

Right action and eternal truth



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“ What good would it do me if truth stood before me, cold and naked, not caring if I recognized it or not?” Soren Kierkegaard - “ father of existentialism,” critic of both Hegelian idealism and its entire philosophical tradition - viewed his contemporaries as passionless individuals, afraid of falling from the dialectical security of metaphysical theories of existence, clinging to abstract certainty without regard for the isolating character of truths located outside the realm of existence. Surrendering to the dangers of passionate commitment and assertive individuality, philosophy had embraced the comforts of understanding and reflection; and, in its passivity, rendered itself incapable of achieving “ anything that could be called greatness.” In Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs, Kierkegaard offers a decisive route through which truth may be rescued from its objectively valid yet existentially irrelevant status, whereby truth is not merely discovered but also integrated into the fabric of life for an existing individual. It is the temporal quality of human existence that leads Kierkegaard to reject systemic theories of existence. “ System and finality correspond to one another, but existence is precisely the opposite of finality.” Thus a total picture of reality itself “ is a system — for God; but it cannot be a system for any existing spirit.” Systematic truths about the world amount to tautologies with respect to the existing spirit who has no way of disembedding himself from his place in-the-world. Such objective forms of truth concerning existence are unsuitable for existing individuals, which leads Kierkegaard to the central proclamation that “ subjectivity is truth.” The subjective path towards truth is an committed lifestyle of “ continued striving” towards an idea. Kierkegaard’s most essential argument concerns the choice between the objective and subjective paths to truth. The

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objective way seeks to describe a perfect and total picture of what is through an idealized abstraction from existence. By bringing the motion of existence to a halt in an effort to capture its totality, objective reflection achieves a seemingly perfect truth. Objective truth is concerned with discovering and describing the essence of something, some type of eternal true property. Objective reflection purports to arrive at what the truth is, without concern for the relationship between that particular truth and the truth-seeker. This method arrives at truths that are, according to Kierkegaard, ultimately irrelevant to an existing individual: "The way of objective reflection makes the subject accidental, and thereby transforms existence into something indifferent, something vanishing." Such truth, while objectively valid, can never assume any existential significance because it is indifferent with respect to the individual. In failing to explain how it relates to the subject it claims to address, objective truth denies the individual entirely. Thus, "for the existing spirit qua existing spirit, the question of truth is still there." Subjective reflection, on the other hand, locates the truth in a lived existential relation between the subject and the truth, pursued through passionately infinite inwardness. Only a truth that preserves its intimate relationship with the truth-seeker is instructive and relevant. Kierkegaard's famous proclamation that "truth is subjectivity" reflects his belief that truth does not lie in a perfect system of true propositions, but a lived, active struggle. A polemic against reason, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* asserts faith as the necessary condition for embracing real truth: the sort that an individual pursues subjectively. The primacy of faith rests on Kierkegaard's paradoxical conception of truth. The only possible truth for an existing individual, stretched between birth and death and subject to the momentary

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quality of life in time, must transform intellectual uncertainty with committed, lived action. In such action, truth is realized into existence while retaining an objectively uncertain character. Thus in its relationship to an existing individual, 'eternal, essential truth' must always appear to be paradoxical. Truth can never exist in a complete, metaphysical sense, "nor indeed is there any individual who exists metaphysically." Because the individual is, so long as he lives, is "in no moment complete" so long as he exists, so must truth remain part of a process of becoming. Loyalty to a belief that is objectively uncertain, embraced with subjective self-commitment and lived in actions and choices- this is faith. Such activity engages the individual in the lifelong struggle for truth in contingent circumstance. Speaking to an audience of Christians he believed to be false in their practice of faith, Kierkegaard characterizes true faith in God as the embrace of a two-fold paradox. He explains first how Christians have become lost in an objective project. They "aim at bringing God to light objectively, which is in all eternity impossible..." Any effort to prove the existence of an eternal idea for an existing subject misses the point entirely. For while "nature is certainly the work of God, only the work is directly present, not God." The paradox of true faith is a passionately stubborn insistence in acting according to an uncertain truth as if it were certain. An embrace of this uncertainty brings true knowledge of God to light subjectively, through an inward striving for a correct way of relating to the idea of God. The second paradox is located in the Christian character of Jesus Christ, the living, breathing, acting son of an immortal, eternal God. Jesus suffered even while his Father is supposedly the ultimate idea, the cause for all. The only way to understand this paradoxical truth is through fervent, stubborn faith in <https://assignbuster.com/right-action-and-eternal-truth/>

the face of uncertainty. Thus the fundamental premise of Christian doctrine is, itself, a paradox. Cultivation of true faith with respect to existing individuals emerges as a striving for truth that embraces an eternal idea with passionate inwardness. Such a conception of truth as an equivalent expression of faith embraces the obstacle of uncertainty in its composition. Objective uncertainty is in fact a precondition for the existing individual's appropriation of Christian truth. It is through an appropriation with the "infinite passion of inwardness" that an objective uncertainty is "held fast" and rendered as truth for an existing individual. Faith, as truth, is a steadfast belief in a contradiction, carried out through continual striving and suffering for the sake of an uncertainty to which one commits oneself. It permeates one's "existence with consciousness, at once eternal as though far beyond it and yet present in it, and nevertheless in the course of becoming..." Truth is achievable only in moments that truly embrace the contradictory nature of truth with passion. As such, striving for truth and authentic existence is nothing other than a lifelong struggle. Kierkegaard's emphasis on an authentic existence, which gains meaning through actions passionately directed with infinite inwardness towards truth, seems to reflect a preconceived Christian belief in creating meaning through action. Just as God came down to Earth as Jesus Christ, and walked among His people and performed miracles, so should, according to Kierkegaard, human beings live their lives in continual striving with their actions towards an eternal truth. As he reveals in one of his early letters, ten years before first publishing the Postscript, what Kierkegaard is really concerned with is discerning a purposeful reason for existing. "What I really need is to get clear about what I am to do, now what I must know, except insofar as knowledge must

precede every act.” Here are the roots of his dismissal of objective truth as useless knowledge in favor of finding “ a truth that is a truth for me...[an] idea for which I am willing to live and die.” His search for truth leads him to affirm existence’s enduring struggle to engender meaning through action. Thus a doctrine that concentrates on the existence of the individual who makes himself through the self-development of his active choices - what will come to be known as Existentialism - is born, ironically, of Kierkegaard’s efforts to affirm his Christian faith.