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KIERKEGAARD'S

Concluding Unscientific

Postscript

A Critical Guide

EDITED BY

RICK ANTHONY FURTAK

Colorado College

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The epistemology of the Postscript

M. G. Piety

There have been two significant obstacles to determining the substance of Kierkegaard's epistemology. The first is the barrier of language. It is relatively easy for scholars in the English-speaking world to learn languages such as German or French. By contrast, most Kierkegaard scholars are able to piece together only a rudimentary knowledge of Danish during short stays in Denmark facilitated by research fellowships. The second obstacle to understanding Kierkegaard's views on knowledge is that his otherwise prodigious authorship includes no straightforward treatise on knowledge. The closest thing to such a treatise is, in fact, his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. A comprehensive account of the epistemological views contained in this work is beyond the scope of a brief essay. Such an account would require an entire book, and a substantial one at that. I argue elsewhere that Kierkegaard appears to subscribe in a very broad sense to the traditional view that knowledge amounts to justified true belief.¹ A great deal of insight into the epistemology of the *Postscript* can thus be gained by looking closely at how the concept of truth functions in this work.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will focus on the concept of truth in the *Postscript*. It will also look in detail at the significance of some of the relevant Danish terminology. The end product, I hope, will help to give the reader greater insight into the substance of the epistemology of the *Postscript* than it has yet been possible to attain from any secondary work in English.

Most Kierkegaard scholars know that Kierkegaard distinguishes between subjective and objective truth. Very little work has been done, however, on precisely *what* distinguishes these two types of truth – and this has caused problems for Kierkegaard scholars. Some mistakenly reduce all types of

truth in Kierkegaard to subjective truth, with the result that he appears more closely related to Sartrean existentialism than he actually is. Others mistakenly reduce all types of truth to objective truth, with the result that his views appear incoherent.

I am going to argue that one of the reasons scholars have had such difficulty understanding Kierkegaard's views on truth is that some important distinctions Kierkegaard makes in this context do not come across in translations. This has been a particularly intractable problem for scholars interested in Kierkegaard's epistemology, and it is undoubtedly one of the reasons that so little has been written on this subject in English. The problem is not restricted, however, to scholarly work in English. I will make special reference to the scholarship of Anron Hügli, whose otherwise excellent book, *Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität und die Objektivität des Erkennens*,² is marred by a failure to appreciate some of Kierkegaard's terminological distinctions. My main objective, however, is to show that one of the most important distinctions Kierkegaard makes between subjective and objective truth is obscured in English translations, which use the single word "approximation" to render two very different Danish terms: *Approximation* and *Tilnærmede*.

Many theories of truth are reductionist in that they try to reduce the various senses of the expression "truth" to a single essence. This essence is sometimes spoken of as a correspondence to reality; "Reality" is problematic, however, in a way that is not often recognized in this context. That is, it is possible to speak of the reality of the way things *are* and the reality of the way they *ought to be*. The subject of the correspondence in question is thus also somewhat problematic. Many contemporary theorists consider that it is something like beliefs, or propositions, that are properly spoken of as corresponding or failing to correspond to reality. It is also possible, however, to think of things in themselves as the subjects of such correspondence. A chair, for example, may be spoken of as corresponding to reality in the sense that it agrees with the form of what a chair ought to be like.

Few people today consider that there is an eternal, unchanging form of chairness, or an idea of chairness in the mind of God, to which all actual chairs ought to correspond. Most people *do* believe, however, that there is a way people ought to behave, that there is something like a moral law, or norms of behavior that are not merely socially or culturally determined. If this is the case, then it seems possible to speak of an individual's life as

¹ See Piety, *Ways of Knowing*.

² "Knowledge of Subjectivity and the Objectivity of Knowing."

either corresponding or failing to correspond to the form it ought to have. A life that corresponded to the reality of the way things ought to be, then, could be spoken of as "true," or as an expression of the truth.

If there is a way things ought to be, then it would seem reasonable to distinguish between what one could call "descriptive truth" and "prescriptive truth." This distinction is precisely the one that Kierkegaard makes between what he refers to as "objective" and "subjective" truth.

Truth, according to Kierkegaard, is an agreement between thought and being, where "being" is synonymous with "reality" (CUP 159).³ Such agreement can be established, however, in two ways: by making thought conform to being, or by making being conform to thought. There are thus two types of truth according to Kierkegaard, as is apparent in his claim that "there is a difference between truth and truths."⁴

"Truths," according to Kierkegaard, are the result of the accurate representation of being in thought. It is important to appreciate, however, that "being," for Kierkegaard, encompasses both abstract and concrete entities. Hence truth, in the sense of "truths," can be defined as agreement either between some abstract entity and thought, or between some concrete entity and thought.⁵ The former appears in Kierkegaard's authorship as what one might call truth in the strict sense and the latter as what one might call truth in a looser sense in that it is never, on his view, more than an approximation.

The agreement between an abstract entity and thought appears tautological, according to Kierkegaard, because in this instance "thought and being [*Tænken og Væren*] mean one and the same" thing (CUP 160). That is, the correspondence of the one to the other is merely "an abstract self-identity" (CUP 160).

That is, the truth that, according to Kierkegaard, is an agreement between some abstract entity and thought is a "duplication" (CUP 160), or self-identity of what he calls "ideality."⁶ This duplication is accomplished in language, of which, according to Kierkegaard, all thought consists, and which has the dual nature of being both ideal in itself and an expression of ideality.⁷ Abstract, or ideal, being is expressed in language, which is itself abstract. Hence truth, in the sense of "truths," is a property of sentences or

propositions. This is also the case when truth is considered as agreement between some actuality and thought. That is, truth is not what is the case about the world, but the agreement between a particular proposition about the world and what is the case. The fact, for example, that Caesar crossed the Rubicon is not a truth about Caesar, or about the past; it is rather the claim that accurately represents this fact which is true. This type of truth is referred to by Kierkegaard as "objective truth" (CUP 163). "Objectively," explains Anton Hügli, "truth is – in the sense of the classical definition – an *adæquatio intellectus ad rem*."⁸ Objective truth, according to Kierkegaard, is quite properly indifferent to the existence of any particular individual (see, e.g., CUP 162–163). It is indeed this indifference, he argues, that "is precisely its objective validity [*Gyldighed*]."⁹ But what kinds of truth, according to Kierkegaard, may legitimately be viewed as objective?

"Objectively understood," he asserts, "truth can mean: (1) the historical truth, [or] (2) the philosophical truth. Looked at historically, the truth must be made out through a critical consideration of the various reports etc., in short, in the way that historical truth is ordinarily brought to light. In the case of philosophical truth, the inquiry turns on the relation of a historically given and ratified doctrine to the eternal truth." (CUP 19)

The reference above is specifically concerned with the truth of Christianity, but it may justly be extended to refer to all types of objective truth. That is, objective truth can signify either (1) an agreement between the past, or the present, as it is represented in thought and the reality of the past, or present; or (2) an agreement between a particular philosophical doctrine (e.g., Platonism), as it is represented in thought and in its eternal reality.

We know from Kierkegaard's journals from 1842–43 that he was particularly interested in the distinction made by Leibniz between truths of reasoning and truths of fact.¹⁰ "Truths of reasoning," argued Leibniz, "are necessary, and their opposite [*si*] is impossible."¹¹

Truths of reason are equivalent to what was identified above as "philosophical truth."¹² The claim, for example, that the validity of an argument is distinguishable from its soundness was first articulated by Aristotle.¹³ That is, it was "historically given," but it is not in itself a historical truth. That there is a distinction between an argument's validity and its soundness is built into the definition of an argument (i.e., it is part of its essence); thus the correspondence to reality of the claim that there is such a distinction

³ Cf. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, KW 2: 247. See also Storey, "Die Erkenntnistheorie S. A. Kierkegaard's (S. A. Kierkegaard's Epistemology)," and Hügli, *Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität*, 78.

⁴ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, KW 20: 206.

⁵ Cf. Hügli, *Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität*, 78. ⁶ *Johannes Climacus*, KW 7: 168–171.

⁷ Cf. *The Concept of Irony*, KW 2: 274 and JP 2: 1159; PAP III A 37.

⁸ Hügli, *Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität*, 199. My translation. ⁹ CUP 163. Translation modified.

¹⁰ See PAP IV c 8–44, *passim*.

¹¹ Leibniz, *Monadology*, § 33, in *Philosophical Writings*, 184.

¹² Aristotle, *Prior Analytics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2: 39–13.

is formally necessary. Such necessity means that it is inconceivable that this claim could fail to correspond to reality. The proposition that there is a difference between validity and soundness constitutes an *adaequatio intellectus ad rem*, or an agreement between reality and ideality (cf. CUP 159), where the reality in question is itself abstract or ideal.

We have just discussed objective truth in the strict sense. This section will explore objective truth in the looser sense.

While truths of reason are necessary, according to Leibniz, those of fact are contingent, which means that their opposites are formally possible. Establishing the correspondence of statements about actuality, whether the actuality in question is that of nature or of human events, to reality is thus problematic. No amount of investigation will reveal that a particular statement about actuality *must* correspond to reality because, unlike abstract entities, nothing actual is what it is necessarily.¹³

But if the correspondence of a statement about actuality to reality cannot be established definitively, then the agreement between this statement and reality which, according to Kierkegaard, constitutes truth, "is transformed into a *desideratum* [or *desideratum*] and everything then posed in terms of becoming [*Vorden*], since the empirical object is unfinished" (CUP 159). Statements about actuality cannot thus be true in an absolute sense. They are often referred to as "true," but because the object of such statements is not finished, they can at best only approximate correspondence to the reality to which they refer. Hügli observes, however, that "the argument that the empirical object is unfinished undoubtedly applies to present actuality, which is still in the process of becoming [*Werden*], but . . . it does not apply to the past which, as Climacus asserts in *Crunbs*, is finished [*abgeschlossen*] and to this extent immutable."¹⁴

However, the correspondence of claims about actuality to reality is an approximation, according to Kierkegaard, not because actuality is "unfinished" (CUP 73, 159), but because of the peculiar relation these empirical statements have to the facts to which they refer. No amount of data will establish that, for example, Caesar *must* have crossed the Rubicon, that no alternative course of action was possible, and thus that no other interpretation of the data could be correct. There will always remain at least

the formal possibility that the claim that he did cross the Rubicon is false. That is, it is conceivable that the claim could be false, even if it is in fact true.

The categories of thought, because of their abstract nature, cannot encompass concrete facts as such.¹⁵ According to Kierkegaard, the categories of thought are, again, linguistic categories; hence thought may be understood to be an expression of reality. The difficulty, as Hügli points out, is that "when the individual is expressed, that expression always says that it should not be an individual but something universal. The universal says nothing, however, about the individual as an individual, but on the contrary, only something about the individual in general."¹⁶ Thus where the reality in question is concrete, or actual, rather than abstract, no expression of it is going to capture it in its uniqueness, or particularity, and thus preclude the possibility that it is other than it is represented as being.¹⁷ It is in this respect that one may understand the object of a statement about actuality as unfinished. That is, it is finished *in itself*. It is just not finished *for thought*. It is always possible to collect more information about it and thus to get a better picture of it.

This does not mean, however, that Kierkegaard is an idealist (or anti-realist). Hügli is right to point out that the past, as Kierkegaard insists in *Crunbs*, "is finished and to this extent immutable."¹⁸ The difficulty is that Hügli confuses the past as it is in itself with the past as it is *for thought*. That is, although the past, according to Kierkegaard, is finished in itself, "as material for cognitive consideration [*erkjendene Betragtning*] it is incomplete: it is constantly coming into being through ever new observation and research" (CUP 125, emphasis added).

What is in the process of becoming (*i Vorden*) in statements about actuality is not actuality in itself, but actuality as it is *for thought*. This interpretation is supported not merely by Kierkegaard's views on the nature of the truth in question (i.e., that as a property of propositions, or thought, it is abstract and thus cannot capture empirical reality – i.e., actuality – as

¹³ Thus Sluiter argues that, according to Kierkegaard, "to grasp means to transform into possibility, but then one does not have the object as an actuality and does not grasp it as that which it is" [*begreife betse in Möglichkeit aufheben, dann hatler man aber das Objekt nicht als Wirklichkeit, fast und erfaße es nicht als das, was es sel*]. Sluiter, "Die Erkenntnistheorie S. A. Kierkegaards," 34.

¹⁴ Hügli, *Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität*, 84. My translation. Compare Sluiter's observation that, according to Kierkegaard, "we cannot grasp the particular contingent things in the universe as they actually are." See "Die Erkenntnistheorie S. A. Kierkegaards," 35. My translation. See also Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, KW 8: 77–78 and JP 1: 896, 1: 1057.

¹⁵ Thus Hügli argues that, according to Kierkegaard, "language does not express reality but produces instead something new." See *Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität*, 52–53. My translation.

¹⁶ Hügli, *Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität*, 88 (my translation) and *Philosophical Crumbs*, in RPC 144.

¹⁷ In this context, "necessity" clearly refers to formal, or logical, necessity, not to causal necessity.

¹⁸ Hügli, *Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität*, 87–88. My translation. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Crumbs*, in *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*, trans. M. G. Piety (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 144. Hereafter abbreviated RPC.

such), but also by the fact that the expression for "becoming" Kierkegaard uses in this context is not *Tilblivelse*, the expression he uses in *Crumbs* to refer to the process of "coming to be," but *Vorden*.¹⁹

To become, according to Kierkegaard, in the sense of *at blive til* is to undergo a change in being (*Væren*) – i.e., to go from having been possible to being actual.²⁰ Past events, on his view, have already undergone such a transition. The "becoming" (*Vorden*) that subsequently characterizes them – i.e., that characterizes them to the extent that they are objects of knowledge – concerns their essence (*Væsen*) rather than their being (*Væren*).²¹ That is, it represents the determination of their essence for thought. As objects of knowledge, past events are no longer what they were – i.e., actualities. As objects of knowledge, these past actualities are transformed into intellectual constructions whose correspondence to actuality can be established in only an approximate sense.

Hügli's failure to appreciate the difference between *Vorden* and *Tilblivelse* stems, I believe, from the fact that both expressions are translated into German as *Werden*. The section of the "Interlude" that is entitled *Tilblivelse* (i.e., becoming) in Danish appears in German translations as *Das Werden*.²² *Tilblivelse* is clearly closer, however, to the German *Entstehen* than to *Werden*.²³

Hügli asserts that Kierkegaard's claim that statements about actuality merely approximate truth "can be maintained only when one abandons the Aristotelian assumption, that is, when the concept is not anchored once and for all in the object, but is constituted in the course of the historical discussion between subject and object."²⁴ Kierkegaard himself says in *The Concept of Irony* that "if the object were not understandable . . . only in and with the phenomenon, then . . . knowledge (of the phenomenon) would be impossible, inasmuch as the actuality would be lacking" (KW 2: 241–242).

¹⁹ *Vorden* is a cognate of the German *Werden*: cf. Friedrich Bresemann, *Hand-Wörterbuch der deutschen und dänischen Sprache* (Copenhagen: C. Seen & Sohn, 1855).

²⁰ Cf. *Philosophical Crumbs*, in RPC:141 and Hügli, *Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität*, 66. *Tilblivelse* is thus closer to the German *Entstehen* than to *Werden* (cf. Bresemann, *Hand-Wörterbuch*, "Entstehen" and "Bliue til").

²¹ Cf. *Philosophical Crumbs*, in RPC:151: "As soon as someone who comes later believes the past (not its truth; because that is an object of knowledge [*Erkjendelsen* sagt], that concerns essence [*Væsen*]), not being [*Væren*]; but believes that it was present by having come to be [*ved at være blevet til*]," then the uncertainty of becoming is there."

²² See, e.g., Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophische Bissen*, Über. mit Einl. u. Kommentar von Hans Reehol (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1989) 72ff.; *Philosophische Brocken*, Über. von Emanuel Hirsch (Düsseldorf: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1967) 69ff.; and *Philosophische Brocken*, Übers. von Chr. Schrempf (Jena: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1950) 67ff.

²³ See note 19 above. ²⁴ Hügli, *Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität*, 280, note 59. My translation.

It is clear, however, from what was said above, that actuality *is* lacking when it is expressed in language.²⁵ Language, Kierkegaard argues, is an abstraction and thus "always presents the abstract rather than the concrete (i.e., the actual)" (JP 3: 2324). Hügli acknowledges this himself when he says, "language does not express reality, it produces instead something new."²⁶ Thus it would appear that Kierkegaard does, in fact, abandon Aristotle's assumption that the concept is embodied (*verankert*) in its object.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the truth of statements about actuality *is* identified by Kierkegaard with "the course of the historical discussion between subject and object." Such a view is consistent with his claims, cited above, about how historical truth is established, as well as with his observation that "with regard to all temporal, earthly, worldly goals the crowd can have its validity, even its validity as the decisive factor, that is, as the authority"²⁷ – i.e., for determining truth. That is, no single scholar or scientist can alone determine that a particular historical or scientific theory corresponds to the reality to which it refers. Theories in science and scholarship are always the products of the cooperative efforts of various individuals throughout the history of these disciplines, and need, in order to continue to enjoy acceptance, to be continually verified within the evolving standards of verification agreed on by practitioners in these disciplines.

We have looked so far at Kierkegaard's views on objective truth. I want to turn now to consider his views on subjective truth.

"Truths," according to Kierkegaard, are the result of the accurate representation of being in thought, whether the being in question is ideal, as is the case with immanent metaphysical truths, or whether it is actual, as is the case, for example, with scholarly and scientific truths. "Truth," on the other hand, is the result of the accurate representation of thought in being – i.e., actuality.²⁸

Kierkegaard occasionally speaks as if the meaning of "truth" were restricted to truth in the sense of "truths" (i.e., the representation of being in thought), as when he observes that "the trilogy – the beautiful, the good, the true – has to be conceived and represented in the sphere of the true (namely as knowledge),"²⁹ or when he claims that the truth of the past is

²⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, 52–53 and Sloty, "Die Erkenntnistheorie S. A. Kierkegaards," 54.

²⁶ See note 16 above. ²⁷ Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, KW 22: 106n.

²⁸ Thus Alastair Hannay argues that "in Kierkegaard we have the idea that the sensible world can itself come to bear the imprint of an ideal, even though the 'source' of that ideal remains intractably transcendent." Kierkegaard, 257.

²⁹ *The Concept of Anxiety*, KW 8: 11.

"an object of knowledge [*Erkjendelsens Sagl*]." ³⁰ He observes, however, in *Practice in Christianity*, that though it is common now to associate truth with "cognition [*Erkjendelsen*], knowledge [*Viden*]... in original Christianity all the expressions were formed according to the view that truth is (a way of) being" (KW 20: 206); and this view of truth appears in his authorship as early as 1844. ³¹

The truth that is a property of actuality rather than of mental representations is restricted, according to Kierkegaard, to aspects of reality that relate to the existence of the individual as such – which, he argues, is the case with ethics and religion (see, e.g., CUP 166). Ethics and religion are essentially prescriptive, thus ethical and religious truth is an agreement between the ideality of ethical and religious prescriptions and the actuality of the individual's existence. Ethically, explains Høgl, "the objective is not to express reality in ideality. The individual is in the truth only to the extent that he has ideality in himself. Truth, in the subjective sense, could thus be described as *adaequatio rei ad intellectum*."³² This truth is referred to by Kierkegaard as "essential truth" (CUP 168n) because it is essentially related to the essence of an individual's existence and is thus also referred to by him as "subjective truth" (CUP 19). The distinction Kierkegaard draws between truth and truths is thus the distinction between objective truth and subjective truth.

Just as there are two kinds of objective, or descriptive, truth according to Kierkegaard, so are there two kinds of subjective, or prescriptive, truth. That is, there is truth in the sense of an agreement between some ethical or religious prescription and the existence of a particular individual and then there is "truth" in the sense that eternally valid norms for human behavior may be referred to independently of their expression in the life of an individual. I am going to refer to the former as subjective truth proper and to the latter as subjective truth in the loose sense.

Subjective truth proper (hereafter referred to simply as subjective truth) is, according to Kierkegaard, a way of existing.³³ It is an existence that instantiates what one could call the moral law. It is for this reason Kierkegaard argues Christianity demands not that one *know* the truth, but that one "be the truth."³⁴ To be truth in this way is to manifest in one's

being – i.e., existence – the agreement between thought and being that was identified above as truth.

According to Kierkegaard, however, ethical and religious prescriptions are actualized by an individual, not in the sense that his "historical externality" (CUP 482) is made to correspond to them, but in the sense that he has truly willed such correspondence.³⁵ To agree with the substance of ethical and religious prescriptions is to make a conscious, or inward, effort to bring one's existence into conformity with them.

Kierkegaard argues, however, that

[i]t is not for a single moment forgotten here that the subject is existing, that existing is a becoming and that the notion of truth as the identity of thought and being is a chimera of abstraction and truly only a longing on the part of creation,³⁶ not because truth is not so, but because the knower is one who exists and thus as long as he exists, the truth cannot be so for him. (CUP 165)

No human being, according to Kierkegaard, is in "absolute possession" of ethical and religious truth.³⁷ The difficulty is that the individual "is constantly coming to be [*Vorden*]" (CUP 77).³⁸ "Truth," argues Kierkegaard, "is for the particular individual, only as he produces it in action."³⁹ Every action of an individual must "produce" truth, if his existence is to be an expression of truth. As long as an individual exists, however, his future is before him. This means that he is not finished acting and that his existence cannot thus be understood to be a complete expression of the truth.

We saw above that Kierkegaard speaks of objective truth in both a strict sense and a loose sense and that truth, and by extension knowledge, in

³⁵ Cf. Høgl's observation that what he refers to as *Ansore* *Wirklichkeit* (external actuality) is not under the control of the individual and that, considered as a candidate for ethical action, "it is unethical to be concerned about that which is not itself dependent upon the ethical." *Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität*, 216 (my translation). Thus, he concludes, only the intention, the will, remains as a candidate for ethical action.

³⁶ Cf. Romans 8:19.

³⁷ KW 18: 83. Cf. Story's observation that according to Kierkegaard, "For the existing subject, truth cannot be obtained once and for all in the eternity of pure being; is not absolutely constituted. Truth, for someone who exists, is rather only in the passionate anticipation of eternity, exists only in an approach." Story, "Die Erkenntnislehre S. A. Kierkegaards," 38. My translation.

³⁸ That the Danish expression Kierkegaard uses here is *Vorden* rather than *Tilbliben* might appear at first to contradict my earlier claim concerning the terminological difference between *Vorden* and *Tilbliben*. I believe, however, that the "coming to be" (or "becoming") Kierkegaard intends the reader to understand here is precisely a determination of the individual's essence (*Væsen*) rather than being (*Væren*). That is, there is a gradual accretion of facts about the individual represented by his actions over time. We "come to be" (*blive til*) according to Kierkegaard when we are born (CUP 490). We may "come to be" again, but only through a personal encounter with Christ as described in *Crunch* (cf. RPC 96–105).

³⁹ KW 8: 138. Cf. Story, "Die Erkenntnislehre S. A. Kierkegaards," 39 and Høgl, *Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität*, 228.

³⁰ *Philosophical Crumbs*, in RPC 51. Cf. KW 21: 135.

³¹ See, e.g., *Concept of Anxiety* (KW 8: 138) and PAP v B 60.

³² Høgl, *Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität*, 199–200. My translation.

³³ Cf. Daise, "The Will to Truth in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*," and Walker, "Ethical Beliefs."

³⁴ *Practice in Christianity*, KW 20: 209.

this latter sense is referred to by him as an approximation (see CUP 21–22, 27–43, 68). It appears, however, that there is a sense in which even subjective truth proper, to the extent that it is expressed in the life of an individual, may be understood to be an approximation.⁴⁰ In other words, as Kierkegaard argues in *Practice in Christianity*,

[t]he being of truth is the redoubling of truth within yourself, within me, within him, that your life, my life, his life expresses the truth *approximately* in the striving for it; that your life, my life, his life is approximately the being of the truth in the striving for it, just as the truth was in Christ, a *life*, for he was the truth.⁴¹

The sense in which one can approximate ethical or religious truth differs, however, from the sense in which one can approximate objective truth. In both instances, according to Kierkegaard, truth in an absolute sense may be defined as a *desideratum*. In the latter case, however, one has no guarantee that the apparent probability of the correspondence of a particular statement about actuality to the reality to which it refers is objectively vindicated – in the sense that, the more probable the correspondence appears, the closer he is to its absolute determination. That is, an increase in the apparent probability of the correspondence brings the subject no closer to establishing genuine correspondence.

To approximate ethical and religious truth, according to Kierkegaard, is precisely to “approach” it. This can be seen if we look at the Danish expression he uses to refer to this sort of approximation. The expression in question is not *Approximation*, the one he uses in the context of his discussion of objective truth (cf. CUP 21–43), but *Tilnærrelse* (see, e.g., KW 20: 205; 21: 208). *Tilnærrelse* is composed of two words, *Nærrelse*, which translates literally as “the act or movement, to approach, to come closer to,” and the preposition *til*, which translates as “to.”⁴² *Tilnærrelse* may thus be translated as either “approximation” or “approach,” and it appears to be the latter that Kierkegaard has in mind. That is because it was customary in theological circles in Copenhagen in the mid-nineteenth century to speak of “approaching God.” J. P. Mynster, the Bishop of Zealand during most of Kierkegaard’s adult life, argued, for example, that “Tilnærmelsen til Gud kann ikke finde Sted uden Betragtning af Gud” (“One cannot approach God without contemplating God”).⁴³

One has an access, according to Kierkegaard, to ethical-religious reality that one does not have to actuality more generally. That is, one is assumed, on his view, to have insight into the substance of ethical-religious prescriptions through one’s conscience which, he asserts, is one’s “co-knowledge [Samviden] with God” (CUP 129).⁴⁴ It is thus possible, according to Kierkegaard, to approach ethical or religious – i.e., prescriptive – truth in the striving for it,⁴⁵ in a sense that it is not possible to approach objective, or descriptive, truth through probability.

Kierkegaard is not a subjectivist.⁴⁶ His claim that “truth is subjectivity” (CUP 159–251) is not meant to refer to truth in general, but is made in the context of his examination of a specific kind of truth – i.e., a truth that is essentially related to the existence of the individual knower as such. This does not mean, however, that while Kierkegaard believed there was objective truth in scholarship and science, he was a subjectivist with regard to ethical and religious truth, as one might infer from his claim that with respect to ethics and religion, “subjectivity itself becomes the mark of the truth” (CUP 212).

That subjectivity becomes “a sign of the truth” here is not in the least mysterious. It is a formal consequence of the fact that there are two ways in which thought and being may be understood, according to Kierkegaard, to “agree.” Subjectivity does not become a sign of truth in general, but only when the truth in question is of the subjective sort. That is, when truth is prescriptive, then the way that the individual’s existence represents an actualization of these prescriptions becomes a sign of the truth. Such agreement is the result of an individual’s having accepted ethical-religious prescriptions in the sense that he has willed to bring his existence into conformity with them.

Kierkegaard’s claim that truth is subjectivity means no more than that when “truth” is prescriptive of an individual’s existence, the substance of the prescription ought to be expressed in that existence, not that Christianity may be “true” for one person and Buddhism, for example, “true” for another.⁴⁷ There is, according to Kierkegaard, one genuine set of

⁴⁰ See *The Book on Adler*, KW 24: 91–92.
⁴¹ KW 20: 205, emphasis added.

⁴² Cf. J. S. Ferrall and T. G. Repp, *A Danish-English Dictionary* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1845) and Christian Molbech, *Dansk Ordbook* [Danish Dictionary] (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1859).
⁴³ Mynster, *Blandte Skrifter*, I: 49. My translation.

⁴⁴ Hannay has “co-consciousness” rather than “co-knowledge.” I have taken the liberty of modifying the translation to “co-knowledge” because the Danish is *Samviden* and “knowledge” is the preferred translation of *Viden*. This more literal translation also makes the resultant expression “co-knowledge” a cognate of the Latin *conscientia*.

⁴⁵ Cf. CUP 334, 351n, 440–441; see also Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, KW 5: 306.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., *Fear and Trembling* (KW 6: 15) and *The Concept of Anxiety* (KW 8: 105). Cf. Storty, “Die Erkenntnislehre S. A. Kierkegaards,” 63.

⁴⁷ Cf. *The Book on Adler* (KW 24: 117–118) and Storty, “Die Erkenntnislehre S. A. Kierkegaards,” 62. This point may seem to be at odds with Kierkegaard’s claim in the *Postscript* that one may pray in truth to God “though he worships an idol” so long as one “prays with all the passion of the infinite” (CUP 169). The point of this example, however, is precisely that prayer concerns *how* one relates to

ethical-religious prescriptions which, when actualized, constitutes truth in the subjective sense. He never tries to defend this view, however, or to develop criteria for determining the "truth," in the sense of the objective truth, of Christianity, because he believes this is formally impossible.⁴⁸

The question of the truth of Christianity can become an object of mere contemplation. Kierkegaard argues, however, that such a disinterested relation to "the truth, or truths, of Christianity is precisely untruth" (CUP 188). That is, to fail to express the substance of these truths in one's existence is to transform Christianity, "which is essentially a way of life, into a way of speaking [*Talmandel*]," which, he argues, "it least of all wants to be."⁴⁹ That is, to fail to express Christian truth in one's existence is to relegate to the realm of abstraction something which by its very nature – i.e., as prescriptive – demands to be made concrete.

Objective "truth," as we have seen, was something with respect to which the crowd, according to Kierkegaard, was considered to have validity, "even validity as the decisive factor"; this is not the case, however, with subjective "truth."⁵⁰ The latter view of truth, he asserts, "holds that wherever the crowd is, untruth is" (KW 22: 106). This view of truth is, according to Kierkegaard, precisely that of ethics and religion.⁵¹ That is, ethics and religion are concerned with the manner in which the individual ought to exist and this is something, according to Kierkegaard, with respect to which the crowd can have no significance.

CONCLUSION

Readers familiar with the *Postscript* will be aware that Kierkegaard speaks there not only of subjective and objective truth, but also of subjective and objective knowledge. These two types of knowledge relate predictably to

God, not whether it is the true God to whom one is related. Kierkegaard's concern throughout the *Postscript* was not whether Christianity was true, but whether he was a true Christian. He is able to make the transition from the fact that one is praying in truth to the claim that it is thus to the true God one prays, because he never questions that the God of the Christian religion is the true God. To pray in truth is thus necessarily to pray to the true God. Cf. Høgl, *Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität*, 159.

⁴⁸ It is not even possible, according to Kierkegaard, to prove that there is a God: see, e.g., CUP 279–280 and *Philosophical Crumbs*, in RPC III–17.

⁴⁹ KW 21: 159. Translation modified. "Platitude" is the word used by the Hongs to translate *Talmandel*; it is not an acceptable translation of this expression, however, as it was used in the first half of the nineteenth century. *Talmandel* was defined simply as a "mode of expression or phrase" (see Ferrall and Resp. *A Danish-English Dictionary*). The Hongs' translation is misleading to the extent that "platitude" has pejorative connotations in English, and the emphasis here is clearly on the distinction between *saying* and *doing*, rather than on the substance of what is said.

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, KW 22: 106n. ⁵¹ See *ibid.*, KW 22: 106 and following.

these two types of truth, and each has its own form of justification which is relative to the particular nature of its object. In fact, just as there is objective truth in the strict sense and objective truth in an approximate sense, so will the reader discover that there is objective knowledge in the strict sense and in an approximate sense. The same sorts of distinctions apply to subjective knowledge. There is subjective knowledge proper and then there is what one could call pseudo-knowledge, or an objective grasp of truths whose nature is essentially prescriptive, divorced from the actions, or way of life, that they prescribe.

It should be clear by now that, although Kierkegaard never wrote an epistemological treatise as such, his views on knowledge are far more sophisticated and well thought out than has traditionally been appreciated, and that the *Postscript* is one of the richest sources of information about these views in all of Kierkegaard's authorship.