, the possibility of offense is essential to Christian faith. In fact, Kierkegaard goes so far as to say that one can only come to faith by passing through the possibility of offense. "The possibility of offense is the crossroad, or it is like standing at the crossroad. From the possibility of offense, one turns either to offense

¹⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, trans. & ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 83.

¹⁹ Kierkegaard, *Practice*, 81.

[in reason] or to faith [in Christ], but one never comes to faith except from the possibility of offense.”²⁰

Chapter 4: The Incarnation & Rationality

But what is the offense, that which offends? That which conflicts with all (human) reason. And it is that which one wants to demonstrate! But to ‘demonstrate’ is, after all, to make something into the rational-actual that it is. Can one, then, make that which conflicts with all reason into the rational-actual? Certainly not, unless one wants to contradict oneself. One can ‘demonstrate’ only that it conflicts with reason;²¹

Kierkegaard did not posit that reason should never be used. He did not want to completely destroy it. There was a place for it, but it was not the sole way of thinking, especially when it came to the truth of Christianity. There will be much more to speak about later as to a person being “solely rational,” yet we must begin with Kierkegaard’s idea of the Incarnation.

The point of the incarnation, according to Kierkegaard, is that it is a concept that reason cannot understand. This is so not because reason has a perfectly clear grasp of what it means to be God and what it means to be human and properly judges that the two concepts are logically contradictory. In fact, just the reverse is the case. Human reason is baffled both by human nature and by God. It is further baffled by the conjunction of the two concepts, but not because reason has a clear understanding of either what it means to be human or what it means to be God. The incarnation may *appear* or *seem* to human reason to be a logical contradiction, but it is not *known* to be such, and the believer does not think that it is a formal contradiction;²²

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

²² Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason*, 83.

Do human beings really know what makes a God? Do we really know what it is to be a human being? Kierkegaard thought that human reason was not able to know what it was to be a god or a human being. The paradox was not about logical contradictions, the paradox "...is connected essentially with being a human being, and qualitatively with each human being in particular, whether he has much or little understanding."²³ The most intelligent and the least intelligent people have the same ability to become a Christian. No matter a person's intelligence *they are still a human being*, and they still have the possibility of offense. They are still able to move at the crossroads of offense to receive the paradox in faith.

The idea of the God-man strikes reason as 'the strangest of all things' because our universal experience is that the two are divergent. Our own temporality is at best a partial, incomplete realization of the eternal, and it generally includes an experience of failure. Hence we find the idea that the eternal could be perfectly realized in a temporal existence baffling;²⁴

This is what the paradox is; a baffling experience. It is not a logical contradiction, although this is the typical way that many people interpret it today. As we saw earlier, Kierkegaard does not mean it to be a logical contradiction. It is meant to refer to any confusing or bewildering experience.

We have to now consider how Kierkegaard viewed reason. He saw human reason as fundamentally flawed in a couple of ways. One important way was that reason had its limits. It was not able to discover everything about our existence; omniscience is not one of its attributes. One of the important boundaries for reason was the Incarnation. When reason could recognize its own limit in the Incarnation,

²³ Kierkegaard, *Concluding*, 566.

²⁴ Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason*, 84-85.

in the fact that the Incarnation unites the contradictories, it is humbled.²⁵ Because of this, reason is actually still necessary, for it is reason itself that realizes its own limits. As Merigala Gabriel put it:

Although reason does not explain faith, it nevertheless performs the valuable service of preparing and inviting man to accept it. Reason performs the additional service of establishing the fact that the object of faith transcends reason and cannot depend on it. Kierkegaard points out that reason enables us to understand that it is impossible to understand;²⁶

It needs to be humbled, because Kierkegaard saw reason as a domineering force. “Kierkegaard believes that reason has what we might term a restless, domineering quality, in that it is always striving to master or appropriate whatever it encounters.”²⁷ Reason and rationality is the sociopath that works at a company, employing sneaky, manipulative tactics to move up in the ranks. It seeks to dominate what it investigates, embodying the will to power wherever it exists. Reason is just like human beings: flawed and limited (which we know from revelation, but more on that later). For this reason, to envision that becoming absolutely rational and objective is the best way to move through life, Kierkegaard thought, is wrong. We now move on to Kierkegaard’s problems with pure rationality and objectivity.

Chapter 5: Objectivity & The Single Individual

To become completely objective is to lose your humanity. As Stephen Evans puts it, “Human beings think as whole persons. It is human beings who reflect, not

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁶ Merigala Gabriel, *Subjectivity and Religious Truth in the Philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2010), 86.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

brains or minds detached from concrete human persons. Their thinking therefore necessarily reflects the shape of their human interests and habits.”²⁸ To submit yourself to fully rationalistic and objective arguments for the truth of Christianity is to lose your identity. As Kierkegaard argues, Christianity is concerned with the single individual. God came and existed as a single individual, not as an objective system. “In order to shed light on logic, it might be desirable to become oriented psychologically in the state of mind of someone who thinks the logical-what kind of dying to oneself is required for that purpose, and to what extent the imagination plays a part in it.”²⁹ To think in completely logical terms is to die. One can become objective when one no longer exists, because while living in this world we are beings, living our lives through beliefs and systems that have an influence on the way we argue about the world. Our past experience and assumptions play a part in the way we think about the world, as well as the conclusions we come to about it. To believe otherwise is sophistry. “If the person occupied with logical thought is also human enough not to forget that he is an existing individual, even if he has finished the system, the fantasticality and the charlatantry will gradually vanish.”³⁰

For Kierkegaard, religious truths cannot be objectively verified. They must instead be subjectively appropriated. Human beings are not objective, and because of this, we cannot objectively and rationally discover if God does exist or not with any type of absolute certainty. Annemarie van Stee writes a very interesting paper, where she imagines Kierkegaard coming to give a talk at a University in our modern

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding*, 117.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

time. In the following quotation, Kierkegaard is speaking to the audience about the objective uncertainty of God:

It is exactly because of the fundamental objective uncertainty regarding God's existence that I can and must have faith. It means I have to actively hold fast to my faith in God. I need passion for that. And by inwardly appropriating my faith in God in this manner, my existence is transformed, which is what faith is all about;³¹

Kierkegaard has an acute sense of human nature, in realizing that nobody is absolutely objective. Humans are not objective beings who can come to any objectively certain proof of the existence of God because of the fact that we exist as single individuals in this world. Because of this, faith is what takes the place of objective certainty in the spheres that cannot contain objective certainty.

For Kierkegaard, "demonstrations" are always infused with assumptions and premises. A person who makes a logical argument has already contained within the premises of the argument the answer. In essence, perfect, rational objectivity is as the self was for David Hume; water slipping through the fingers. A person who is completely and absolutely objective has lost the very essence of themselves, their humanity and their existence.³²

In the third chapter of *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard lays out some very interesting ideas that are necessary to our conversation here. He uses Napoleon as an example of how many people's reasoning often assumes the conclusion within the premises from which they argue their point:

³¹ Annemarie van Stee, "Faith in a Rational Age: A Dialogue with Climacus," in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, ed. Heiko Schulz et al. (Berlin/Boston: CPI books GmbH, 2014), 160.

³² M. Jamie Ferreira, "Faith and the Kierkegaardian Leap," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay & Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 209-210.

If one wanted to demonstrate Napoleon's existence from Napoleon's works, would it not be most curious, since his existence certainly explains the works but the works do not demonstrate *his* existence unless I have already in advance interpreted the word 'his' in such a way as to have assumed that he exists;³³

What Kierkegaard is saying with this example is that the conclusion is often hidden within the premises of the argument. If you tried to argue that Napoleon existed because of his performance at the battle of Waterloo, Napoleon's existence is already assumed when you bring up the battle of Waterloo. "Therefore, whether I am moving in the world of sense palpability or in the world of thought, I never reason in conclusion to existence, but I reason in conclusion from existence."³⁴

Evans sees this as well. "...Climacus does not seem to object to an argument that in some sense rests on faith rather than being a replacement for faith."³⁵ Evans argues that on the surface, Climacus does reject apologetic arguments of one kind, but he accepts another kind; that in which the premises are infused with the conclusion. Climacus sees that human beings do not come to arguments, even rational ones, as pre-suppositionless. Nobody argues from a vacuum. A person's experience and belief system will always play a part in how and what they argue for, even in logical arguments. Evans documents how Climacus is perfectly comfortable with Socrates arguing the teleological argument with the existence of God (which is supposed to be the conclusion) infused into the reasoning that gets him to the conclusion of God existing and giving nature a purpose.³⁶ For Climacus, Socrates

³³ Kierkegaard, *Fragments*, 40.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 144.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 144-145.

does not try to consciously come from an “objective” standpoint, but his experience of the world allows him to see things in a certain way. This is not the logical fallacy of begging the question, where one of the premises contains the conclusion within it. God does not exist just because God exists. “Rather, the ‘subjectivity’ that Socrates brings to his experience of the world might be an enabling factor, providing Socrates with the skills and abilities needed to recognize features of the world that would otherwise be unnoticed.”³⁷ The subjective, breaking-in of truth is a lens that allows a person to come to another truth of the world that would not be experienced through an “objective” standpoint.

This is another way of saying that people already believe the things that they argue for. Anyone who argues for something already believes in what they are arguing for in some sense, otherwise they would not be mounting an argument for it. Kierkegaard reacts strongly against the “objectivity” of rationalism, and shows how a person’s belief system is inherent within the premises of their argument. Kierkegaard did not think that human beings could actually become “objective.” Even if they could, Christianity was not about being “objective.” He says it well in this following paragraph:

*Christianity, therefore, protests against all objectivity; it wants the subject to be infinitely concerned about himself. What it asks about is the subjectivity; the truth of Christianity, if it is at all, is only in this; objectively, it is not at all. And even if it is only in one single subject, then it is only in him, and there is greater Christian joy in heaven over this one than over world history and the system, which as objective powers are incommensurate with the essentially Christian;*³⁸

The truth of Christianity is in subjectivity.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

³⁸ Kierkegaard, *Concluding*, 130 (italics added).

The fact that Kierkegaard does not believe in absolute objectivity is related to another emphasis of his; everybody exists as a single individual. Even God came down to earth as an existing single individual. This means that, as people who live our lives every day, the one thing we can't do is not decide whether we have faith or not. Even if we are undecided on the issue, our actions make statements about our belief. Murray Rae puts it this way, "Agnosticism is not an option, for our actions are themselves an expression of our personal beliefs and commitments."³⁹ This is what is behind the leap of faith. "The 'leap' designates the fact that we are called upon to act even though the life-view or principle by which we act has not been proven true beyond all shadow of doubt."⁴⁰ The encounter with the paradox, the possibility of offense, and the movement towards faith is all done by a single individual. It is all about a single person and their humanity:

Thus offense is related to the single individual. And with this, Christianity begins, that is, with making every man a single individual, an individual sinner; and here everything that heaven and earth can muster regarding the possibility of offense (God alone has control of that) is concentrated-and this is Christianity. Then Christianity says to each individual: You shall believe-that is, either you shall be offended or you shall believe;⁴¹

Chapter 6: Revelation & Sin

With all this emphasis on subjectivity, how is it that Christianity has a common message? It would seem that, if religious truth is subjectively oriented then religious truth would be victim to the whimsical notions of anybody. Christian

³⁹ Murray Rae, *Kierkegaard and Theology* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2010), 55.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, 122.

doctrine could be as wide as the Grand Canyon, with people who all identify as Christians giving very different teachings. What is the common identity with which all Christians identify? It is the Bible, which contains the core teachings of Christianity as revealed by God. One of these teachings is the doctrine of sin, which Kierkegaard writes about most prominently in *The Sickness Unto Death*:

And no *human being* can come further than that; no man of himself and by himself can declare what sin is, precisely because he is in sin; all his talk about sin is basically a glossing over of sin, an excuse, a sinful watering down. That is why Christianity begins in another way: man has to learn what sin is by a revelation from God; sin is not a matter of a person's not having understood what is right but of his being unwilling to understanding it, of his not willing what is right;⁴²

A fish has no concept of being fully submerged in water. It will glide right through water, with no awareness of the surrounding chemical structure that keeps it functioning. The same is to be said of human beings. It was not until late in our development as a species when we discovered that the air around us consisted of oxygen. We simply had no consciousness of the fact that the air around us contained chemicals that were critical for our survival.

So it is with sin. We exist within sin, and therefore cannot on our own become aware of the fact that we live within it. Unless an outer force breaks into our awareness and alerts us to the fact that we live in a state called sin, it is not a force we will recognize on our own. We have to learn from *revelation*. This is in part a reaction to Kant. Human beings attain knowledge in certain ways, through certain categories. We are not able to have experiences outside of time or space. Revelation is the breaking in of God to catapult our consciousness onto another level of

⁴² *Ibid.*, 95.

alertness; it is God refocusing our gaze in another direction, causing us to understand truths that human beings could never come to realize on our own. Because humans only take in part of reality, God shifts our paradigm to realize what is really around us; the reality of sin.

This is also incorporated into Kierkegaard's idea of offense. He does not write about it formally along with the offensive nature of Christianity, but he offers us a tempting, quick formulation of it in *The Sickness Unto Death*. "...in short, the Christian teaching about sin is nothing but offensiveness toward man, charge upon charge; it is the suit that the divine as the prosecutor ventures to bring against man."⁴³ This teaching about sin is not something that is natural to human belief, yet it is a teaching that must simply be believed on the authority of the revelation itself. In a certain sense, Kierkegaard thinks that a human being has to purely believe in the revelation. Evidence can do nothing to convince a person of the reality of the revelation, nor should it:

It is not surprising, therefore, that for Kierkegaard religious truth lies above the capacities of finite, temporal human beings. God as eternal exceeds the power of human reason, and God as the eternal that has become temporal is doubly baffling. For Kierkegaard, this revelation on the part of God in human form should be believed because it has been authoritatively revealed. Any attempt to justify its content on philosophical grounds undermines the transcendent character of the revelation;⁴⁴

Evans wrote about authority quite elegantly here. We also see it in Kierkegaard:

But can any human being comprehend this Christian teaching? By no means, for it is indeed Christianity and therefore involves offense. It

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason*, 88.

must be believed. To comprehend is the range of man's relation to the human, but to believe is man's relation to the divine. How then does Christianity explain this incomprehensibility? Very consistently, in a way just as incomprehensible: by revealing it;⁴⁵

This is Kierkegaard reaffirming that it is a truth that must be revealed, because it is beyond human reason, and for this reason it must be purely believed on its own authority.

Chapter 7: Christendom & The Understanding

The objective defense of Christianity was the root of Kierkegaard's attacks on Christendom. Christendom was an age and a culture where Christianity was a given. Christianity was as common as eating. It is something that people just were. "Of course I'm a Christian!" That's all there was to it. There was no internal struggle or reckoning with the eternal happiness that Christianity was trying to provide. It was a cultural aptitude for the population, they were born Christian, and it was never questioned or even thought about as an integral part of their identity. Kierkegaard's emphasis on the single individual, and the moment of decision with the paradox was completely against this culture.

Imagine Christendom here in our current day, American culture (and to some extent, it is quite clear this still exists in some places). A person is born to Christian parents, baptized, and is raised in the church. That person lives their life in American culture, just as all other secular and religious Americans do. Reading the same books, watching the same movies, semi-involved in politics, but never making

⁴⁵ Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, 95.

a large splash in the surrounding culture around them. They meet up with a non-believing friend in a coffee shop to catch up. They turn to religion, and start to debate the existence of God and Jesus Christ, as well as the meaning of faith. The Christian will give reasons and arguments in favor of God's existence, which the non-believing friend then argues back against. The Christian gives all the philosophical arguments they can think of. Neither changes the others mind, but they part amicably as always (they are friends, of course!), and go back to their lives. They keep on living the same life in the culture surrounding them. Except for their belief about God and the way they debate each other, one would never be able to tell the difference between them.

This is the Christendom that Kierkegaard fights so strongly against. Christianity has little effect on one's life in the culture they live within, but one is a fully believing Christian. It is a Christianity that is more interested in defending itself in a rationalistic way against other religions than causing changes in the way a person lives their life. Kierkegaard would often go on diatribes concerning Christianity as a rationalistic, philosophical defense. The most passionate and poignant is below:

What a priceless anticlimax-that something that passes all understanding-is proved by three reasons, which, if they do anything at all, presumably do not pass all understanding and, quite the contrary, inevitably make it obvious to the understanding that this bliss by no means passes all understanding, for 'reasons,' after all, lie in the realm of the understanding. No, for that which passes all understanding-and for him who believes in it-three reasons mean no more than three bottles or three deer!-To go on, do you believe that a lover would ever think of conducting a defense of his being in love, that is, admit that to him it was not the absolute, unconditionally the absolute, but that he thought of it as being in a class with arguments against it and on that basis developed a defense; that is, do you believe

that he could or would confess that he was not in love, inform against himself that he was not in love?; ⁴⁶

Kierkegaard, while having respect for the intellect, and in one sense putting forward arguments in favor of Christianity, also did not believe that intellectuality was the prime relationship a person had with Christianity. Christianity was more about living than intellectually assenting to any set of doctrine. Stee puts it well, as if Kierkegaard himself were saying it, “...busying myself with these arguments distracts me from the task of existing in faith. It is much harder to live Christianly than to abstractly and absentmindedly develop arguments about it.”⁴⁷

The enlightenment, best personified by David Hume and Voltaire, had championed reason and objectivity. In a reaction to this, defenders of Christianity started to use rational arguments and objective evidence in order to “prove” Christianity (although this actually didn’t start with the enlightenment, it intensified with it). He makes the point that Christianity did not come into the world to be explained. “...it seems strange that Christianity should have come into the world in order to be explained, alas, as if it were itself puzzled about itself and therefore came into the world to seek out the wise man, the speculative thinker, who can aid with the explanation.”⁴⁸

The culture had removed the possibility of offense in Christianity. A person encounters Christ (or the paradox), and from here there are two possibilities, one can be offended, or the intellect steps aside, and a happy encounter takes place with the paradox within faith. Christendom had abolished this. One encounters Christ as

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴⁷ Stee, “Faith in a Rational Age,” 160.

⁴⁸ Kierkegaard, *Concluding*, 213.

one encounters a good friend at a coffee shop, without putting any work or struggle into it, even enjoying it:

“In established Christendom, this and every other possibility of offense is basically abolished—in established Christendom one becomes a Christian in the most pleasant way of the world without being aware of the slightest possibility of offense. In established Christendom, the natural man has had it his own way. There is no infinite contrast between what is Christian and what is secular. At most, what is Christian is related to the secular as a potentiation, but directly (particularly under the rubric of culture); it is an altogether regular comparison, the positive form of which is: civic justice. Such powerful measures to avoid offense as Christianity recommends are not needed in established Christendom; ⁴⁹

Chapter 8: Faith & The Root Paradigm

Here is the essence of everything I have argued and wish to argue: Faith is neither rational nor irrational because it involves a belief system that is planted in the root of a human being. It involves the entire essence of thinking, existing human beings who have fears, hopes, desires and emotions of all kinds. It is almost a form of intuitionism; a person interprets existence in such a way that the Christian message does not have to be explained, it just *is* the way it *is*. The Christian faith is the paradigm through which a person understands and, more importantly, acts in the world, and it pervades and penetrates the person’s very being, influencing their actions and how they interact with the world around them. When one becomes a Christian, reason and rationality are set aside; Christian faith happens *independently* of reason and rationality. As William Barrett wrote in his book, *Irrational Man*,

⁴⁹ Kierkegaard, *Practice*, 111-112.

“Strictly speaking, subjective truth is not a truth that I *have*, but a truth that I *am*.”⁵⁰

A similar sounding statement to this interpretation is found in Kierkegaard’s writing itself: “The *how* of the truth is precisely the truth.”⁵¹

Philosophical Fragments is the work that most systematically (if one can call it that, Kierkegaard did not work in traditional “systems”) lays out the philosophical categories of Christianity. He describes the *moment*, which is when a person comes to experience a rebirth, which is essentially a complete and total reorientation of one’s vision. The important aspect I want to note here is that this reorientation involves much more than listening to arguments and evidence. For Kierkegaard, it is not so much that one’s individual beliefs will change with new information, but the entire paradigm, or structured framework of existence, through which a person interprets reality, undergoes a major shift, to the extent that one “sees” things in a completely new way. The method through which we interpret our existence, as well as the actions that come about because of this re-envisioning, is radically changed.⁵²

Evans, in his commentary on *Philosophical Fragments*, which is called *Passionate Reason*, writes:

So Climacus’ argument cannot be seen as intended to convince the non-Christian that Christianity is true, and insofar it does not contradict the ‘Moral,’ which does not say that Christianity cannot be known to be true, but rather that the question cannot be decided without a ‘new organ,’ namely faith. Climacus’ remark is not an ‘objective argument,’ but one more reminder of how the person who has the condition will see things;⁵³

⁵⁰ William Barrett, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (New York: Anchor, 1990), 171.

⁵¹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding*, 323.

⁵² Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self*, 128.

⁵³ C. Stephen Evans, *Passionate Reason: Making Sense of Kierkegaard’s Philosophical Fragments* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 41.

For someone to become a Christian, it is not about being convinced by objective, rationalistic arguments. As we have seen above, Kierkegaard believes the whole notion of “objectivity” to be a phantasm. Nobody is truly “objective,” because we are individual, existing human beings. We do not come to beliefs in a vacuum. Nobody becomes a Christian through abstract thinking and logical arguments:

What is abstract thinking? It is thinking where there is no thinker. It ignores everything but thought, and in its own medium only thought is. Existence is not thoughtless, but in existence thought is in an alien medium. What does it mean, then, in the language of abstract thinking to ask about actuality in the sense of existence when abstraction expressly ignores it?;⁵⁴

It cannot be stated strongly enough, how Kierkegaard did not believe people come to belief systems through a completely rationalistic way. People do not examine the arguments, take their time, think through things a little bit, and then decide that Christianity makes the most sense:

So, then, there is a man who wants to have faith; well, let the comedy begin. He wants to have faith, but he wants to assure himself with the aid of objective deliberation and approximation. What happens? With the aid of approximation, the absurd becomes something else; it becomes probable, it becomes more probable, it may become to a high degree and exceedingly probable. Now he is all set to believe it, and he dares to say of himself that he does not believe as shoemakers and tailors and simple folk do, but only after long deliberation. Now he is all set to believe it, but, lo and behold, now it has indeed become impossible to believe it. The almost probable, the probable, the to-a-high-degree and exceedingly probably-that he can almost know, or as good as know, to a higher degree and exceedingly almost *know*-but *believe* it, that cannot be done, for the absurd is precisely the object of faith and only that can be believed;⁵⁵

Faith does not happen with certainty. It is a passion. A passion that involves a person’s deepest desires, emotion, and essence of their humanity. This is what shifts

⁵⁴ Kierkegaard, *Concluding*, 332.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 211.

when a person goes through a rebirth and becomes a Christian. “To make contact with truth we need to be reshaped from the ground up, and for Kierkegaard that requires a reorientation of our deepest desires.”⁵⁶

Once one becomes a Christian, once a person interprets their existence through the prism of Christianity, it is a truth that is *lived*, and not just *understood*. “Religion is not a system of intellectual propositions to which the believer assents because he knows it to be true, as a system of geometry is true; existentially, for the individual himself, religion means in the end simply *to be religious*.”⁵⁷ We are existing, living human beings who live our lives. We are not thought. We are not logic. We are not rationalistic beings. Kierkegaard recognizes this, and says that, whether you are a Christian or not, the bottom line is that, as an individually existing human being, the only thing that a person cannot do is not choose. One cannot opt out of life; you have to live it! And that requires making decisions and living in a certain way:

From his standpoint, to ask whether the goal of existence can be achieved, or whether there is even a goal, is to opt out of life. It is not that Climacus has up his sleeve some proof that life has a goal and that it can be attained. Rather, he puts aside this option because demanding such a proof would presuppose a detached perspective on life which may be suitable for a being who is Pure Thought, but which is inappropriate for an existing human being;⁵⁸

This “attached” perspective on life plays a role in our religious beliefs. Our emotions and desires largely influence the belief systems that we find ourselves becoming a part of. Human beings have presuppositions that allow ourselves to

⁵⁶ Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason*, 112.

⁵⁷ Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 170.

⁵⁸ Evans, *Passionate Reason*, 32.

connect with one message rather than another, or even a certain interpretation of existence over against another:

One way to think about Kierkegaard's claims about subjectivity is to see them as claims about the character of the ground of religious beliefs. The specifically Christian beliefs he is discussing, for example, can be understood as beliefs that require a particular set of emotions (or 'passions' in Kierkegaard's language). A person cannot come to believe in Christ without a strong sense of sinfulness and a desperate desire for God's forgiveness. Those are the factors that produce the beliefs. When they are present, the evidence is always sufficient; when they are lacking, no amount of evidence is enough;⁵⁹

This quotation from Evans also shines a light on the fact that evidence is usually assessed within the paradigm. For a non-Christian, no amount of evidence may be enough to convince them of the objective truth of Christianity. However, for somebody who is already within the paradigm, that evidence will become convincing.

Conclusion

Kierkegaard did not envision faith to be an easy thing. He did not think it was merely a belief to make us feel better and be more comfortable while patting ourselves on the back. Faith requires a constant will to live religiously in the terrifying wake of objective uncertainty. Throughout this paper, I have argued that faith is not rational or irrational but happens independently. Human beings are not objective thought structures, but exist as beings with emotions and desires. These play a part in the formation of our belief structures and lead us to faith independently of reason. Because of this, the fact that rationality and probability

⁵⁹ Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason*, 109.

matter very little to Kierkegaard (when it comes to the formation of Christian faith), it makes faith a terrifying, agonizing affair. While atheists in our day and age often cite religious belief as a source of comfort, Kierkegaard would have thought of reason and rationality as a source of comfort. The more and more faith in Christ was probable, with good, logical reasons for support, the more one would feel comforted by the increasing certainty. Gabriel puts it this way, "Kierkegaard disagreed with traditional apologetic moves. He regarded them as objective props theologians used in an effort to make belief easier."⁶⁰ The title of this paper comes from one of the most poignant sections in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, where Kierkegaard speaks of the terror of faith, because rationality has no part to play in one's life of faith. I will end with the quote from Kierkegaard on this sentiment:

I do not deny that it is comfortable to be a Christian and yet to be exempted from the martyrdom that always remains even if no external persecution is inflicted, and even if a Christian remains unnoticed as if he had never lived at all—the martyrdom of believing against the understanding, the mortal danger of lying out on 70,000 fathoms of water, and only there finding God. See, the wader feels his way with his foot, lest he go out so far that he cannot touch bottom. In the same way, with his understanding, the sensible person feels his way in probability and finds God where probability suffices and thanks him on the great festival days of probability when he has obtained a really good job and there is the probability of quick advancement to boot. And he thanks him when for a wife he finds a girl both beautiful and congenial, and even Councilor of War Marcussen says that it will be a happy marriage, that the girl has the kind of beauty that in all probability will last a long time, and that she is built in such a way that in all probability she will bear healthy and strong children. To believe against the understanding is something else, and to believe with the understanding cannot be done at all, because the person who believes with the understanding talks only about job and wife and fields and oxen and the like, which are in no way the object of faith, since faith *always* thanks God, is *always* in mortal danger in that collision of the infinite and the finite that is

⁶⁰ Gabriel, *Subjectivity and Religious Truth*, 88.

precisely a mortal danger for one who is composed of both. The believer cares so little for probability that he fears it most of all, since he knows very well that with it he is beginning to lose his faith; ⁶¹

⁶¹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding*, 232-233.

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