

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

## KIERKEGAARD AND DOGMATIC THEOLOGY : AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL IMPASSE

DIALECTIC theology has directed the attention of dogmatic theologians to the writings of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), who ardently hated all philosophies based on what he scornfully termed the "systematic idea". Because Hegel exemplified "systematic" thought, Kierkegaard attacked him relentlessly. Christian dogmatics is implicitly challenged by Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegel: Does the doctrinal interpretation of Christianity (as compared with the mystical, for example) stand under the same charges which Kierkegaard brought against Hegel's "systematic idea?" Or does dogmatic theology also dispute the "systematic idea?" Or does the truth lie between these extremes?

First, by "systematic", Kierkegaard does not describe a method for the logical arrangement of ideas, as do theologians when they speak of "systematic" theology. The "systematic idea" is an epistemological point of view which may, but need not, underlie ordered thinking. As "systematic" describes the expository procedure of theology, "dogmatic" designates its epistemological point of view. Since epistemology is the subject of this paper, the latter term is preferred.

Kierkegaard attacked the "systematic" epistemology which informs Hegel's entire philosophy; he did not attack his expository procedure. Kierkegaard did not distinguish method from theory of knowledge because Hegel himself did not do so. In fact, Hegel found in systematic method a natural means of expounding his philosophy of the unity of intellection and reality. Nevertheless, it is always the epistemology of Hegel's system, not orderly exposition, that Kierkegaard attacks.

What is the "systematic idea"?

The systematic Idea is the identity of subject and object, the unity of thought and being. . . . In the objective sense, thought is understood as being pure thought: this corresponds in an equally abstract-objective sense to its object, which object is therefore the thought itself, and the truth becomes

the correspondence of thought with itself. This objective thought has no relation to the existing subject. . . .<sup>1</sup>

The systematic idea is the proposition that thought and reality are one ; that subject and object are identical.

Kierkegaard maintained that Hegel did not conceive thought as an activity of the thinker; as something impossible to conceive apart from him. For Hegel, thought itself was an objective something. He abstracted thought from the individual who thinks.

Thought naturally seeks an object. In order to apprehend its object, thought subjects it to the process of abstraction. Kierkegaard points out that it was through abstraction that Hegel distinguished thought from the thinker. Thought discovers objects in their character as objects-of-thought (i.e., abstractions created by thought, which Hegel conceives to be their "real" character) apart from the varying forms in which any given object may be experienced. An object is known, according to Hegel's epistemology (as Kierkegaard expounds it), only when thought has taken the object to itself through abstraction. By this process, an object of thought is itself a thought.

What of the concept of truth, inquires Kierkegaard? How can the universality of a judgment of truth be assured? Hegel has no answers for these questions, replies Kierkegaard. The concept of truth loses all significance, since "the truth becomes the correspondence of thought with itself."<sup>2</sup>

False reasoning produced this preposterous conclusion, continues Kierkegaard. The notion of "abstract-objective thought" is absurd, since thought is by nature a function of an individual subject. The fatal flaw in Hegel's philosophy is that "this objective thought has no relation to the existing subject". Having to his own satisfaction destroyed the "systematic idea", Kierkegaard states the principle to which all this thought returns: the existence of the individual agent is the vital core of any philosophy.

This principle is applied in a fuller critique of Hegel.

This objective thought has no relation to the existing subject; and while we are always confronted with the difficult question of how the existing subject slips into this objectivity, where subjectivity is merely pure abstract subjectivity . . . it is certain that existing subjectivity tends more and more to evaporate.

<sup>1</sup> *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Walter Lowrie and David F. Swenson, trr. (Princeton University, 1941), p. 112.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, cf. pp. 169 ff.

And finally, if it is possible for a human being to become anything of the sort, it is merely something of which at most he becomes aware through the imagination, he becomes the pure abstract conscious participation in and knowledge of this pure relationship between thought and being, this pure identity; aye, this tautology, because this being which is ascribed to the thinker does not signify that he is, but only that he is engaged in thinking.<sup>1</sup>

How is it possible, asks Kierkegaard, for a "systematic" philosopher to attain pure thought, i.e., thought which is unconditioned by the thinking individual? Where thought is, there is a thinker. However, so long as the thinker exists—and if he cease to exist, thought ceases—his individuality will destroy the detachment of his thought. Yet thought does not occur as a general phenomenon, for it is the function of individual minds.

Kierkegaard is contemptuous of all who deceive themselves with the "systematic idea".

One must therefore be very careful in dealing with a philosopher of the Hegelian school. . . . Is he a human being, an existing human being? Is he himself *sub specie aeterni*, even when he sleeps, eats, blows his nose, or whatever else a human being does? Is he in himself the pure 'I am I'? . . . Does he in fact exist? And if he does, is he then not in process of becoming? And if he is in process of becoming, does he not face the future? And does he ever face the future by way of action? And if he never does, will he not forgive an ethical individuality for saying in passion and with dramatic truth, that he is an ass?<sup>2</sup>

Although the "systematist" may think of himself as "pure 'I am I'" in the conviction that he has attained immanent relation with reality, Kierkegaard contradicts him: "this being which is ascribed to the thinker does not signify that he is, but only that he is engaged in thinking."

Kierkegaard's dispute with Hegel is two-sided: the "systematic idea" destroys reality by identifying it with mere ideation, which occurs only in particular individuals;<sup>3</sup> its abandonment of the distinction between thought and reality renders the concept of truth ridiculous and its discovery impossible by making thought its own standard of truth.

<sup>1</sup> *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 112.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 295. "The philosophical principle of identity is precisely the opposite of what it seems to be; it is the expression for the fact that thought has deserted existence altogether, that it has emigrated to a sixth continent where it is wholly sufficient to itself in the absolute identity of thought and being. We may finally reach the stage of identifying existence with evil, taken in a certain emasculated metaphysical sense; in the humorous sense, existence will become an extremely long dragging out of things, a ludicrous delay. But even so there remains a possibility that the ethical may impose some restraint, since it accentuates existence, and abstract thought and humour still retain a relationship to existence. But pure thought has won through to a perfect victory, and has nothing, nothing to do with existence."

## I

Kierkegaard's conviction that thought and being are discontinuous rises out of the root concept of Existence (*Existenz*). That in which any individual's existence consists is explained sometimes in terms of human emotional experience; at other times psychologically, referring to the functioning of the mind; and again conceptually, referring to the ideas of the temporal and eternal.<sup>1</sup> Always the existing individual is central.

A primary characteristic of an existing individual is movement: "it is impossible to conceive existence without movement."<sup>2</sup> Movement is always present in becoming, and the individual is constantly in process of becoming. Kierkegaard views the Self as a complex of movements and dynamic relations.

Another characteristic intrinsic to the Self is thought. But thought has a dual character which presents a special problem. On the one hand, "all logical thinking employs the language of abstraction, and is *sub specie aeterni*. To think existence logically is thus to ignore the difficulty, the difficulty, that is, of thinking the eternal as in process of becoming".<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard is certain that thought is *sub specie aeterni*, i.e., unmoving. It cannot, therefore, give a reliable account of existence, for movement is essential to existence. "To think existence *sub specie aeterni* and in abstract terms is essentially to abrogate it. . . ."<sup>4</sup> He vehemently denies Hegel's right to bridge the gap between thought and movement by importing movement into logic "in the form of the transition category". This only creates a "new confusion", since movement is alien to the very nature of thought.

But there is another side to thought.

But inasmuch as all thought is eternal, there is here created a difficulty for the existing individual. Existence, like movement, is a difficult category to deal with; for if I think it, I abrogate it, and then I do not think it. It might therefore seem to be the proper thing to say that there is something which cannot be thought, namely, existence. But the difficulty persists, in that existence itself combines thinking with existing, in so far as the thinker exists.<sup>5</sup>

Here is the baffling aspect of thought: despite its static character, it is an integral function of the existing individual,

<sup>1</sup> *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 273.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. cit.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. cit.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.

who is immersed in becoming and movement. Kierkegaard illustrates by pointing to the Greek philosopher who perceived that pure thought is impossible to a living person: consistent to the last, he committed suicide, in order to destroy the movement he abhorred. Hegel's effort to give logic movement was merely inconsistency.

It is nevertheless possible to reconcile thought with Existence, since Existence is the "child that is born of the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, and is therefore a constant striving. . . . However much the subject has the infinite within himself, through being an existing individual, he is in process of becoming."<sup>1</sup> The thinking individual retains his self-identity, despite the changing nature of his humanity, because the eternal is present in his thought.

In so far as existence consists in movement there must be something which can give continuity to the movement and hold it together, for otherwise there is no movement. . . . The eternal is the factor of continuity; but an abstract eternity is extraneous to the movement of life, and a concrete eternity within the existing individual is the maximum degree of his passion.<sup>2</sup>

Thought is eternal, but it is also intrinsic to the existing individual. But existence is change; therefore, thought expresses with peculiar clarity the contradiction which is the very definition of existence.

A further determination enters: there are different kinds of thought, depending on the degree of interest which thought takes in existence (the degree of interest Kierkegaard terms "concreteness"). "Existence constitutes the highest interest of the existing individual, and his interest in his existence constitutes his reality."<sup>3</sup> There are two genuine kinds, or "media" of thought, and one imaginary medium: "Just as existence has combined thought and existence by making the existing individual a thinker, so there are two media: the medium of abstract thought, and the medium of reality. But pure thought is still a third medium, quite recently discovered." With this last ironical sentence, Kierkegaard attacks Hegel.

The relation which abstract thought still sustains to that from which it abstracts, is something which pure thought innocently or thoughtlessly ignores. . . . Pure thought is a phantom. If the Hegelian philosophy has emancipated itself from every presupposition [in that it makes an "absolute beginning" through

<sup>1</sup> *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 277.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

exhaustive abstraction; cf. pp. 99, 113, *Postscript*] it has won this freedom by means of one lunatic postulate: the initial transition to pure thought.<sup>1</sup>

“Pure thought” differs from abstract thought in that the former does not proceed out of given data, nor does it depend on any entity prior to itself. From an illusory absolute beginning, contends Kierkegaard, Hegel supposes that “pure thought” proceeds creatively, self-contained, and self-sustaining. “Abstract thought”, on the other hand, remains permanently dependent on the experimental data from which it abstracts; on this account, it is superior to “pure thought”.

But “abstract thought” is inferior to “existential thought”.

It has been said above that the abstract thinker, so far from proving his existence by his thought, rather makes it evident that his thought does not wholly succeed in proving the opposite. From this to draw the conclusion that an existing individual who really exists does not think at all, is an arbitrary misunderstanding. He certainly thinks, but he thinks everything in relation to himself, being infinitely interested in existing. Socrates was thus a man whose energies were devoted to thinking; but he reduced all other knowledge to indifference in that he infinitely accentuated ethical knowledge. This type of knowledge bears a relation to the existing subject who is infinitely interested in existing.<sup>2</sup>

Existential thought not only consciously depends on objects, like abstract thought; it knows that its whole meaning derives from its participation in the life of a particular thinker. Existential thought is chiefly interested in functioning in the total life of the individual.

Man thinks and exists, and existence separates thought and being. . . . What is abstract thought? It is thought without a thinker. . . . Existence is not devoid of thought, but in existence thought is in a foreign medium. . . . What is concrete thought? It is thought with a relation to a thinker, and to a definite particular something which is thought. . . .<sup>3</sup>

Examination of the relation of thought to its objects brings the philosopher to the same conclusion as did the inquiry into the mode of its functioning: existence is the only right object of thought. But to think existence is to abrogate it. Evidently an entirely new approach is necessary. Preparing for that new step, Kierkegaard states the aim of cognition: “The supreme paradox of all thought is the attempt to discover something which thought cannot think.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 278 f.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 281.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296.

<sup>4</sup> *Philosophical Fragments*, David Swenson, tr. (Princeton, 1936), p. 29.

The passionate search for truth drove Reason into paradox. "What is this unknown something with which Reason collides when inspired by its paradoxical passion, with the result of unsettling even man's knowledge of himself? It is the Unknown."<sup>1</sup> The failure of Reason to satisfy the passion for reality not only leaves passion undiminished, but intensifies it. Kierkegaard now turns from Reason to personal passion itself for his avenue to truth, dimly visible to thought in paradox.

## II

The whole functioning of thought in paradox is based on the fact that thought functions *sub specie aeterni*;<sup>2</sup> thought is therefore incapable of grasping change. But change is basic to real existence. The result is that cognition makes itself impossible, for it can never picture real existence, but only existence deprived of motion, i.e., the merely possible. The touch of thought transforms reality into mere possibility. Reality cannot be apprehended by thought except as possibility.

To illustrate Kierkegaard's meaning with a modern simile, thought treats reality as a motion picture camera treats motion. However fast the camera may take still pictures, the camera never photographs motion itself. The film strip is only a possible representation of the moving object, in that we say: "if" the object were to cease moving, it would appear thus at each instant a picture was made. In projection, the illusion of motion is complete. But in the case of the existing individual, change is basic to human character; accordingly, thought gives a fundamentally altered picture of reality. Thought lays hold only of a "suspension of the dialectical moment". Such a suspension is only an unreal possibility, since no individual can really exist and at the same time escape his peculiarly personal point of view in the interest of unbiased judgment. Existentially speaking, the idea of a photographer is nonsense. Objectivity is possible only in imagination, never in fact. Furthermore, it would be a violation of the fundamental ethical principle of existence to be objective, since most fully to exist is the highest duty of every person. The violence which thought does ethics is summed up thus:

All knowledge about reality is possibility. The only reality to which an existing individual may have a relation that is more than cognitive, is his own

<sup>1</sup> *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. p. 108 f. of this paper.

reality, the fact that he exists; this reality constitutes his absolute interest. Abstract thought requires him to become disinterested in order to acquire knowledge; the ethical demand is that he become infinitely interested in existing.<sup>1</sup>

The subordination of thought is even more explicit in the words which immediately follow:

The only reality that exists for an existing individual is his own ethical reality. To every other reality he stands in a cognitive relation; but true knowledge consists in translating the real into the possible. . . . The real subject is not the cognitive subject, since in knowing he moves in the sphere of the possible; the real subject is the ethically existing subject.<sup>2</sup>

This is Kierkegaard's mature view of the epistemological problem. Man's relation with reality is not an epistemological issue, since by Kierkegaard's definition, he can know only the possible. Only in passionate faith, unmediated by thought, can an individual apprehend reality. Kierkegaard's view of the discontinuity of thought and reality may be reviewed as follows.

The primary fact of human knowing is existence, a compound of the eternal and the temporal, the unchanging and the changing, the infinite and the finite. Although thought is a function of the existing individual, it functions *sub specie aeterni*. Thought perfectly expresses paradox in that it is a function of the individual, even though it cannot participate in or apprehend movement. All human functions, including thought, ought to have as their true object and highest interest the existing individual himself; this is an ethical imperative. But thought can no more grasp process than a camera can photograph motion. Thought must therefore be content with the secondary function of cognising mere possibility, which is an emasculated refraction of reality, lacking as it does the essential characteristic of existence, movement. Hegel's attempt to solve this difficulty by the "transition-category" of movement within thought is debarred by Kierkegaard as mere confusion.

### III

Kierkegaard's theses that "existence constitutes the highest interest of the existing individual" and that "his interest in his existence constitutes his reality" render epistemology un-

<sup>1</sup> *Postscript*, p. 280.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 281.

important.<sup>1</sup> To define reality as man-in-process (despite the presence of thought within him) and to reject epistemology as unimportant challenge theology directly. Epistemology has always been central in dogmatic theology.

All dogmatic philosophies presuppose an epistemology which relates intellection to reality in some reliable way. This is exemplified by contemporary Roman Catholic dogma. In the *Catholic Encyclopedia* Daniel Coghlan assails the Modernism of Le Roy (*Dogme et Critique*), who holds that "dogma, like revelation, is expressed in terms of action"; i.e.,

When we profess our faith in God the Father we mean, according to M. Le Roy, that we have to act toward God as sons, but neither the fatherhood of God, nor the other dogmas of faith such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Resurrection of Christ, etc., imply of necessity any objective intellectual conception of fatherhood, Trinity, Resurrection, etc. or convey any idea to the mind.<sup>2</sup>

Against the evaluation of dogma for its usefulness, Coghlan cites the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.

There are truths such as the Trinity, the Resurrection of Christ, His Ascension, etc., which are absolute objective facts and which could be believed even if their practical consequences were ignored or were deemed of little value. The dogmas of the Church . . . have an objective reality and are facts as really and truly as it is a fact that Augustus was Emperor of the Romans and that George Washington was first President of the United States. The Catholic serves God . . . because he believes mentally in God and in the duty of keeping the Commandments; and he believes in them as objective and immutable truths. . . .<sup>3</sup>

As in the case of Romanist dogma, Reformed theology is based on objectivist epistemology. Calvin never doubted that ideas about God derived from nature and revelation truly reflect God. This is so obvious as scarcely to require documentation. While Calvin did not discourse on the problem of knowledge, his entire theology set out to ramify and systematise God's revelation of Himself, to the end that the human mind might

<sup>1</sup> By epistemology I mean the study of the processes by which thought apprehends reality. In this usage, a view of reality is assumed which is outlined in James Iverach's article on "Epistemology" in *Hastings' Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, V, p. 343: "Our system of thought falls far short of reality. For, while the world which each mind constructs for itself out of its own experience is the world of which it is the centre, there must be a world common to all intelligences, or, in other words, a higher experience than ours, which in its organized state is the supreme world of reality. All the worlds which seem separate and unconnected, as constructed by each for himself, have common ground and purpose in that experience which is higher and deeper than ours. In this view, reality is independent of our judgment, and is something which far transcends our experience. Yet our judgment and its outcome must be held to be an element in that higher experience, and the world we construct is part of the world that is what it is for the higher experience."

<sup>2</sup> Vol. 5, p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

grasp the meaning of God's relation to the world. For Calvin, the existence of God was an objective certainty, the ultimate ground of all the sense data of the visible creation. Calvin's objectivism is apparent in his treatment of God and the Scripture. Speaking of those who persistently deny the existence of God, he says:

Though they strive against their own natural understanding, and desire not only to banish him thence but even to annihilate him in heaven, their insensibility can never prevail so as to prevent God from sometimes recalling them to his tribunal.

They satisfy themselves with any attention to religion, however preposterous, not considering that the divine will is the perpetual rule to which true religion ought to be conformed; that God ever continues like himself; that he is no spectre or phantasm, to be metamorphosed according to the fancy of every individual. . . . We must therefore decide, with Lactantius, that there is no legitimate religion unconnected with the truth.<sup>1</sup>

In Book I, chapter 7 of the *Institute*, Calvin refers to the "eternal and inviolable truth of God". Because of His eternal nature, the "God who created the world may be certainly distinguished from the whole multitude of fictitious deities"<sup>2</sup> created, as he elsewhere contends, by the vain imaginings of pagan men. Calvin's denial of subjective religion is as explicit as could be expected of a thinker who wrote in an era before the subject-object relation became the core issue of epistemological investigation.

In speaking of the function of the Scripture, Calvin says:

For as persons who are old, or whose eyes are by any means become dim, if you show them the most beautiful book, though they perceive something written, but can scarcely read two words together, yet, by the assistance of spectacles, will begin to read distinctly—so the Scripture, collecting in our minds the otherwise confused notions of Deity, dispels the darkness, and gives us a clear view of the true God.<sup>3</sup>

Calvin's view of truth as absolute, objective, and normative for thought is applied to the Scripture: ". . . we now believe the divine original of the Scripture, not from our own judgment, or that of others, but we esteem the certainty that we have received it from God's own mouth by the ministry of men, to be superior to that of any human judgment, and equal to that of an intuitive perception of God Himself in it."<sup>4</sup> Calvin's view of Scripture and his view of God equally assume the

<sup>1</sup> *The Institute of the Christian Religion* (ed. of 1559), I, 4, 2 and 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 6, 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. cit.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 7, 5.

existence of an objective, intellectual, normative standard of truth. Reformed thinking, like Romanist dogma, has always assumed the objective existence of intelligible truth, and a reliable means by which truth may be communicated to human thinking.

## IV

What was Kierkegaard's view of the epistemology of Christian dogma?

This question requires that two issues be distinguished: Does there exist an objective Truth, which all men ought to believe? Can man know Truth? The first portion of this paper treats solely of Kierkegaard's views on the latter issue.<sup>1</sup> His conclusion was that thought is of no aid in discovering the nature of reality, either supra-personal or human existential reality.

Kierkegaard said nothing about objective reality in his discussion of epistemology, since the principle of the discontinuity of thought and being rendered any reference to objective reality irrelevant. His polemic against the Hegelian unity of thought and being, coupled with sarcastic references to dogma and its association with the despised speculative habit,<sup>2</sup> lead one to believe that Kierkegaard denied the existence of objective reality altogether. This conclusion would be entirely correct if his remark that "a man's interest in his existence constitutes his reality" had remained unsupplemented. However, it did not. Kierkegaard distinguished the epistemological question, with which this paper has hitherto dealt, from the metaphysical. While his conviction of the discontinuity of thought and being logically deprived him of the right to discuss metaphysics, it was unavoidable. Kierkegaard made several important assertions about reality, its discovery and nature, apart from his definition of personal (existential) reality.<sup>3</sup>

An existential system cannot be formulated. Does this mean that no such system exists? By no means; nor is this implied in our assertion. Reality itself is a system—for God; but it cannot be a system for any existing spirit. System and finality correspond to one another, but existence is precisely the opposite

<sup>1</sup> Summarised on page 113 of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> *Sickness unto Death*, pp. 156 f. *Postscript*, pp. 193, 472.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that Kierkegaard approaches metaphysics from epistemology, giving the latter almost exclusive attention. He would have said nothing about metaphysics had he dared risk misunderstanding on that important point. Precisely the opposite is true of dogmatics. Calvin speaks first of the existence of the absolute verities, and says little about the categories in which revelation is to be understood, or how it is possible in principle. His implicit assumption of objectivist epistemology is evident.

of finality. It may be seen, from a purely abstract point of view, that system and existence are incapable of being thought together, because in order to think existence at all, systematic thought must think it as abrogated, and hence as not existing. Existence separates, and holds the various moments of existence discreetly apart; the systematic thought consists in the finality which brings them together.<sup>1</sup>

What reality is, cannot be expressed in the language of abstraction. Reality is an *inter-esse* between the moments of that hypothetical unity of thought and being which abstract thought presupposes. Abstract thought considers both possibility and reality, but its concept of reality is a false reflection, since the medium within which the concept is thought is not reality, but possibility. Abstract thought can get hold of reality only by nullifying it, and this nullification of reality consists in transforming it into possibility. . . . Reality or existence is the dialectical moment in a trilogy, whose beginning and whose end cannot be for the existing individual, since qua existing individual he is himself in the dialectical moment. Abstract thought closes up the trilogy. Just so. But how does it close the trilogy? Is abstract thought a mystic something, or is it not the act of the abstracting individual? But the abstracting individual is the existing individual, who is as such in the dialectical moment, which he cannot close or mediate, least of all absolutely, as long as he remains in existence. So that when he closes the trilogy, this closure must be related as a possibility to the reality or existence in which he remains.<sup>2</sup>

Contrary to his habit, in these two quotations Kierkegaard describes reality in terms of the "systematic idea". In the former it is explicit: "Reality itself is a system—for God." In the latter it is equally clear, although oblique: "reality is an *inter-esse* between the moments of that hypothetical unity of thought and being which abstract thought presupposes." Kierkegaard's customary definition of reality also appears in the latter quotation in that he uses "reality" interchangeably with "existence". Kierkegaard does this consistently. He says of existence, "if I think it, I abrogate it, and then I do not think it".<sup>3</sup> Precisely the same is said of reality.<sup>4</sup> This is equivalent to the familiar existential usage quoted in this paper: "A man's interest in his existence constitutes his reality." Considering Kierkegaard's overwhelming emphasis on the personal view of reality, it is all the more strange that he says, "Reality itself is a system—for God". Has he compromised existentialism?

It must first be denied that Kierkegaard conceded reality any objectivity by introducing the idea of God. God did not become the subject of Kierkegaard's inquiry; he made no assertion whatsoever about the nature of God. God is introduced solely as an epistemological prop. He assumed by hypothesis God's point of view, i.e., that point of view which is absolutely different from the human point of view.

<sup>1</sup> *Postscript*, p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.

God is a highest conception, not to be explained in terms of other things, but explainable only by exploring more and more profoundly the conception itself. The highest principles for all thought can be demonstrated only indirectly (negatively).<sup>1</sup>

In a purely negative sense, reality is a system. By inverting the existential point of view, reality is known as the unity of thought and being.

Does the admission of negative epistemology to existentialism enable human thinking to recognise the existence of absolute objective reality?

Kierkegaard has made two concessions: it is conceivable to him that there is a supra-existential element in the universe, even though it be no more than a hypothetical static point of view; second, it is legitimate to speak of reality as related to thought, even though the relation be negative. However, Kierkegaard's ethical view of man prevents any concession in epistemology: because he is an existing individual, man has neither intellectual nor ethical right to seek reality beyond himself. Kierkegaard's admission that there is a static element in the universe actually fortifies his epistemological view that "an infinite qualitative difference" separates man and supra-existential reality, for now the metaphysical distinction "God-man" stands beside the epistemological distinction "system-existence" to widen the breach.

But the absolute difference between God and man consists precisely in this, that man is a particular existing being (which is just as much true of the most gifted human being as it is of the most stupid), whose essential task cannot be to think *sub specie aeterni*, since as long as he exists he is, though eternal, essentially an existing individual, whose essential task is to concentrate upon inwardness in existing; while God is infinite and eternal.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, after all the evidence for the consistency of Kierkegaard's existentialism has been reviewed, negative epistemology has led him to make positive affirmations about the point of view of God. Did Kierkegaard further develop a concept of God?

In the *Philosophical Fragments* he inquires:

What is this unknown something with which Reason collides when inspired by its paradoxical passion, with the result of unsettling even man's knowledge of himself? It is the Unknown. It is not a human being, in so far as we know what man is; nor is it any other known thing. So let us call this unknown something: *God*. It is nothing more than a name we assign to it. The idea of demonstrating that this unknown something (*God*) exists, could scarcely suggest itself

<sup>1</sup> *Postscript*, p. 197.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

to the Reason. For if God does not exist it would of course be impossible to prove it; and if he does exist it would be folly to attempt it.<sup>1</sup>

What then is the Unknown? It is the limit to which Reason repeatedly comes, and in so far, substituting a static form of conception for the dynamic, it is the different, the absolutely different. But because it is absolutely different, there is no mark by which it could be distinguished. When qualified as an absolutely different it seems on the verge of disclosure, but this is not the case; for the Reason cannot even conceive an absolute unlikeness. The Reason cannot negate itself absolutely, but uses itself for the purpose, and thus conceives only such an unlikeness within itself as it can conceive by means of itself; it cannot absolutely transcend itself, and hence conceives only such a superiority over itself as it can conceive by means of itself. Unless the Unknown (God) remains a mere limiting conception, the single idea of difference will be thrown into a state of confusion, and become many ideas of many differences.<sup>2</sup>

Kierkegaard maintained that Reason's extreme is recognition of the static unknown as absolute real—but to grasp absolute reality is not the work of Reason, but of Passion.<sup>3</sup> He holds that Reason has a dual function: it recognises absolute reality, and it excites Passion. It is the recognition of reality that destroys Reason, and to deny that Reason truly discovers reality is both to deny that it destroys itself and to deprive it of its power to excite Passion. Kierkegaard calls absolute reality the Unknown because by definition it is the opposite of the known (the existential relatives of Reason comprise the known). It is legitimate from Kierkegaard's point of view to designate absolute reality the "Unknown" since Reason never knows reality save as limiting concept.<sup>4</sup>

V

Having granted that Reason discovers reality in the instant of its self-destruction, Kierkegaard hastened to deprive the discovery of all epistemological significance: an individual has neither the right nor the ability to seek reality beyond his own existence, but only within himself.

It is at this point that Kierkegaard differs with dogmatic theology. Kierkegaard and dogmatics hold in common that reality exists apart from and above all limitations of human rational faculties; but whereas this is a starting point for the

<sup>1</sup> *Fragments*, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35: "To say that it is the Unknown because it cannot be known, and even if it were capable of being known, it could not be expressed, does not satisfy the demands of passion, though it correctly interprets the Unknown as a limit; but a limit is precisely a torment for passion, though it also serves as an incitement. And yet Reason can come no further, whether it risks an issue *via negationis* or *via eminentiae*."

<sup>4</sup> Is Kierkegaard here advancing a variant form of the ontological argument for the existence of God?

epistemology of dogma, Kierkegaard denies man the right to think about reality on the assumption of its objectivity; instead he affirms that "truth is subjectivity".<sup>1</sup> The recognition of the existence of supra-personal reality is the final act of Reason; for dogmatic epistemologies, Reason's discovery of reality is at once an assurance of its rational character and the justification of its intellectual interpretation.

While the epistemologies of the historic dogmatic schools have varied in detail, they have all held that reality permits exploration by Reason. Whether it is held that intellect has the right and ability to conduct self-sufficient investigations of reality; or that intellect traces the thoughts of God in nature and mind; or that intellect finds God's revelation of Himself in Scripture and conscience, grasping not the hidden mind of God, but only those imperatives which God has uttered in human categories; whether it be held that knowledge of God is analogical or literal, always it is agreed that human thinking and reality stand in a trustworthy relation which renders intellectual pursuit of reality worthwhile, in the assurance that truth may be approached.

Kierkegaard's repudiation of dogmatic Christianity is explicit in his criticism of Christian doctrine.

Suppose Christianity is not a matter of knowledge, so that increased knowledge is of no avail except to make it easier to fall into the confusion of considering Christianity as a matter of knowledge. . . . Objective faith, what does that mean? It means a sum of doctrinal propositions. But suppose Christianity were nothing of the kind; suppose on the contrary it were inwardness, and hence also the paradox, so as to thrust the individual away subjectively, in order to obtain significance for the existing individual in the inwardness of his existence. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Not only does Kierkegaard deny that Christianity is a mere sum of dogmas (Reformed theology joins him here), but he also denies that intellect is in any way related to faith, either as ground for belief in reality, or with respect to dogmatic interpretation and application of faith. Faith is not proved genuine by final submersion in an intellectual vision of God; precisely the opposite is true:

I contemplate the order of nature in the hope of finding God and I see omnipotence and wisdom; but I also see much else that disturbs my mind and excites anxiety. The sum of all this is objective uncertainty. But it is for this very reason that the inwardness becomes as intense as it is, for it embraces this objective uncertainty with the entire passion of the infinite. . . .

<sup>1</sup> *Postscript*, Chapter II.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 192 f.

Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith.<sup>1</sup>

Faith is exhibited most truly in the believer who remains passionately loyal to God, while recognising that He is not only incredible, but unknowable.

A believer who believes, i.e., believes against the understanding, takes the mystery of faith seriously and is not duped by the pretense of understanding, but is aware that the curiosity which leads to glimpsing is infidelity and betrayal of the task.<sup>2</sup>

His anti-intellectualism stated explicitly, Kierkegaard defines Christianity positively:

The thing of being a Christian is not determined by the *what* of Christianity but by the *how* of the Christian. This *how* can only correspond with one thing, the absolute paradox. There is therefore no vague talk to the effect that being a Christian is to accept, and to accept, and to accept quite differently, to appropriate, to believe, to appropriate by faith quite differently (all of them purely rhetorical and fictitious definitions); but *to believe* is specifically different from all other appropriation and inwardness. Faith is the objective uncertainty due to the repulsion of the absurd held fast by the passion of inwardness, which in this instance is intensified to the utmost degree.<sup>3</sup>

How does thought function if Christianity be conceived as the act of the individual Christian?

The dialectical aspect of the problem requires thought-passion—not to want to understand it, but to understand what it means to break thus with the understanding and with thinking and with immanence, in order to lose the last foothold of immanence, eternity behind one, and to exist constantly on the extremest verge of existence by virtue of the absurd.<sup>4</sup>

Kierkegaard states the nature and function of thought thus: "It is the supreme passion of the Reason to seek a collision which will in one way or another prove its undoing."<sup>5</sup> Its undoing results because "thought-passion is to understand what it means to break with the understanding and with thinking. . . ." Thought fulfils its whole task by unremittingly accentuating in the mind of the religious person the conviction that he can never grasp reality, but that he must believe despite the intellectual offence which it gives him. In the endless process, rising doubt constantly calls forth newly intensified faith.

<sup>1</sup> *Postscript*, p. 182.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 505.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 540.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 505.

<sup>5</sup> *Fragments*, p. 29.

Thought has an additional, wholly secondary function. Thought may frame poetic exclamations intended to spread the contagion of the poet's inward faith, but not to convey ideas. Only thus was dogma acceptable to Kierkegaard. Unless dogma is a form of poetry intended to express faith as passion, it is mere confusion.

## VI

The questions asked at the outset of this paper are these: Does the doctrinal interpretation of Christianity stand under the same charges which Kierkegaard brought against Hegel's "systematic idea"? Or does dogmatic theology also dispute the "systematic idea"? Or does the truth lie between these extremes?

On the ground of inner logical consistency, Hegel's epistemology cannot withstand the criticism of Kierkegaard. An even greater fault, Kierkegaard points out, is that the personal nature of all thinking (as distinct from thought falsely conceived as an abstract entity) is totally ignored in Hegel's epistemology. By implication, any philosophy or theology which assumes that thought is unconditioned by the personality of the philosopher falls under the same condemnation. Theology as abstract intellectual science, dissociated from personal experience, such as underlay St. Augustine's thought, is, in Kierkegaard's view, cut off from truth, and like Hegelianism, is logically inconsistent.

Yet Kierkegaard's exclusive attention to religious experience disqualifies him as a theologian, for he denies intellection the right to participate in the upbuilding of man's relation to God. Reformed theology holds that certain facts about God and Christ Jesus must be understood and acknowledged as true before Christian experience is possible. Emotional disturbance, mystical vision, and other varieties of psychological experience are possible without Christian ideas. But only the Christian character of the ideas which direct religious experience can identify it as uniquely Christian. "Theology" which is non-intellectual aestheticism or description of psychological experience may refer to the God of the Christian, but Reformed dogma holds that unless poetic or scientific theologies know themselves Christian, they are more likely to refer to subjective insights dissociated from the God revealed in Christ and the records of His life. Reformed theology is convinced that without its sup-

porting frame of ideas, Christianity retains only a relatively unimportant historical contact with its Founder and is indistinguishable from other religions the ideas of which contradict the teachings of Christ.

Kierkegaard condemns any interpretation of Christianity which forgets passionate faith in God. Theology which lives by its experience of God agrees with Kierkegaard in condemning Hegel's epistemology, since it knows that knowledge of God depends not on the unity of human and divine mind, but on the divine grace of Self-revelation. Reformed theology disputes any epistemology which obliterates the division between God and man. Nevertheless, psychological experience is not the sum of Christianity. Dogmatic theology flatly contradicts Kierkegaard's exclusive subjectivism in that its epistemology affirms the eternal reality of absolute truth, historical revelation of God in Christ, and the witness of the Holy Spirit in Christian thinking.

*Washington, D.C.*

ELWYN ALLEN SMITH,