

Faith, Meaning and Truth

Soren Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855)



Stages on life's way:

The aesthetic

The ethical

The religious

The aesthetic - concerned with learning and enjoyment.

The ethical - living in accordance with objective moral principles, grounded in humanism.

The religious - the standpoint of faith; the position of Abraham.

The religious stage is the highest stage of personal commitment and of subjectivity. He saw these stages as stages in the development of human beings. Humans may live their whole lives in any one of these

stages or may progress through the stages. Each move must be *chosen* / must be a genuine and *committed* move.

Objectivity

Objectively understood, truth can signify historical truth or philosophical truth. But objective reasoning fails to provide the certainty with respect to the belief essential for eternal happiness.

Objectivity never leads to certainty – yet our lives demand urgent choices to be made or ‘decisiveness’. Such choices are required despite a lack of objective truth.

Subjective truth and religion

For Kierkegaard, when it comes to religion, the issue is not about the truth of Christianity but about the individual’s relation to Christianity; it is about the concern of the infinitely interested individual with regard to her *own relation* to such a doctrine.

The truth of religion is not an *approximate* truth. ‘The truth of religion... is truth that must penetrate my own personal existence, or it is nothing... What is in question here... is one’s own personal *appropriation* of the truth’ (William Barrett, 1990, p.171).

Truth is found in the existence and passion of the subjective thinker. The passion of the subjective thinker is characterised by a deep inwardness and heightened subjectivity.

The paradox

‘Faith is 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’ (*Postscript*, Part VI, Sec., 8).

Subjective truth is the venture of choosing the objective uncertainty with passion. As John Cottingham says (in his introduction to the *Postscript*, Part VI, Sec., 8, in *Western Philosophy*, 2008), ‘it is precisely the lack of objective certainty that generates the ‘risk’ [or we might add, the leap to faith] which is the essential pre-condition of true faith.’

Consider Socrates: in the face of *objective uncertainty* that he is immortal, he is still *subjectively certain* that he is immortal (and this is shown in the way he lives his life).

‘When subjectivity is the truth, the conceptual determination of the truth must include an expression for the antithesis to objectivity... this expression will at the same time serve as an indication of the subjective inwardness. Here is such a definition of truth: *an objective uncertainty held fast in as appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth*... The truth is precisely the venture which chooses an objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite’ (*Postscript*).

References

- Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Part VI, Sec., 8), in John Cottingham (ed.), *Western Philosophy: An Anthology*, second edn. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).
- William Barrett, *Irrational Man* (NY: Anchor Books, 1990).

Reading

Essential

- John Cottingham (ed.), *Western Philosophy: An Anthology*, second edn. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008)—Read the extract from Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Part VI, Sec., 8).

Recommended

- Fremstedal, R. (2022). Part III “Subjectivity, Inwardness, Is Truth.” In *Kierkegaard on Self, Ethics, and Religion*. Cambridge University Press.

Further

- Blackham, *Six Existentialist Thinkers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1952), ch. 1.