

## Søren Kierkegaard

*Philosophical Fragments, Concluding Scientific Postscript* – excerpts<sup>1</sup>

PHIL101

Prof. Oakes

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### Section III: How do I know?

#### Reading III.5

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was a Danish philosopher who is best known for his interpretation of Christian faith and for his contributions to what would become known as ‘existentialism’. In both cases, a primary focus of Kierkegaard’s work is the immediate quality of our lived experience. What, exactly, is it like to be a human? What constitutes the best form of human life? As we will see, both in the following excerpts and in those in our Ethics section (Section IV), Kierkegaard thinks that our conceptual thought poses a significant potential obstacle to living well – or, more precisely, an obstacle to our living at all, in a sense. Not that Kierkegaard is anti-intellectual in either the theological or ethical context: conceptual thought plays a crucial role in proper human life, he maintains. But we can become “lost” in our concepts, he thinks, and thus fail to live the vital, vivid lives that are otherwise possible for us.

In the following passages, Kierkegaard calls attention to this dualism in our relationship with God, the dualism of our objective, conceptual form of thought, on the one hand, and a subjective, felt state, on the other. Conceptual thought is the province of reason, and so Kierkegaard first considers belief in God in terms of what reason and the conceptual mind can tell us. Finding this approach unsatisfactory, Kierkegaard then considers belief in God in subjective terms.

Kierkegaard’s writing challenges us to consider the nature and result of conceptual thought, and this challenge can prove demanding, intellectually, even paradoxical. Kierkegaard’s writing style reflects these challenges.

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Read each of the following passages carefully and reflect on each before proceeding to the next.

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

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<sup>1</sup> Philosophical Fragments by Søren Kierkegaard. Religion-Online.org. <http://www.religion-online.org/showbook.asp?title=2512>. 9/28/12.

*Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, D. Swenson and W. Lowrie, trans. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941.

## *Kierkegaard on Faith*

For at the very outset, in beginning my proof, I would have presupposed it, not as doubtful but as certain (a presupposition is never doubtful, for the very reason that it is a presupposition), since otherwise I would not begin, readily understanding that the whole would be impossible if he did not exist. But if when I speak of proving God's existence I mean that I propose to prove that the Unknown, which exists, is God, then I express myself badly. For in that case I do not prove anything, least of all an existence, but merely develop the content of a conception. Generally speaking, it is a difficult matter to prove that anything exists; and what is still worse for the intrepid souls who undertake the venture, the difficulty is such that fame scarcely awaits those who concern themselves with it. The entire demonstration always turns into something very different and becomes an additional development of the consequences that flow from my having assumed that the object in question exists. Thus I always reason from existence, not toward existence, whether I move in the sphere of palpable sensible fact or in the realm of thought. I do not for example prove that a stone exists, but that some existing thing is a stone. The procedure in a court of justice does not prove that a criminal exists, but that the accused, whose existence is given, is a criminal.

In the above passage, Kierkegaard refers to the project of proving God's existence as "folly". What does it mean to call something 'folly'? And why does Kierkegaard think that it is folly to seek proof of God's existence?

One concern that Kierkegaard raises, here, involves a fallacy of reasoning known as "begging the question" or a "*petite principii*". *Begging the question* occurs in an argument or dispute when one assumes the very point in contention.<sup>2</sup> In the context of whether it is rational to believe in God, this means assuming without adequate justification that God does in fact exist. Because intellectual disputes can become complex, it is possible to beg the question without meaning to. This is one "folly" that Kierkegaard points out in the above passage: if I set out to prove God's existence, it can only be because I already think God to exist. But that assumes the very point in contention – that God exists.

So, to attempt proof of the existence of God is tantamount to assuming his existence: I assume what I intended to prove, which is foolish. Kierkegaard points to further dimensions of folly in the following:

The works of God are such that only God can perform them. Just so, but where then are the works of God? The works from which I would deduce his existence are not directly and immediately given. The wisdom in nature, the goodness, the wisdom in the governance of the world – are all these manifest, perhaps, upon the very face of things? Are we not here confronted with the most terrible temptations to doubt, and is it not impossible finally to dispose of all these doubts? But from such an order of things I will surely not attempt to prove God's existence; and even if I began I would never finish, and would in addition have to live constantly in suspense, lest something so terrible should suddenly happen that my bit of proof would be demolished. From what works then do I propose to derive the proof? From the works as apprehended through an ideal interpretation, i.e., such as they do not immediately reveal themselves. But in that case it is not from the works that I make the proof; I merely develop the ideality I have presupposed, and because of my confidence in *this* I make so bold as to defy all objections, even those that have not yet been made. In beginning my proof I presuppose the ideal interpretation, and also that I will be successful in carrying it through; but what else is this but to presuppose that God exists, so that I really begin by virtue of confidence in him?

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase 'begging the question' is widely misused to say "raising the question." In its logical context, the meaning of the phrase is quite different: to "beg" a question is to assume the truth of a proposition that is in question. For example, if you and I are arguing over whether women should be legally free to obtain an abortion, and if in the process of so arguing I simply assume that women should be so free, then I have "begged the question" at issue, rather than settling the question by reason.

Note the several more practical problems emerging from the attempt to secure belief in God by means of objective proof – and think about this yourself: What evidence is there, exactly, for God’s existence and is that evidence ultimately unambiguous? How long would it take you to devise an argument that fully convinced you of God’s existence, not simply an argument that you found attractive, but one that of itself left you unable to doubt? And how would you remain certain, over time, that your argument contained no errors?

One key point here, for Kierkegaard, the impossibility of eliminating doubt where an objective demonstration of God’s existence is concerned. We may refer to this as our *objective uncertainty*:

*Objective Uncertainty*: as far as reasoned arguments are concerned, we cannot rule out the objective possibility that God doesn’t exist.

This is an important point, for Kierkegaard. Intellectually, we must accept that our efforts to prove God’s existence fail. The other key point here is what this means in practical terms: the pursuit of belief in God via objective proof won’t achieve its purpose. If I seek belief in God’s existence, the “objective approach” won’t get me there. Kierkegaard focuses on this more practical point in the following:

And how does God’s existence emerge from the proof? Does it follow straightway, without any breach of continuity? Or have we not here an analogy to the behavior of the little Cartesian dolls?<sup>3</sup> As soon as I let go of the doll it stands on its head. As soon as I let it go – I must therefore let it go. So also with the proof. As long as I keep my hold on the proof, i.e., continue to demonstrate, the existence does not come out, if for no other reason than that I am engaged in proving it; but when I let the proof go, the existence is there. But this act of letting go is surely also something; it is indeed a contribution of mine. Must not this also be taken into the account, this little moment, brief as it may be – it need not be long, for it is a *leap*. However brief this moment, if only an instantaneous now, this "now" must be included in the reckoning.

Perhaps Kierkegaard’s most famous image is the “leap of faith.” In common terms, the leap of faith implies an action undertaken in uncertainty, in particular, uncertainty of its outcome. In the context of belief in God, the uncertainty in question is with the objective truth of the matter. Not knowing, objectively, whether God exists, one remains stuck in a state of un-belief as long as one remains engaged in the project of proof. And if no proof can be found that compels belief, as Kierkegaard thinks, belief can result only if one “lets go” of the proving effort and, simply, believes. Note, too, Kierkegaard’s treatment here of *belief* as an *action* – something that we consciously choose to do. Our beliefs are ours to choose, on this view; we are responsible for them.

The irony of this situation is of particular interest, for Kierkegaard; indeed, *irony* is an important concept for him and for the emerging existentialist philosophy that he helps to initiate: the attempt at proof, whose goal is belief, fails to achieve that goal, even though the attempt itself contains all the requirements of belief, and even presupposes this belief.

Kierkegaard’s analysis of religious belief continues with an important distinction between “subjective” and “objective” forms of truth. The distinction is subtle, so be patient as you approach it.

*When the question of truth is raised in an objective manner, reflection is directed objectively to the truth, as an object to which the knower is related. Reflection is not focused upon the relationship,*

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<sup>3</sup> “Cartesian dolls” are tops that flip over after having spun for a few moments. See here for an illustration: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58sryfWQOa0>.

## *Kierkegaard on Faith*

*however, but upon the question of whether it is the truth to which the knower is related. If only the object to which he is related is the truth, the subject is accounted to be in the truth. When the question of the truth is raised subjectively, reflection is directed subjectively to the nature of the individual's relationship; if only the mode of this relationship is in the truth, the individual is in the truth even if he should happen to be thus related to what's not true.* Let us take as an example the knowledge of God. Objectively, reflection is directed to the problem of whether this object is the true God; subjectively, reflection is directed to the question whether the individual is related to a something *in such a manner* that his relationship is in truth a God-relationship. On which side is the truth now to be found? Ah, may we not here resort to a mediation, and say: It is on neither side, but in the mediation of both? Excellently well said, provided we might have it explained how an existing individual manages to be in a state of mediation. For to be in a state of mediation is to be finished, while to exist is to become. Nor can an existing individual be in two places at the same time – he cannot be an identity of subject and object. When he is nearest to being in two places at the same time he is in passion; but passion is also the highest expression of subjectivity.

Part of the idea, here, is that there are two *ends* to a *truth relationship* as we might call it. That is, in a belief or knowledge state, we have on one *end* the subject of the belief or knowledge – a human person – and on the other *end* we have the object of the belief or knowledge – the thing believed in or known. Since we have thus a subject and an object, we can consider either when we consider what it is for a belief, say, to be true. For a belief to be true, Kierkegaard suggests, is for the subject's mental state to *match* or *correspond* in some sense to the object of that belief.<sup>4</sup> For my belief about a cow's being brown to be true is for my belief on my end to correspond to the actual color of the cow on the cow's end.

The case of belief in God is the same, but in this case our “access” to the object, God himself, his nature, is obscured: given our objective uncertainty, we don't know what God is, exactly, or even whether he exists. What are we to do, then, if belief in God is a desired goal? Kierkegaard here suggests that we can effectively ignore the “object end” of the truth relationship, and focus instead on “our end.” Given that one takes the proper “attitude”, we might say, one will be “in the truth.” That is, it is sufficient *to believe* in God, since that is our goal, after all.

Our final passage from Kierkegaard offers a characterization of religious belief, as Kierkegaard understands it. Note the important role played by objective uncertainty in preserving the passion of faith.

Without risk there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith.

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### **Ask Yourself:**

1. Why, exactly, does Kierkegaard believe that it is “folly” to attempt the proof of God's existence?

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<sup>4</sup> This is to refer to what is called a “correspondence theory” of truth. Like much else in philosophy, this basic picture of what truth is is controversial. Nevertheless, this idea provides a useful guide to our thinking about truth.

*Kierkegaard on Faith*

2. What are the prospects for our proof of God's existence, as Kierkegaard views them?
3. What role does rational thought play in Kierkegaard's understanding of religious belief?
4. In what sense, if any, is religious belief rational, on Kierkegaard's view?