

**KIERKEGAARD:  
FATHER OF EXISTENTIALISM OR CRITIC OF EXISTENTIALISM?**

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**Abstract:** *What is Kierkegaard's relation to existentialism? The lack of clarity of the concept of "existentialism" makes this question difficult. I argue that if we take Sartre as the "ideal type" that defines existentialism, Kierkegaard is better thought of as a critic of existentialism than as its "father." Kierkegaard rejects both the classical foundationalism that demanded objective certainty as the basis for ethics, and the Sartrean "radical choice" of will that the failure of classical foundationalism led to. Kierkegaard shows how passion and subjectivity can help an individual acquire a truth that can be lived but is not subjective in the sense of being relativistic or arbitrary.*

Kierkegaard is frequently described as the father of existentialism. But is this correct? If we mean simply that Kierkegaard had a profound influence on certain twentieth century thinkers — such as Heidegger, Jaspers, Unamuno, Sartre, Camus, and Marcel — it is certainly correct. However, such a claim does not tell us very much and can in fact be very misleading. Hegel had a profound influence on Marx, as everyone recognizes, but it would be somewhat misleading to describe Hegel as

the father of Marxism. Normally, to describe someone as the “father” of a particular movement is to claim that there are basic similarities between that individual and the main tenets of the movement in question.

So let us rephrase the question. Does Kierkegaard share basic similarities with the twentieth century existentialists? Here is where the question becomes difficult. To begin, there is a problem identifying the existentialists. Heidegger, for example, rejected the label, as did Gabriel Marcel. Even Camus often writes about “the existentialists,” implying that he is not one himself. And even if we could agree on who qualifies as an existentialist, we would still have the problem of determining what are the main views of the movement. It is not easy to find a set of beliefs or convictions that thinkers as different as Sartre, Heidegger, Jaspers, Camus, and Marcel all hold. Perhaps we could say that all of them share a passionate concern for the meaning of human existence, but this could be said about many philosophers that no one would call existentialist, including Socrates, Augustine, and Pascal. Perhaps they all could be said to emphasize the importance of choice in the formation of the self, but, once again, this would appear to be something held in common with a great many thinkers from the past.

Faced with these difficulties, I think our best strategy is to seek to understand existentialism with reference to an “ideal type.” When most people think of existentialism, I think the figure who comes most prominently to mind is the Jean Paul Sartre of the 40’s and 50’s, the Sartre who wrote *Being and Nothingness* as well as the famous lecture essay on “Existentialism” as a form of humanism. So I am going to take Sartre to be the prototypical existentialist, and I will count other thinkers as existentialist to the degree that they resemble Sartre.

Measured by this criterion, my thesis will be that Kierkegaard is better thought of as a radical critic of existentialism than the father of existentialism. Despite the influence of Kierkegaard on Sartre, the differences between the two thinkers are large and fundamental. I shall try to show that Kierkegaard, writing 100 years before Sartre, anticipated Sartre’s basic viewpoint, and subjected it to devastating criticism. Thinking of Kierkegaard as the father of existentialism has had a generally baneful effect on our understanding of Kierkegaard himself, because it has resulted in a tendency to read Kierkegaard through Sartrean eyes,

emphasizing commonalities between the two figures while making it harder to see the fundamental differences.

## **Sartre and the Idea of Radical Choice**

What is Sartrean existentialism? The key idea to grasp is, I believe, the notion that Alasdair MacIntyre has termed "radical choice." The idea is that our most basic values, including moral values, are *chosen* by human beings. Sartre begins his essay on "Existentialism" by saying that there are two kinds of existentialism, the atheistic kind, among which he names Heidegger as well as himself, and the Christians, among whom he includes Marcel and Jaspers. Oddly, however, after making this admission, Sartre goes on to define existentialism in such a way that only atheistic existentialism is consistent. Existentialism, he says, is the denial that there is any common human nature. If there were a God, Sartre tells us, then God's purposes in creating humans would define our nature and give us an ideal to live for. Without God, there is no basis for saying what human beings are or should be. Many atheists, however, according to Sartre, have irrationally continued to believe that there is human nature even without a God. Sartre rejects this kind of atheism, and says he wants to recognize the full implications of a world without God:

Atheistic existentialism, which I represent, is more coherent. It states that if God does not exist, there is at least one being in whom existence precedes essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept, and that this being is man, or as Heidegger says, human reality... Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it.<sup>1</sup>

Since there is no human nature, there is no objective good for human beings. Sartre says that when we make a choice, we are defining the good, not just for ourselves, for all humans, but there are no prior criteria to help us choose. If we appeal to instincts, it is up to us to determine the meaning of our instincts. If we ask for advice from others, we decide whom to ask and whether to accept the advice.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism," in *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: Citadel Press, 1985), 15.

When facing the criticism that such radical choices are ultimately arbitrary, since if values are created by my choices, I cannot appeal to those values to justify the choices, Sartre's reply is revealing: "My answer to this is that I'm quite vexed that that's the way it is; but if I've discarded God the Father, there has to be someone to invent values."<sup>2</sup> So the question is whether Kierkegaard shares this Sartrean view of values as the product of radical choice. To answer it, I want to begin by looking at Kierkegaard's basic view of the self.

## **Two Views of the Self**

Broadly speaking, there are two views of selfhood that can be found in the western intellectual tradition. One view sees persons as substances, entities within the natural order of things. Such a view goes back at least as far as Aristotle, who famously defined the human self as a rational animal. This kind of view continued to prevail during the middle ages, and can still be clearly seen in Descartes' conception of the human self as a "thinking thing."

However, many contemporary discussions of selfhood and personhood describe selfhood as a special status that accrues to something by virtue of some achievement. For example, some contemporary ethicists have argued that even a newborn child is not a person because it lacks the capacities to do the right things. Clearly, Sartre's view of the self falls solidly in this camp.

Kierkegaard has, I believe, a foot in both of these camps. His Christian convictions allow him to think of human persons as creatures, part of the natural order made by God. However, God has made humans with a special character; and holds them responsible for becoming what he intended them to be. Thus, to be a self is to be assigned a task.

Johannes Climacus, the pseudonymous author of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, expresses this thought in a whimsical and ironical manner: "Well, of course, every human being is something of a subject. But now to become what one

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 48-49.

is as a matter of course — who would waste his time on that?”<sup>3</sup> The human task is to become a self in truth, a task that *seems* insignificant, because it amounts to becoming what one already is. A genuine understanding of the nature of the self reveals that this task is no triviality, however, because “what one already is” includes potentialities that must be actualized to fully become oneself. The human self is “an existing self,” in that pregnant sense of existence that Kierkegaard made famous. Climacus describes human existence in language very similar to that used by Anti-Climacus for the self in *The Sickness Unto Death*: “But what is existence? It is that child who is begotten by the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, and is therefore continually striving.”<sup>4</sup> Climacus compares the process of existing as a self to driving a carriage or wagon pulled by two very unequal horses, one “like Pegasus” and the other “an old nag”:

And this is what existing is like if one is to be conscious of it. Eternity is infinitely quick like that winged steed, temporality is an old nag, and the existing person is the driver, that is, if existing is not to be what people usually call existing, because then the existing person is not a driver but a drunken peasant who lies in the wagon and sleeps and lets the horses shift for themselves. Of course, he also drives, he is also a driver, and likewise there perhaps are many who — also exist.<sup>5</sup>

There is a sense in which we humans cannot help but exist. To use language popularized much later by Sartre and Heidegger, we are “condemned to be free,” “thrown into existence.” However, most of us simply drift through life; we let the horses run where they wish. Kierkegaard wants to challenge his readers to become selves in truth.

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<sup>3</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. & trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 130.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 311-12.

## **Is Kierkegaard a Proponent of “Radical Choice”?**

But what does it mean to become a self in truth? Is there some kind of ideal for selfhood that is normative? What would this even mean? If there is such an ideal, how could someone committed to a particular view of the self defend such an ideal against rival accounts? These are difficult questions indeed, and raising them places us right in the middle of what we might call Kierkegaard’s implicit epistemology.

Kierkegaard is well-known for his view of the three stages or spheres of existence — life viewed aesthetically, ethically, and religiously. I believe there is no doubt that Kierkegaard thinks of these spheres of existence as ranked; the ethical is superior to the aesthetic overall, just as the religious is superior to the ethical. But what makes one stage superior to another?

One answer, which we might call the “existentialist” answer, is that no stage is objectively superior to another, but that what makes one “better” is simply the choice or affirmation of the self. According to this view, Kierkegaard’s ranking of the stages is simply his personal choice, and it leaves open the possibility that for others different choices would imply a different ranking or perhaps no ranking at all. On this view a person’s most basic choices are indeed Sartrean “radical choices.” No reasons for such choices can be given, because the choice is essentially a choice about what is going to count as a good reason for a person. Since Kierkegaard is often called “the father of existentialism,” it is not surprising that such a Sartrean view is often read back into Kierkegaard.

One influential source of this Sartrean reading of Kierkegaard is Alasdair MacIntyre’s provocative book, *After Virtue*. According to MacIntyre, the Enlightenment set itself the project of giving a rational foundation for ethics to replace tradition or religion. Kierkegaard, says MacIntyre, was the first to see that this project could not succeed, and MacIntyre claims that Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* embodies this insight. What Kierkegaard essentially tried to do, on MacIntyre’s reading, is to substitute a radical act of the will for reason as the foundation of ethics:

Kierkegaard and Kant agree in their conception of morality, but Kierkegaard inherits that conception together with an understanding

that the project of giving a rational vindication of morality has failed. Kant's failure provided Kierkegaard with his starting-point: the act of choice had to be called in to do the work that reason could not do.<sup>6</sup>

*Either/Or* confronts the reader with a choice between the aesthetic life, represented in Part I by the papers of "A," and the ethical life, represented in the papers of "B." But the reader is not told who is right and must choose for himself or herself, with no external "result" to confirm the rightness of the choice. MacIntyre says that Kierkegaard thinks this choice must be a radical, "criterionless" choice:

Suppose that someone confronts the choice between them [the ethical and the aesthetic lives] having as yet embraced neither. He can be offered no *reason* for preferring one to the other. For if a given reason offers support for the ethical way of life — to live in that way will serve the demands of duty or to live in that way will be to accept moral perfection as a goal and so give a certain kind of meaning to one's action — the person who has not yet embraced either the ethical or the aesthetic still has to choose whether or not to treat this reason as having any force. If it already has force for him, he has already chosen the ethical; which *ex hypothesi* he has not. And so it is also with reasons supportive of the aesthetic.<sup>7</sup>

This argument is far from decisive. Consider the following parallel argument. Suppose that in a political theory class I present my students with arguments for and against a libertarian view of the state, without tipping my hand as to which view I personally favor. Let us assume that prior to the class the students are not familiar with libertarian views of the state and have no settled commitments either way. Would we say in such a case that the students "can be offered no reason for preferring one position to the other?" Would we say that a student who is considering an argument for libertarianism "still has to choose whether or not to treat this reason as having any force," and if he or she does see it as having force,

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<sup>6</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: Second Edition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 47. See also the fine reply to MacIntyre, *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*, ed. John J. Davenport and Antony Rudd (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 2001).

<sup>7</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 40.

the student has already chosen libertarianism, contrary to the hypothesis that the student is as yet uncommitted? Clearly, it is possible for a student in this situation to find a reason compelling. There must be something wrong with this argument that the student must perform an act of radical choice in order to decide the issue, and the same flaw infects MacIntyre's argument concerning Kierkegaard.

It is not difficult to detect the flaw. The problem arises from the assumption that an individual must choose to regard a reason as having force in order for the reason to have any force for the individual. This is simply not the way reasons work. In the normal case, if someone gives me a reason for supporting or opposing a policy, the reason will or will not strike me as having force of some degree or other, and whether this is so is not under my voluntary control.

The argument between the aesthetic and the ethical is an argument where both sides give reasons that they believe could be appealing to the other. Both the aesthete and the ethicist are pictured as concrete individuals with desires and needs. The aesthete assumes that human beings want to satisfy their desires and avoid boredom, and tries to show that the ethical life constricts and undermines the individual's quest for a satisfying existence. The ethicist tries to show that the ethical life is superior to the aesthetic life, even when judged by aesthetic criteria, because a human life without ethical commitments turns out to be meaningless and unsatisfying. No appeal to radical, criterionless choice is made by either party.

## **Subjectivity and Kierkegaard's Rejection of Classical Foundationalism**

However, does the fact that Kierkegaard gives us no "result" show that MacIntyre must be right? Does the fact that both the aesthete and the ethicist have arguments they think should be appealing to the other show that neither view is objectively superior to the other? It might appear that this is so, since Kierkegaard gives us no scorecard on which to rank the views. So far as we know, neither party to the argument is convinced. The ethicist does not succumb to temptation and have an affair; the aesthete does not repent of his scandalous ways and choose the path of marriage and respectability.

Modern western philosophy has been dominated by a certain epistemological picture that is today termed "classical foundationalism." There are two important elements of this type of foundationalism. First, the classical foundationalist holds that genuine knowledge must be based on truths that are known with a high degree of certainty. Second, the classical foundationalist believes that the method we must follow to achieve such certainty requires objectivity. Descartes himself sets the tone in his *Meditations*. The standard for certainty is set very high, so that even the possibility of error becomes a ground for doubt. And Descartes thinks that the only way to obtain such certainty is to become entirely objective, setting aside all emotions and other "subjective" attitudes, which are seen as sources of bias and distortion.

From the standpoint of classical foundationalism, the argument between Kierkegaard's aesthete and ethicist looks undecidable. However, Kierkegaard's own perspective is profoundly different. For although Kierkegaard rarely discusses epistemological issues in a formal way, his whole outlook is a challenge to this classical foundationalist picture. Both the elements I have identified in the picture are rejected. On the one hand, the kind of absolute certainty sought by modern, western philosophy is unattainable for finite human existers. Human persons are historically situated beings, and they are incapable of thinking "*sub specie aeternitatis*," as Spinoza thought we should aspire to do.

On Kierkegaard's view, to have knowledge that is absolutely certain would be to have knowledge that is complete and final; it would be to have "the System," which indeed Hegel claimed to possess. Johannes Climacus surely speaks for Kierkegaard in renouncing any claims to possess a system of existence. Climacus says that a "logical system is possible" but that "a system of existence is impossible" for an existing human person."<sup>8</sup> He does not thereby deny that there is such a thing as the final, objective truth about reality, since "existence itself is a

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<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 109. The Hongs translate this literally, but awkwardly in English, as "a logical system can be given, but a system of existence cannot be given." I have here removed Kierkegaard's original italics.

system — for God.”<sup>9</sup> The problem is that we humans are not God, and thus we are not capable of seeing the world from God’s point of view.

From this Kierkegaardian perspective, uncertainty is simply part of the human condition, and the aspirations of the classical foundationalist are aspirations to transcend that condition. It follows from this that the fact that neither the ethicist nor the aesthete can produce a logical proof or demonstration that makes his or her viewpoint objectively certain is not a reason to despair. We human beings find uncertainty painful, and we would like to escape it. The history of western philosophy is, as John Dewey has said, the history of “the quest for certainty.”<sup>10</sup> However, in reality, most of us, most of the time, find ways of resolving this uncertainty. Despite our finitude, we develop convictions and act on the basis of commitments.

How do we do this? Here is Kierkegaard’s break with the other main plank of classical foundationalist epistemology. The foundationalist typically sees human emotions as distorting filters and biases; the epistemological task is to put these aside somehow and become purely “rational” and objective. However, Kierkegaard sees what he variously calls “subjectivity” and “inwardness” as lying at the heart of human existence. Without desires, hopes, fears, and loves human life would be impossible because human choice and action would be impossible.

Despite our finitude, Kierkegaard does not embrace skepticism, at least with respect to what he calls “essential human knowledge,” the knowledge a human person must have to be fully human and live a truly human life. It is true that we cannot stand at some impossible place of pure neutrality and objectivity and grasp the truth as a matter of pure logic. Anyone who tries to occupy what Thomas Nagel has called “the view from nowhere” will fail to grasp what human life is all about.<sup>11</sup> Rather, the path to truth requires us to embrace our subjectivity. The evil of cruelty cannot be recognized apart from our emotional repugnance to cruelty, just as the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>10</sup> See John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1929).

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

goodness of love cannot be perceived apart from our emotional embrace of its splendor.

However, there are emotions and there are emotions. Our task is not to divest ourselves of subjectivity, but to allow our subjectivity to be formed and developed in the right way. To explain this requires an exploration of the famous Kierkegaardian claim that "truth is subjectivity," and I will now try to say something about this important theme.

### **"Truth is Subjectivity"**

The claim by Johannes Climacus in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that "truth is subjectivity" is one of the most well-known and yet misunderstood Kierkegaardian claims. Climacus himself says that this claim is a "Socratic" one, and thus it is perhaps right that it should be voiced by a pseudonym rather than Kierkegaard himself. At the very least, Kierkegaard the Christian writer will want to balance this Socratic claim with the apparently contradictory claim that "subjectivity is untruth," reflecting Kierkegaard's commitment to the Christian doctrine of human sinfulness. However, the contradiction between the two claims is only apparent, and there is little doubt that Kierkegaard himself is firmly committed to this "Socratic" thesis.

But what does it mean to say that truth is subjectivity? We can begin by saying what it does not mean. It is not an endorsement of epistemological subjectivism or some form of relativism. The relevant section of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is difficult to interpret because Climacus brings together two kinds of issues that are not usually seen as connected: epistemology and soteriology, or what theologians call a theory of salvation. He begins with epistemology by examining two classical philosophical definitions of truth. However, his real concern is not with the adequacy of a philosophical theory of truth, but with the question of what it means for a human being to possess the truth. To grasp the significance of this, we must not think of truth in the way characteristic of contemporary philosophy, focusing on the properties of propositions, but in the way ancient thinkers conceived of truth. For Socrates and Plato, at least as Kierkegaard understood them, having the truth meant having the key to human life, possessing that which makes it possible to live life as it was intended to be lived. We might

think, even more pertinently for Kierkegaard, of Jesus' promise to his followers that "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."<sup>12</sup> Here the possession of truth is the philosophical expression of what is termed in theology "salvation" for Christians, "enlightenment" for Buddhists.

So we should not be too surprised when Johannes Climacus suddenly switches from a discussion of philosophical theories of truth to the issue that really concerns him: How does a human being acquire the truth that makes life worthwhile? How can a human person live "true-ly?" He poses a stark alternative between "objective" and "subjective" answers to this question:

*When the question about truth is asked objectively, truth is reflected upon objectively as an object to which the knower relates himself. What is reflected upon is not the relation but that what he relates himself to is the truth, the true. If only that to which he relates himself is the truth, the true, then the subject is in the truth. When the question about truth is asked subjectively, the individual's relation is reflected upon subjectively. If only the how of this relation is in truth, the individual is in truth, even if he in this way were to relate himself to untruth.<sup>13</sup>*

Climacus attaches a footnote to this passage in which he makes an important qualification by noting that he is no longer trying to give a general philosophical definition of truth but only intends to discuss "the truth that is essentially related to existence."

In this passage Climacus does not deny the existence of objective, propositional truth, but rather presupposes there is such a thing. What he wants to know is whether a person who knows what is objectively true is thereby personally "in the truth," and whether a person whose beliefs are objectively false can nevertheless have a life that can be described as true. The answer is given through a famous thought-experiment in which he compares a "Christian" of sorts with a passionate pagan:

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<sup>12</sup> John 8:32.

<sup>13</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 199. Italics original.

If someone who lives in the midst of Christianity enters, with knowledge of the true idea of God, the house of God, the house of the true God, and prays, but prays in untruth, and if someone lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all the passion of infinity, although his eyes are resting upon the image of an idol — where then, is there more truth? The one prays in truth to God although he is worshiping an idol; the other prays in untruth to the true God and is therefore in truth worshiping an idol.<sup>14</sup>

Climacus finds no need to argue this point; he thinks his answer is “obvious for anyone who is not totally botched by science and scholarship.”<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps things are not so obvious as this, but the view Climacus defends here is certainly reasonable. For if we are trying to determine what makes a human person’s life “true,” it seems very plausible that objectively true intellectual beliefs are neither sufficient nor necessary. Such beliefs are not sufficient, because in order for a person to live truly, it is not enough to affirm the right propositions. The person must allow his or her beliefs to transform his or her life. Climacus uses religious examples to make his point, but we could use a non-religious example also. Suppose, for example, that it is true that global warming is occurring as a result of human activity. Perhaps I believe this is so and even believe that humans ought to cut their use of fossil fuels and do other things to reduce greenhouse gases. Surely, however, it is not enough for me to have the right belief about this; what is crucial is that this belief in some way shapes my actions and leads me to change my behavior in appropriate ways.

It is just as clear that true objective beliefs are not necessary, either. Assume for the moment that the truth about human life is that the best kind of life is one devoted to compassion and loving service to others. Imagine an individual who has come to believe, perhaps by reading Nietzsche or Ayn Rand, that compassion is in fact a vice, and that truly ethical people care only about themselves. Despite this objectively wrong belief, it might be possible for this individual to respond with

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

genuine compassion and love when confronted by actual human suffering. Whatever the ultimate ethical and religious truth may be, human persons may be better — or worse — than their theories. The Kierkegaardian view is that it is subjectivity, the inward emotions and passions that give shape to human lives and motivate human actions, that makes the difference.

We can see, therefore, that the claim that “truth is subjectivity,” far from supporting a Sartrean conception of radical choice, actually presupposes that there is an objective ideal for humans to strive for. To be sure, Kierkegaard does not view the ideal self as a “one size fits all” pattern. Although there are universal elements to the ideal, and a universal structure to human existence, God has created all humans as unique individuals, and his intentions are for them to affirm and even celebrate that uniqueness. Despite this individuality, however, there is still something like an objective standard for every person, defined by God’s intentions. If Kierkegaard is right to think that there is something like an ideal of selfhood that each of us should strive for, then it makes sense to describe our lives as representations of that ideal that can be true or false.

This point suggests another problem, however. Even if it makes sense to talk of human lives as true or false, why think of objective, propositional truth and subjectivity as if they were mutually exclusive options? Perhaps it is right that a person can believe true things and yet live falsely, and thus it is not enough to have the right beliefs. And perhaps a person who has the wrong beliefs can still live truthfully in some ways. But is it not better to have true beliefs *and* to appropriate those beliefs in the right way? Can’t true beliefs sometimes shape a life in the right way? And don’t false beliefs sometimes hamper a person from living in a truthful manner? Would it not be better for Kierkegaard’s pagan to have the “inner passion of infinity” *and* to have true beliefs about God? In my own earlier example, it is possible for the Nietzschean who thinks compassion is a vice to live compassionately, but it might be harder for him to do this, perhaps even impossible. So it seems better for him to have both true beliefs about the value of compassion and the appropriate emotional response to those beliefs.

I think that Kierkegaard recognizes the force in this line of thinking and would concede the point. Notice that in the example of the nominal Christian and

the pagan, Climacus only claims that the pagan has *more* truth in his life than the hypocritical Christian, not that the pagan's situation is ideal. Kierkegaard does not want to defend a sloppy relativism that holds that "it does not matter what you believe as long as you are sincere." The point is not that everything is fine so long as one is passionate about one's beliefs, so that a sincere and dedicated Nazi would become an exemplar of human life, or that the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks were justified because of their passionate commitment to their cause. Of course the truth of our beliefs does matter, and Climacus recognizes this: "Exactly equally important as the truth, and if one of the two must be preferred still more important, is the manner in which the truth is received: it would help only a little if someone got millions to receive the truth, if these receivers precisely by their manner of reception were transformed into untruth."<sup>16</sup>

The words here are carefully chosen. Subjectivity is "exactly equally important" as objective, propositional truth, and is to be preferred only if one is forced to choose between them. But when, one might ask, would such a choice be forced on us? The answer, I think, is that the choice is forced on us when we are told that objective truth requires the complete suppression of subjectivity, the adoption of the "view from nowhere" in which I put aside emotions and passions and resolve to believe only what can be demonstrated on the basis of objective reason.

We can now understand why this discussion of living "truly" began with a discussion of philosophical theories of truth. From a Kierkegaardian standpoint, the person who chooses pure objectivity loses the truth both in life and in belief; the person who chooses subjectivity has a chance at truth in both arenas. The quest for certainty ends up in skepticism, for humans are finite, historically situated beings who can see nothing if they adopt "the view from nowhere." Kierkegaard consistently sees the universal doubt that supposedly stands at the foundation of modern philosophy to be impossible, and that is a good thing, since if it could be achieved it could never be overcome. He argues that it is impossible for doubt to

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<sup>16</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 247.

"overcome itself," but that doubt can only be stopped by personal resolve.<sup>17</sup> To see we must stand somewhere and trust that our perspective, finite and limited as it is, is one that enables us to see something.

Kierkegaard's polemic is directed against a philosophical tradition that would claim we must first settle our intellectual questions and then turn our attention to how to put our beliefs into practice. Kierkegaard believes that in one sense our questions are never "settled," since we do not have "the System." Doubts can always be raised, and questions can always be asked. If we demand intellectual certainty before we begin to live our convictions we will never live at all.

Nor will we make much progress on the intellectual questions themselves. With respect to what he calls "essential truth," the truth about living, progress in answering our intellectual questions goes hand in hand with progress in becoming better people. This is hardly a new idea. The idea that knowing the truth requires the knower to strive to become a better person was common in the ancient world. Even Aristotle says that it is probably hopeless for someone who has been brought up poorly, and thus has a bad character, to study ethics.<sup>18</sup> Kierkegaard accepts the ancient principle that "only like knows like," and this implies that one must be good to know the Good.

Thus, the answer to the charge that our beliefs matter is to agree that they do, but to argue that we cannot hope to settle questions of belief in a way that is prior to and independent of our struggle to become selves of a certain sort. Subjectivity is not only essential if we are to put our beliefs into practice, but plays an essential role in the acquiring of those beliefs.

This helps us see why Kierkegaard, though he rejects the possibility that ethical and religious truths can be demonstrated through some objective, logical method, does not see this as a failure that requires some "radical choice" or arbitrary act of will. He is no Sartrean existentialist. The reasons an ethicist offers to an aesthete for becoming ethical may or may not move the aesthete. If the

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 335-336, especially the footnote that begins on 335.

<sup>18</sup> See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1, Chapter 3 (1095b 3-8).

reasons do move the aesthete, that will be because they have made contact with the desires and hopes and fears of an actual individual. Arguments do not have to be convincing to "all sane, rational people" to be good arguments, and arguments that do move people do so by making contact with actual individuals, replete with subjectivity.

Kierkegaard does not assume, as some "postmodern" thinkers are prone to do, that the failure of classical foundationalism leads to the collapse of the ideal of truth. This kind of postmodernist is in reality much more indebted to the modern philosophical tradition than he realizes. Both the modern and postmodern philosophers are committed to the following premise: "If there is an objective truth, then there must be a method which guarantees us access to that truth." Modern philosophers, from Descartes through Husserl, accepted the premise and concluded that there must be such a method, even if they disagreed about what the method is. The skeptical postmodernist doubts we have such a method and concludes that we must give up on objective truth.

Kierkegaard, however, rejects the premise both kinds of thinkers share. For reality is a system for God, and there is thus a way things truly are, regardless of whether I can attain the right view of things. The fact that we have no "method" that gives the foundational certainties sought by the modern philosopher is no reason to give up on objective truth. He thus thinks it is possible for the ethical life to be superior to the aesthetic life, and the religious life to be superior to the ethical life, regardless of whether it is possible to demonstrate this to a particular aesthete or ethicist. There is no escape from subjectivity and no logical techniques will free us from the possibility of mistakes. He has faith that humans can discover what they need to know to live truly, but the process God has designed to make this possible is one that goes through subjectivity:

Truly, no more than God lets a species of fish to come into existence in a particular lake unless the plant that is its nourishment is also growing there, no more will God allow the truly concerned person to be ignorant of what he must believe.... The need brings the *nourishment* along with it; what is sought is in the seeking that seeks it; faith is in the concern over not having faith; love is in the self-

concern over not loving.... The need brings the nourishment along with, not *by itself*, as if the need produced the nourishment, but by virtue of a divine determination that joins the two, the need and the nourishment.<sup>19</sup>

## **Kierkegaard's Critique of Sartre**

Perhaps it is not too surprising then that we find in Kierkegaard's writings a prophetic description of Sartre's view of the self, along with a powerful critique. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard's Christian pseudonym, describes a form of despair in which the self attempts to invent itself, relying on the "infinite form" of the self, which is the self's power to distance itself from itself through consciousness.

But with the help of the infinite form, the negative self, he wants first of all to take upon himself the transformation of all this in order to fashion out of it a self such as he wants, produced with the help of the infinite form of the negative self... he himself wants to compose his self by means of being the infinite form.<sup>20</sup>

The passage in question reads as if Kierkegaard had been reading Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, which is a phenomenological exploration of just this form of negativity. Anti-Climacus struggles to find a term to describe this kind of philosophy: "If a generic name for this despair is wanted, it could be called stoicism, but understood as not referring only to that sect."<sup>21</sup> Today we have a better term for what Anti-Climacus is trying to label; we call it existentialism.

The criticism that Anti-Climacus goes on to make of this philosophy is telling. The problem with radical choice is that it cannot be the basis of values that make any kind of claim on us, for we are aware that the values we have chosen are

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<sup>19</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, ed. & trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 244-45.

<sup>20</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. & trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 68.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

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grounded in a choice that could be undone at any time. Thus, on this view, “the negative form of the self exercises a loosening power as well as a binding power; at any time it can quite arbitrarily start all over again, and no matter how long one idea is pursued, the entire action is within a hypothesis.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, the self that has created itself turns out to be empty: “this absolute ruler is a king without a country, actually ruling over nothing; his position, his sovereignty, is subordinate to the dialectic that rebellion is legitimate at any moment.”<sup>23</sup>

I conclude that Kierkegaard is better thought of as a prophetic critic of existentialism than as the father of the movement. If Jean Paul Sartre is the exemplar of existentialism, then Kierkegaard is no existentialist.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.