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# KIERKEGAARD'S EXISTENTIAL ELLIPSE OF TRUTH

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## **Abstract**

Kierkegaard in his way of dealing with the concept of universal truth sees the whole panorama of a considerable number of issues including the weakness of any systematic approach to it and yet one's existential effort to lead a truly authentic life that transcends any philosophical, ethical or psychological framework. This study offers an interpretative instrument of Kierkegaard's thought as presented in his monumental writing 'Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments and Philosophical Fragments', where both the theological and philosophical horizons are intertwined in a special way. The author presents his preferences for an elliptical paradigm rather than that of concentric circles in regard to the framework of Kierkegaard's existential truths, that is to grasp reality by the authentic exercise of the individual's existence alone. Unlike the later ellipse it has no centre defined so easily, which resonates with the paradoxical character of the task – so typical of a Kierkegaardian way of thinking.

*Keywords:* philosophy, ethics, existence, epistemology, theology

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## **1. Introduction**

Kierkegaard, being a child of his time, had to face not only the idealistic movement brought about by the French revolution, but also an intellectual demand to challenge the concepts of the ruling enlightenment movement with its dominant Cartesian logic. On the one hand the emphasis is laid on the necessity of social progress, whereas on the other hand there is the concept of Kant's epistemology and the speculative Hegelian dialectical system. Kierkegaard in his philosophical reflection deals consistently with both perspectives. A specific impetus for his reflection was provided by Lessing's 'barrier' between the Truth of history and the Truth of reason, on which he reflected with significant effort.

The determination of the concept of truth in the ideas of Kierkegaard oscillates obviously between two poles – Socratic reasoning and a characteristic Christian concept. They form the dialectical ground and the conceptual basis for

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understanding truth according to Kierkegaard. One of them is a philosophical concept of truth and the other one we could label as the theology of salvation. He simultaneously opens his themes of correspondence between these two viewpoints and coalesces them again in the world of logical theory and epistemology on one hand and the world of soteriology on the other. With masterful skill Kierkegaard achieves the level of handling the task in a way that the reader finds it hard to recognize and decode the perception of reality of the author himself which is hidden under a pseudonym.

Climacus is one of the pseudonyms which Kierkegaard used. The definition can be found in his work *Concluding An Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*: “I am not a Christian, born and bred in this city and now thirty years old, an ordinary human being like most folk. I assume that the highest good, called an eternal happiness, awaits me just as it awaits a housemaid or a professor. I have heard that Christianity is one’s prerequisite for this benefit. I now ask how I may enter into relation to this doctrine.” [1] Climacus acknowledges both concepts as separate spheres, while a common point is the concept of truth – being presented not as two separate points of view although interpreted in separate contexts. “The objective issue then would be about the truth of Christianity. The subjective issue is about the individual’s relation to Christianity” – that should again be ‘true’ in the sense of the reality of truth as a totality in an ontological sense [1, p. 17].

## 2. Climacus and philosophical theory of truth

Climacus opens his chapter ‘Subjective Truth’ in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments* with a polemical discussion of two classical philosophical concepts of truth: “Whether truth is defined more empirically as the agreement of thinking with being or more idealistically as the agreement of being with thinking, the point in each case is to pay scrupulous attention to what is understood by being and also to pay attention to whether the knowing human spirit might not be lured into the indefinite and to fantastically become something such as no *existing* human being has ever been or can be “ [1, p. 189]. Hence he raises a demand for the investigation of the truth, successfully avoiding the risks of applying certain philosophical concepts.

The correspondence theory of truth is historically linked to empiricism, in which reality (or being itself) is given. Reality (being) is true, in regard to human reasoning, if there is a correspondence or agreement between reality and reasoning. In contrast to Spinoza, whose philosophical system was built entirely on reason, Locke was open to acknowledge the role of experience in the process of reasoning, while applying the rational principles and criteria he perceives the truth rather in a psychological mode [2]. His perception of the question of truth was to define how human ideas, assumptions and concepts can be true, or considered to be true. Some other theories emphasize the logical relation to the comprehension of truth where a mutual correspondence in statements, theories, theses and reality is necessary. Hence he raises a demand for the investigation of

the truth, successfully avoiding the risks of applying certain philosophical concepts [3].

Climacus recognizes certain nuances in the meaning of some expressions – that is why the ultimate goal of his effort is every individual's reality of being (Vøren). He constantly indicates a substantial difference between being in an idealistic mode and in a physical (empirical) mode. "If, in the two definitions given, being is understood as empirical being, then truth itself is transformed into a desideratum [something desired] and everything is placed in the process of becoming, because the empirical object is not finished, and the existing knowing spirit is itself in the process of becoming" [1, p. 189]. The actual concept of being, according to Climacus, is a constant becoming and the truth itself becomes an approximation whose beginning cannot be established absolutely, because there is no conclusion that has retroactive power.

Climacus assumes a unity between being and thinking. This approach corresponds to an idealistic concept of metaphysics with confidence in man as a thinking being. The ultimate nature of man is thinking. This implies that truth is a rational item and therefore a test of truth is actually a test of reasoning. Burgess [4] gives an insight into this complex asserting that from the Hegelian point of view truth emerges by means of dialectical logic, while Aristotelian logic is heading to the central issue – the rational coherence of individual propositions. The foundation of coherence theory, as well as its limitation, was developed by Blackburn in his critical analysis of Blanshard's theory of coherence [5], according of which when we believe in the existence of a world independent from our thinking, then no propositions reflecting that reality may be considered to be true if they are not consistent with the world, no matter how perfectly they are coherent with other propositions. On the other hand, if they reflect the world precisely, they cannot be wrong, even if they lack the coherence of other propositions.

Comparably to a correspondence approach Climacus links the dynamic of the relationship between being and thinking to his fundamental task – what is to be understood as being (Vøren). He does not deny a possible asset of abstract reflections, but he reminds us of the fact that these concepts do not create reality as such. They merely create "an abstract prototype of empirical being" [1, p. 190], being *in concreto*. When it is so understood, there is no obstacle to our abstractly defining truth abstractly as finished, for when viewed abstractly the agreement between thought and being is always complete, since becoming has its beginning precisely in the concrete form from which abstract thought derives.

An analysis of the text results in an assumption that man is capable of generating some formal logical structures, which are complete, and concluding, but they are not actual in the sense of a physical or ontological reality. Therefore they become a *hypothesis of truth* or an *approximation of truth*. Truth as such then becomes a component of conceptual truth in a system of an analytical process of thinking. Therefore the ideal truth according to Climacus is not an existential system – inherent, conscious or having objective reality of being. He accepts such an approach to the reality of truth, but he notices the danger of a

lack of contact with reality. He suggests that such an acknowledgement of truth has the character of illusion about the absolute knowledge that gives one a false sense of total power and control. It leads to a casual attitude to the truth, as if it were a proposition. According to Watkin [6], such objective knowledge does not encourage a particular lifestyle, as a subjective aspect of ethical offenses is not actually included in this big picture. Abstract ideas might create a coherent system of concepts corresponding to abstract being. The truth, then, is to be defined in a tautological sense, where *thinking* and *being* refer to the same context. Truth is reached on a formal basis, although irrelevant to actual entities.

Two objective reasons can be identified in his ideas. The first one is a constant change, to which the object of cognition is subjected. The other one is the fact that the subject of cognition is also constantly in the process of change. The object of cognition is 'incomplete' and no human idea can be considered embracing the knowledge of reality of objects. Truth as an epistemological concept is involved in the process of constant correction and revision, and therefore cannot be ultimate and definitive, but can only be an approximation of absolute truth. The subject of cognition himself is the process of *becoming* and susceptibility to correction or a development of his cognition of truth. This fact only accentuates the deficient character of the cognitive process.

### 3. Climacus and the theological concept of truth

Pelikán [7] describes and analyses the Hegelian intellectualism which "infected Danish church and Theology" and hence Kierkegaard opposed not only the Hegelian system but furthermore fulminates against "that post Hegelian gang" [Pap. X, 6 B 128] to unite rationalism and Theology on the basis of speculative philosophy. He never accepted the formalistic and rationalistic reduction of Holy Scripture into a textbook of church doctrines. Kierkegaard was interested in new theological approaches, especially the so-called *higher critical study* of Scripture. He never accepted Luther's theology: "I have never really read anything by Luther" [Pap. VIII, A 465], being significantly influenced by a conservative type of orthodoxy from the congregation of the *Moravian Brethren* (Unitas Fratrum), where his father used to take him as a child. In his letter to W. Lund (1.6.1835) he presents his theological ideas, oscillating between pietistic devotion, which he considers to be *real and consistent*, although rather difficult to be practised in real life, and rational devotion which he sees as "second-class devotion" [Pap. I A 72].

The fundamental mistake of the followers of Hegel was their emphasis on the philosophical approach to spiritual life, instead of focusing on an actual existing subject which exists in a particular historical context. Climacus [8] assumes the basis of spiritual comprehension in his historical approach as he regards Christianity to be the only historical phenomenon that despite the historical aspect indeed, precisely by means of a historical basis, has wanted to be *the single individual's point of departure* for his eternal consciousness, and has wanted to interest him otherwise than merely historically, but has wanted to

base his happiness on his *relation to* something historical. In Climacus' view Philosophy is related to reasoning, mythology to imagination, historical knowledge relates to memory and only Christianity *touches the heart* of a man, so the theological embrace of the paradoxical truth becomes a "scandal of truth" [Pap. X, 3 A 225].

The works of Grotius, Hobbes and Spinoza together with English deism contributed to the development of critical thinking based on a scientific approach to Scripture and to a rationalistic understanding of Christian testimony. In his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* Spinoza asserts that the means of interpretation and the rules that apply are supposed to be "nothing but the natural light which is common to all, and not any supernatural light or external authority" [9]. Fichte assumes that "only the metaphysical, and not the historical, can give us blessedness" [10] as the *historical* is only to make the *metaphysical* being more comprehensible. Buttrick [11] points to the relation of how Lessing's barrier between the accidental facts of history and essential truth significantly influenced the interpretation of Scripture especially in so far as fundamental facts were questioned: the nature of Christ's resurrection, the eschatological dimension of messianism or the differences between the Synoptic gospels and John's gospel. Climacus strongly criticizes any questioning of Christ's historicity, since he maintained his conviction that "Christ was historical. Then, after a long time, came the mythical – but merely as an invention of the intellect." [Pap. IX, A 160]

One of the most popular approaches of that time was a theory of rationalistic interpretation of miracles with a mythological view on the narrative texts in Scripture. It was Schleiermacher who developed new trends of contemporary Theology with hermeneutics focused on an *acceptable* understanding of biblical texts by a contemporary observer. In his work *Das Leben Jesu* he presents the resurrection of Christ as his resuscitation and the transcendent supernatural events in the Gospel he presents as a result of the prejudiced thinking of the apostles. Consequently the essence of the Christian faith is independent of Scripture since what the observer sees in Jesus is actually the confirmation of the truth and the truth can be postulated irrespective of Christ himself as essence is inevitably connected with historicity [12].

Scepticism was also significant in the theological thinking of modern philosophers as for Kant the truth is ethical while, for Hegel, it is the pantheistic unity of Spirit and the meeting point in each one of us of true humanity and true divinity [10]. Climacus, however, critically analyses the misconception of this rationalistic approach. Rationalism cannot be a reliable guide to a theological embracing of the truth as its conclusions are syllogistic: "it looks as if the intellect now had the task of explaining this myth — this myth which it had itself composed" [Pap. IX, A 160]. For Climacus the truth is paradoxical and therefore it is impossible to be comprehended theologically. There is the *absolute difference between man and God*, while man cannot think *sub specie aeterni*, explicitly God is the one who is infinite. Therefore man during his lifetime, although he is "eternal, is in fact as an existing individual" needs to

accept the “internalization in existence“ [1, p. 412]. Life in its finiteness is determined by limits that cannot be overcome, not even by an objective approach to reality as framed by Theology.

One of Kierkegaard’s contemporaries D.F. Strauss (1808-74) applied Hegel’s philosophy on the interpretation of the New Testament and came to the conclusion that most of the testimonies in the Gospel have no real historical foundation but a mythical character, as eternal theological truths are “not history but myth, the clothing of timeless religious truth in the dress of historical narrative“ [10]. According to Strauss a man is obliged to learn primarily eternal truth not historical truth, as the truth that is presented in the Bible is a synthesis of unity between the divine and the human. Jesus Christ in human reasoning consequently represents an ideal of human existence respectively as an example of an ideal way of living, without actually having a soteriological impact on a man’s life. For Climacus the Bible is “authentic, complete, and its authors are trustworthy” and being the inspired Word it is qualitatively “dialectical and not to be reached by quantitative means” [1, p. 28]. Hence Paul’s authority, according to Kierkegaard, is not derived from the quality of his rhetorical capability, neither from the rational power of his arguments, but a man who has to “submit to Paul because he has divine authority“ [13].

#### 4. Climacus and biblical concept of truth

Kierkegaard’s scholars focus their research on his relationship to different philosophical and theological traditional approaches mostly, rather than his bible studies – although it is principally his knowledge of the Scriptures and his relationship to the Scriptures that determine the understanding of his works. It becomes so evident that Kierkegaard was an intensively scripturally shaped writer whose natural idiom was the language of the Bible and who viewed the world through biblical lenses [14]. The narrative character of the biblical testimony as well as the stories of Old Testament characters (such as Abraham, Job, David, Solomon) are the basis for his reflection on the giants of Philosophy and Theology, as well as on the reflections of the ideas of his Danish contemporaries. At the centre of his effort there is Jesus Christ as the embodiment of God’s reconciliation to humanity and as the prototype for humanity to emulate and to follow. This *God in time* is the absolute paradox *integrating* objective, subjective, cognitive, ethical and existential perspectives in a single individual life.

The concept of truth occurs in the texts of New Testament in various different notions. *Aletheia* (Greek ἁληθεια) is used for objective reality in contrast to reality that is seeming or apparent, or with intentional lies (Romans 1.25). It is the context that explains the complexity of the meaning: to communicate the truth (Romans 9.1), the reality of Christ’s truth inside man (2 Corinthians 11.10), the truth of the Gospel (Galatians 2.5), Jesus as the truth (John 14.6) and also the Servant of truth, who lives in truth (Mark 12.14). The truth has not only a declarative character (John 18.38), but it is also a

transforming force, able to change a man's life (Ephesians 4.21). Jesus Christ is truth not only in the ethical sense, but he is also the embodiment of truth in its whole complexity, he is the essence of truth, holder, representative and ultimate reason. As an adjective *aléthés* (ἀληθής) occurs in a description of real phenomena, events, statements describing reality (John 4.18). In a different permutation *aléthinós* (ἀληθινός) it describes God's character (John 3.33), defines the relationship of a context to the relating item. God, being a true God, differs from other deities, in that he always fulfils his promises, he can't be untrue, his judgment is always right, in Him there is a unity of word and action. Truth here represents the complete, real state of reality. Those, who worship God are not primarily sincere, but true, faithful (John 4.21). There is also a term *gnésíós* (γνησιώς), which refers to reliability, responsibility and truthfulness of the one who communicates the truth (Philippians 2.20).

In the text of the Old Testament there are several concepts corresponding to truth by creating a Hebrew approach of embracing reality in an intellectual, empirical, ethical and social view. The expression *émunáh* (Hebrew אֱמוּנָה) stands for truth, truthfulness, honesty, and also official duties and a steady position. Jeremiah the prophet, for example, warns Israel saying: "Faithfulness is dead. No longer it is even talked about." (Jeremiah 7.28) The context of this expression opens up some interesting connections: Truth is to be found in God because He is the truth, His people live in the truth if they listen to Him, that is, listen to His voice. And only those can hear His voice are humble, whose ethical effort is guided by the spirit of discipleship (Psalm 119.151). Climacus is in tune with the above when affirming that "the life of a man who has some understanding of objective truth, but will not allow this knowledge to penetrate his life, is not *true*, but it is *false*" [8, p. 34].

There are vertical and horizontal dimensions in the concept of true, as truth should be the very essential of one's inner being (Psalm 51.6) and human relations should also be based on truthfulness (Exodus 20.16). In a different context the same expression refers to the character of God: God is true, because He is gracious and merciful, generous and forgiving, faithful and unchanging (Isaiah 16.5, Joshua 2.14). He is righteous, judging and rewarding (Proverbs 11.18) and there is a subjective, as well as an objective aspect of the content of truth. This expression synonymously relates to *tsedeq* (righteousness, Isaiah 11.5), *mišpat* (justice, a legal decision – Jeremiah 5.1) and *hesed* (faithfulness to the covenant – Psalm 98.3). The concept of the agreement between God and His people is metaphorically present in marriage, full of love, faithfulness and commitment, while surprisingly the term *hesed* (covenant faithfulness) refers to God as well as to a man.

According to Douglas [15], the Hebrew term *émet* (Hebrew אֱמֶת) is often translated into Greek as *aletheia* (Jerusalem as the faithful city – Zechariah 8.3), *dikaíos* (truthful acting as a synonym of justice and law – Nehemiah 9.33) and *pistos* (true as faithfulness, reliability, fear before God and also devotion to God, Nehemiah 7.2). In the most ancient texts this term relates to an intellectual examination of objective reality. Reality itself can be true (actual) or untrue

(deceptive or seeming, Deuteronomy 17.4 or 1 Kings 10.6). More frequently it is used in its existential and moral meaning, where it is related to beings, individuals and society. It can be related to man (Exodus 18.21) or God (Psalm 132.11). Man can choose the truth (Psalm 119.30), demonstrating his faithfulness and devotion to God. The Old Testament is focused on the truth as the essential being of a reliable man more than on a description of phenomena or their analytical classification. The true identity of being is formed by a unity between words and action.

The concept of truth in the Old Testament is also related to the cognitive processes in learning. The word *da'at* (Hebrew דַּעַת) occurs in a narrative illustrative of the land where the first man ate from the tree of 'the knowledge of good and evil', other contexts indicate its relation to understanding the continuity, analytical skills, assessing the qualities, understanding and practical reasoning. According to academic studies it is mentioned 90 times in the text of the Old Testament, while the expression *jáda'* (יָדָעַ) is mentioned 1040 times, indicating a comprehensive concept of learning [16]. The system of learning here is not merely external (descriptive), but also a significantly internal process of analysing hidden phenomena and principles observed in reality. The process of learning has a reflexive and experiential dimension. In contrast to the Greek ideal of learning by analysing the reality in its static and constant being, the existential approach studies life's dynamic with the emphasis on one's personal experience of reality while involving the integrity of the person in every possible cognitive process.

Discovering the connections between presenting the truth in the Old and New Testaments is most revealing. In the Old Testament the idea of truth is primarily associated with 'the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob', gradually uncovered in the vector of messianic prophecies. The prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus Christ, God incarnate. The paradoxical character of this historical event is expressed in the New Testament text: "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (John 1.18). John with his master skill placed several Old Testament's notions of truth (*tsedeq*, *émunáh* and *hesed*) in his testimony, emphasizing the central position of Jesus Christ in the history of salvation, especially the paradox of His existence, which Kierkegaard encompasses as the absolute paradox.

Sponheim [17] assumes that Kierkegaard's theological concept of truth oscillates between two poles determined by *God-man* relationship in a centrifugal (diastase) sense, where the distinction between them is emphasized and in a centripetal (synthesis) sense with the emphasis on their reciprocity and interaction. Climacus talks about temporality (finiteness) and eternity (infinity). In the infiniteness different horizons are given, where an individual internalizes his relationship to God who is *absolutely different*. Kierkegaard in his *Book on Adler* [13, p. 181] explicitly specifies the fact of "the infinite qualitative difference between God and man", which will one day disappear in eternity in "essential identity" and "God and man, like king and servant, become equals". The problem of the relationship between God and man is the problem of the



reality of sin [18]. Sin is the barrier which inhibits the actualization of their relationship, as “man becomes a sinner“ [1, p. 583]. The phenomenon of sin makes the dissimilarity between God and man even ‘more radical than ever before’, while man’s position before God cannot be changed *via negationis* (by denying) neither *via eminentiæ* (by confirming). Kierkegaard in his writings thus opens the way for an existential dimension of grasping truth where the paradoxical character of matter finds a real and authentic outcome in a single individual existence walking ahead to eternity [19].

## 5. Conclusions

We need to notice that Kierkegaard’s perspective of embracing truth seems to be essentially different from that of the Cartesian or rationalistic or sceptical version. The principal reason lies in Kierkegaard’s view of man as an eternal being, existing in a historical context. Such men are not capable of perceiving reality in its absolute sense, not even to reason in Spinoza’s *sub specie aeterni*. The Kierkegaardian person thinks *before* and he thinks *afterwards*. His thinking therefore cannot attain absolute continuity and „only in a fantastical way can an existing person continually be *sub specie aeterni*“ [1, p. 329]. Retaining knowledge with absolute certainty according to Climacus requires knowledge which is absolute, ultimate and final – similar to the ‘system’ presented by Hegel.

According to Climacus – system and conclusivity are in mutual correspondence. Nevertheless for existence – it is exactly the opposite. Man is not God, so a person cannot perceive the reality of being from His (absolute) perspective, only from a (limited) human perspective. Human existence is existence within the space allowed by limitations. Therefore neither an aesthetic nor an ethical view can make a definitive evidence of certain declaration, for no view can be considered to be surely objective. Climacus also indicates that no logical system can relate to understanding the concept of eternal life and death. Death cannot be an object of logical definitions, as the individual subject, trying to explain death, is existentially involved [20]. Climacus acknowledges the ethical proposition in life to be an intrinsic quality of human existence, therefore he refuses any logical system indicating the acknowledgement of truth.

Climacus directs his understanding of truth as a human existence to ‘how do I live’, ‘who I am’ (ethical dimension) rather than ‘what do I think’ (intellectual dimension). Being aware of certain *existential limits* is a painful experience for mankind, yet there is no reason to despair. Kierkegaard’s individual has to deal with them in time and space, so truth has a dimension of existence in the sense of ‘subjectivity’ and ‘internalization’. Human desires, such as hope, love and fear are an integral proportions of every individual’s life and become a reality, in which human will and action find their *raison d’être*.

The epistemological problem whether *the truth can be learned* is viewed by Climacus as a movement derived from a Socratic philosophical approach (man possesses the truth) leading to a Christian approach (man has lost the truth,

so he does not possess it) where a more significant role than *retaining the truth* is the necessity of *living the truth*. According to Kierkegaard all essential knowledge somehow relates to existence, or put in another way – only such cognitive skills and human capacity and knowledge that have a true relationship to existence is true knowledge. The actualization of the individual's existence accedes to a process, which is inherently ethical, since it is actual to exist ethically. Hence such an existential ellipse offers a *modus operandi* where questions of truth, justice and love thus became ethical questions and Kierkegaard deals with them on a theological basis, since according to Climacus only ethical and ethical-religious knowledge is essential knowledge.

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