

*4th Western Philosophy: an anthology,
ed. J. Cottingham (Oxford:
Blackwell, 2008)*

8 Faith and Subjectivity: Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript**

Challenges to established religion of the kind mounted by Hume (see the two previous extracts) led some philosophical supporters of theism in the nineteenth century to seek radically new ways of defending their beliefs. Our next extract is by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, often regarded as one of the founders of the movement known as existentialism (see Part II, extract 9, and Part V, extract 10). Kierkegaard rejects the whole idea of scientific objectivity as a guide to how we should believe and act in matters that concern our personal lives. In a famous slogan he declares that 'Truth is subjectivity'. Even if the most thoroughgoing scientific evidence for the truth of the Scriptures were forthcoming, Kierkegaard maintains, this would not alter the human predicament one wit, any more than it would if the results of scholarly

and scientific research were to point conclusively in the opposite direction. For 'all essential decisiveness is rooted in subjectivity'. What matters is not a set of scientific results, or a body of objective doctrine, but the deep personal commitment of an individual who takes the leap of faith. This stress on the primacy of faith corresponds to a long-standing tradition in religious thought: Anselm (see extract 1 above) had coined the slogan 'I believe in order to understand', and Pascal too (see extract 4) had exalted faith and devotion above rational proof. But Kierkegaard adds to this a striking paradox, namely that it is precisely the lack of objective certainty that generates the 'risk' which is the essential precondition for true faith: 'if I am capable of grasping God objectively I do not believe; but precisely because I cannot do this, I must believe'.



Let us assume that the critics have succeeded in proving about the Bible everything that any learned theologian in his happiest moments has ever wished to prove about the Bible. These books and no other belong to the canon; they are authentic; they are integral; their authors are trustworthy – one could say that it is as if every letter were inspired... Well, everything being assumed to be in order with respect to the Scriptures, what follows? Has anyone who previously did not have faith been brought a step nearer to its acquisition? No, not a single step. Faith does not result simply from a scientific inquiry; it does not come directly at all. On the contrary, in this objectivity one tends to lose the infinite personal interestedness in passion which is the condition of faith, the 'everywhere and nowhere' in which faith can come into being. Has anyone who previously had faith gained anything with respect to its strength and power? No, not in the least. Rather is it the case that in this voluminous knowledge, this certainty that lurks at the door of faith and threatens to devour it, he is in so dangerous a situation that he will need to put forth much effort in great fear and trembling, lest he fall victim to the temptation to confuse knowledge with faith. While faith has hitherto had a profitable schoolmaster in the existing uncertainty, it would have in the new certainty its most dangerous enemy. For if passion is eliminated, faith no longer exists, and certainty and passion do not go together. Whoever believes that there is a God, and an over-ruling providence, finds it easier to preserve his faith, easier to acquire something that definitely is faith and not an illusion, in an imperfect world where

* S. Kierkegaard, *Afsluttende Uvidenskabelig Efterskrift* [1846]. Trans. D. F. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), extracts from pp. 26–35 and 177–82; with minor modifications.

of Luke 18: 8 might be fulfilled: 'Nevertheless, when the Son of Man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?'

- The more objective the contemplative enquirer, the less he bases an eternal happiness, i.e. his eternal happiness, upon his relationship to the enquiry; for there can be no question of an eternal happiness except for the passionately and infinitely interested subject. Objectively, the contemplative enquirer, whether learned scholar or dilettante member of the laity, understands himself in the following farewell words as he faces the final end: 'When I was a young man, such and such books were in doubt; now their genuineness has been demonstrated, but then again a doubt has recently been raised about certain books which have never before been under suspicion. But there will doubtless soon arise a scholar who will...' and so forth.

The accommodating and objective subject holds himself aloof, displaying an applauded heroism. He is completely at your service, and ready to accept the truth as soon as it is brought to light. But the goal toward which he strives is far distant – undeniably so since an approximation can continue indefinitely; and while the grass grows under his feet the enquirer dies, his mind at rest, for he was objective. It is not without reason that you have been praised, O wonderful Objectivity, for you can do all things; not even the firmest believer was ever so certain of his eternal happiness and above all of not losing it, as the objective subject! Unless this objective and accommodating temper should perhaps be in the wrong place, so that it is possibly unchristian; in that case, it would naturally be a little dubious to have arrived at the truth of Christianity in this manner. Christianity is spirit, spirit is inwardness, inwardness is subjectivity, subjectivity is essential passion, and in its maximum an infinite, personal, passionate interest in one's eternal happiness.

- As soon as subjectivity is eliminated, and passion eliminated from subjectivity, and the infinite interest eliminated from passion, there is in general no decision at all, either in this problem or in any other. All decisiveness, all essential decisiveness, is rooted in subjectivity. A contemplative spirit, and this is what the objective subject is, feels nowhere any infinite need of a decision, and sees no decision anywhere. This is the falsity that is inherent in all objectivity; and this is the significance of mediation as the mode of transition in the continuous process where nothing is fixed and nothing is infinitely decided. For the movement turns back upon itself and again turns back, so that the movement is chimerical, and the philosopher is wise only after the event. But there is no decisive result anywhere. This is quite as it should be, since decisiveness adheres in subjectivity alone, essentially in its passion, and maximally in the personal passion which is infinitely interested in an eternal happiness...

In an attempt to make clear the difference of way that exists between an objective and subjective reflection, I shall now proceed to show how a subjective reflection makes its way inwardly in inwardness. Inwardness in an existing subject culminates in passion; corresponding to passion in the subject, the truth becomes a paradox; and the fact that the truth becomes a paradox is rooted precisely in its having a relationship to an existing subject. Thus the one corresponds to the other. By forgetting that one is an existing subject, passion goes by the board, and the truth is no longer a paradox; the knowing subject becomes a fantastic entity rather than a human being, and the truth becomes a fantastic object for the knowledge of this fantastic entity.

Now when the problem is to reckon up on which side there is most truth, whether on the side of one who seeks the true God objectively, and pursues the approximate truth of the God-idea, or on the side of one who, driven by the infinite passion of his need of God, feels an infinite concern for his own relationship to God in truth... the answer cannot be in doubt for anyone who has not been demoralized with the aid of science. If one who lives in the midst of Christendom goes up to the house of God, the house of the true God, with the true conception of God in his knowledge, and prays, but prays in a false spirit; and if he who lives in an idolatrous community prays with the passion of the infinite, although his eyes rest upon the image of an idol: where is the most truth? The one prays in truth to God though he worships an idol; the other prays falsely to the true God, and hence worships in fact an idol.

When one man investigates objectively the problem of immortality, and another embraces an uncertainty with the passion of the infinite, where is there most truth and who has the greater certainty? The one has entered upon a never-ending approximation, for the certainty of immortality lies precisely in the subjectivity of the individual; the other is immortal, and fights for this immortality by struggling with the uncertainty. Let us consider Socrates. Nowadays everyone dabbles in a few proofs; some have several such proofs, others fewer. But Socrates! He puts the question objectively in a problematic manner: *if there is immortality*. Must he therefore be accounted a doubter in comparison with one of our modern thinkers with their 'three proofs'? By no means. On this 'if' he risks his entire life; he has the courage to meet death; and he has with the passion of the infinite so determined the pattern of his life that it must be found acceptable — *if there is immortality*. Is any better proof capable of being given for the immortality of the soul? But those who have the three proofs do not at all determine their lives in conformity with them; if there is immortality it must feel disgust over the manner of their lives. Can any better refutation be given of the three proofs? The fact that Socrates had a bit of uncertainty helped him because he himself contributed the passion of the infinite; the three proofs that the others had do not profit them at all, because they are dead to spirit and enthusiasm. And their three proofs, instead of proving anything else, prove just this. A young girl may enjoy all the sweetness of love on the basis of what is merely a weak hope that she is beloved, because she rests everything on this weak hope. But many a wedded matron, more than once subjected to the strongest expressions of love, has to this extent indeed had proofs, but strangely enough has not enjoyed *quod erat demonstrandum*.¹ The Socratic ignorance, which Socrates held fast with the entire passion of his inwardness, was thus an expression of the principle that eternal truth is related to an existing individual and that this truth must therefore be a paradox for him as long as he exists; and yet it is possible that there was more truth in the Socratic ignorance, as it was in him, than in the entire objective truth of the System, which flirts with what the times demand, and accommodates itself to the university lecturers.

The objective accent falls on *WHAT* is said, the subjective accent on *HOW* it is said. This distinction holds even in the aesthetic realm, and receives definite expression in the principle that what is in itself true may in the mouth of such and such a person become untrue. In these times this distinction is particularly worthy of notice, for if we wish to

¹ '[that] which was to be demonstrated' (the phrase is used in Euclid's geometry after each theorem has been proved).

If I wish to preserve myself in faith, I must constantly be intent on holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith.

9 Reason, Passion and the Religious Hypothesis: William James, *The Will to Believe**

In the course of assessing the value of supposed miracles as support for religious belief, David Hume had enunciated a principle which many philosophers would find self-evidently sound and sensible: 'a wise man proportions his belief to the strength of the evidence' (see extract 7, above). This implies it is foolish to believe a proposition for which the evidence is weak or inconclusive; one could go further and say that belief in such cases is irresponsible and wrong. In the following extract from an address given to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities at the end of the nineteenth century, the celebrated American philosopher William James strongly rejects this argument. There are, he concedes, many cases where our belief is determined by the facts: we cannot just *decide* whether or not to believe, for example, that Abraham Lincoln existed. But where we are faced with a genuine option that cannot be decided on intellectual grounds, James argues that our 'passional nature not only lawfully may but must decide'. Both moral and religious questions provide examples of questions where our will need not, and indeed should not wait on the evidence. The sceptic may claim to remain aloof and suspend judgement, but James argues that this is just as much a matter of passion, of

exalting our fear of being in error above our hope that the religious hypothesis may be true.

James goes on to argue that an act of will or faith may itself bring benefits that cannot be achieved any other way; friendship, for example, would be impossible if everything were assessed by the standards of 'snarling logicity' and 'pure intellectualism'. The extolling of passionate commitment over austere rational objectivity seems in some respects reminiscent of Kierkegaard (see preceding extract). But James adds a dimension drawn from his pragmatist theory of belief, according to which the content of a belief is intimately bound up with the difference it makes to the way we behave: 'belief', as he puts it in the penultimate footnote of the extract, 'is measured by action'. He ends with a resounding quotation comparing the human predicament with that of a traveller on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist; if we stand still, we shall be frozen to death. Accepting the religious hypothesis, for James, enables us to act with courage and integrity. That is indeed a signal benefit; the question his critics may be inclined to press is why such benefits should be beyond the reach of the resolute and sincere atheist or the agnostic.



In the recently published *Life* by Leslie Stephen of his brother, Fitz-James, there is an account of a school to which the latter went when he was a boy. The teacher, a certain Mr Guest, used to converse with his pupils in this wise: 'Gurney, what is the difference between justification and sanctification?'; 'Stephen, prove the omnipotence of God!' etc. In this midst of our Harvard freethinking and indifference we are prone to

* William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans Green, 1897), ch. 1; abridged.

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