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Kierkegaard's Pragmatist Faith

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Introduction

It is the aim of this paper to show that the Kierkegaardian conception of faith may be defended along traditional pragmatist lines. The argument turns on a reading of the third chapter of *Philosophical Fragments*, in which Kierkegaard develops the concept of the Absolute Paradox. I interpret the Absolute Paradox as a conceptual expression for the total incommensurability between an infinite God and a finite human intellect. As such, it clears logical space for faith by showing that theoretical reason is incapable of deciding the question of whether or not Christianity is true. However, where theoretical reason cannot decide the option between belief and unbelief, and where the attainment of an eternal happiness is effectively precluded by the failure to believe, the venture to become Christian may be validated on practical grounds.

I

There is a distinguished group of Kierkegaard scholars who regard the Climacus writings as philosophical texts and have studied them as such. Their approach to the study of Kierkegaard as a philosopher is characterized by the crucial assumption that the "paradox" of the Absolute Paradox is of a logical variety. On this interpretation, to have faith in Christianity is to believe a proposition which is not only uncertain, but impossible. The traditional line on the Climacus writings is that they put forward an "irrationalist" view of faith.¹

¹ Cf. Torsten Bohlin, *Kierkegaard's Tro och Andra Kierkegaardstudier* (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelsens Bokforlag, 1944); William Barrett, *Irrational Man* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1962); A. E. Murphy, "On Kierkegaard's Claim that 'Truth is Subjectivity,'" in *Reason and the Common Good* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1963); Herbert M. Garelick, *The Anti-Christianity of Kierkegaard* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965); Brand Blanshard, "Kierkegaard on Faith," *Personalist* 49 (1968); Louis P. Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity* (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1984).

The main points of the "irrationalist" interpretation can be summarized as follows. According to Kierkegaard, there are two possible ways to attain eternal truth: either in objective reflection or in subjective reflection. Since the way of objective reflection is shown to fail, it is concluded that only subjective reflection is adequate to attain eternal truth. But not just any form of subjectivity will do. Only the subjectivity of Christian faith, which results from reflection on the Absolute Paradox, can bring one to the highest truth. Here, faith is construed as a "subjective certainty over a proposition involving one's eternal telos, which is objectively uncertain."²

If one wishes to be related to the highest truth, then one must seek to cultivate faith. Faith is a condition which reflects the tension between one's subjective passion and the objective uncertainty of one's intentional object. The element of risk is central to this view of faith: "For without risk there is not faith, and the greater the risk the greater the faith; the more objective security the less inwardness (for inwardness is precisely subjectivity), and the less objective security the more profound the possible inwardness."³ The greater the improbability that some proposition *p* is true, the greater the volitional effort required to accept it. The very improbability of *p* repels human reason and forces the believer into the extremity of passion. In order to believe that *p*, where this proposition is maximally improbable, it must be believed against reason.⁴ If this account is correct, then according to Kierkegaard faith in Christianity is irrational.

Whereas some degree of probability greater than 1/2 is ordinarily regarded as a necessary condition for justification, Kierkegaardian faith appears to require just the opposite. As a form of intense passionate commitment to an objectively uncertain or improbable proposition, faith declares itself opposed to probability, for the latter diminishes the element of risk, and hence also the passion required to believe.⁵ On this reconstruction of Kierkegaard, the insufficiency of proof and evidence is not only desirable and advantageous in matters of faith, but necessary to a viable faith. Indeed, faith and paradox are on this view a mutual fit.⁶

On the "irrationalist" account, the Absolute Paradox is thought to be connected to the logical difficulties inherent to the metaphysics of God Incarnate. According to the specifications of the doctrine of Incarnation, as codified at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D., Jesus is alleged to have

² Louis P. Pojman, op. cit., p. 141.

³ *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (hereafter cited as *CUP*), translated by David Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 188 (*Samlede Værker* [hereafter cited as *SV*], IX, p. 175).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 540 (*SV IX*, 272).

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 208-09 (*SV IX*, pp. 194-95).

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 182, 206 (*SV IX*, pp. 170, 192).

possessed attributes as a man which are the logical complements of other attributes he is alleged to have possessed as God. But it is strictly impossible for any individual to have, at one and the same time, both an attribute and its logical complement. Faith in Christianity is thus thought to involve the believer in a logical contradiction. But if this is the case, then the truth of Christianity is not merely objectively uncertain, it is logically impossible. There is no possibility that it could someday turn out to be true.

According to the “irrationalist” interpretation, then, Kierkegaard claims that it is possible to believe something while at the same time recognizing that it is a contradiction. Indeed, he claims that Christianity must be affirmed as such. But can one believe both that the doctrine of Incarnation is true and that it is logically inconsistent? It might be thought that Kierkegaard advocates a strong form of voluntarism, which says that a person can acquire certain beliefs independently of any evidential considerations by consciously willing to do so.⁷ But there are compelling philosophical grounds for thinking that the strong voluntarist thesis is incoherent.

The argument against the strong voluntarist thesis is motivated by the standard view that belief is involuntary, something which happens to a person rather than something a person does. On this view, which we find in Hume,⁸ the acquisition of a belief that *p* is not under our voluntary control. But as Richard Swinburne has pointed out, this is not merely a contingent feature of human psychology, it is a matter of logic.⁹ For on the standard view of belief, we may be said to believe a proposition *p* if and only if we believe that the total evidence at our disposal makes *p* more probable than any alternative. Our beliefs are properly a function of the set of basic propositions we accept and the degree of confidence we have in those propositions.¹⁰ But if it is assumed that our beliefs are under our voluntary control, then the basic propositions we accept and the degree of confidence we have in those propositions will have to be assumed under our voluntary control as well.

However, the trust we have in our beliefs and our degree of confidence in them rests on the further assumption that they are formed by external factors, that is, independently of our will. What makes a proposition true is a state of affairs which exists independently of us and of our believing it.

⁷ A similar case is made by Louis P. Pojman, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-117.

⁸ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Appendix, p. 624.

⁹ Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 25.

¹⁰ Swinburne defines a basic proposition as a proposition which seems to *S* to be true, not because it is made probable by other propositions *S* accepts, but because *S* is inclined to believe that it is forced on him by his experience of the world.

Thus, if one were to acquire the belief that p simply by willing to do so, one would realize that this belief originated from one's will and so was not determined by whether what it reported was the case. One would know that there was no reason for trusting that belief, and so would not really believe.

Perhaps Kierkegaard could concede the logical impossibility of Christian Incarnation on logical grounds but, like Tertullian, believe it precisely because it is impossible. On this strategy, the fact that the doctrine violates certain fundamental principles of logic might be considered a true mark of its supernatural origin. But to claim that a proposition manifests a logical contradiction is to acknowledge that all the evidence counts against it. And, according to the definition of belief noted above, if one believes that all the evidence is against a proposition, then one cannot really believe that it is true. There are logical limits to irrationality.

The only alternative, as Brand Blanshard has pointed out, is for the believer to put logic aside.¹¹ On this strategy, Kierkegaard might concede that although the Incarnation is unintelligible and even self-contradictory, the faithful will come to see that it is absolutely true through a passionate commitment of feeling and will. What this calls for, in effect, is an exception to the principle of contradiction. However, the principle of contradiction is either universally valid or it is not valid at all. And if it is not valid, then in no case does the affirmation of a proposition exclude the truth of its denial, since no proposition is true rather than untrue. By rejecting this fundamental principle, all assertion becomes meaningless, including the Christian claim concerning the truth of the Incarnation. Thus, Kierkegaard is faced with a dilemma: "If the logic he assumes in his philosophy is valid, then the faith which stands at the summit of 'the stages on life's way' is meaningless. If that irrational faith is accepted, the principles on which faith conducts itself are everywhere impugned."¹²

It does no good here to fall back on the notion of truth as subjectivity. We cannot simply claim that religion is a commitment of feeling and will and that Christianity seeks to intensify passion to its highest pitch, rather than to induce belief or rational comprehension. Christianity is a doctrinal religion, and as such it requires that one accept the truth of the doctrine of Incarnation, which purports to be a truth about an actual world-historical event.¹³ To reduce truth to the purely noncognitive status of a passionate

¹¹ Brand Blanshard, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹³ I do not mean to claim that Kierkegaard sees faith primarily as a form of intellectual assent to doctrinal propositions. I am merely observing that Christianity demands adherence to its doctrines, and that this aspect of faith, whether or not it is secondary to the fiducial aspect (and for Kierkegaard I think it clearly is), must be accounted for. It

self-commitment would not save Christianity but, as Blanshard points out, largely destroy it:

For it implies that there are no common truths for Christians to accept, no common principles by which their lives may be guided, indeed no common Deity for them to contemplate and worship. The Kierkegaardian subjectivity would dissolve things away into a set of processes in individual minds where there would be as many Christianities as there were persons to exercise their inwardness and their passion.¹⁴

Any defense of Christian faith which turns on the devaluation of logical consistency has little to recommend it from the philosophical point of view. Though it follows from the traditional notion of divinity that there will be some aspects of mystery attending all Christian claims about God, it does not follow that logical inconsistency is not a clear and decisive mark of falsehood in theological discussion. Any defense of Christianity which claims otherwise rests on a basic confusion.

If, as the "irrationalist" interpretation contends, the Absolute Paradox is intended to express what is *contra rationem*, then it is difficult to see any useful application that the results of Kierkegaard's inquiry can have for understanding the requirements of faith, except to show that the believer is one who embraces nonsense. But this interpretation appears to be deficient in several ways. To begin with, it is clearly affirmed both in the Climacus writings and throughout the *Journals & Papers* that the Christian does not believe mere nonsense. In the former, Kierkegaard explains that the believer "not only possesses but uses his understanding...to make sure that he believes against the understanding. Nonsense therefore he cannot believe against the understanding, for precisely the understanding will discern that it is nonsense and will prevent him from believing it."¹⁵ In the latter, it is plainly asserted that the paradox of Christianity is so constituted that "reason has no power at all to dissolve it," and hence, cannot reduce it to mere nonsense.¹⁶

Next, Kierkegaard nowhere calls for the suspension of the principle of contradiction. On the contrary, he affirms that true contradictories can never be united and that the principle of contradiction is always valid:

This is something that our age has altogether overlooked, in and by its repudiation of the principle of contradiction, failing to perceive what Aristotle nevertheless pointed out, namely

must not be forgotten that Kierkegaard's Christian pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, has no problem affirming his belief in the doctrines of Christianity.

¹⁴ Brand Blanshard, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.

¹⁵ *CUP*, p. 504 (SV X, pp. 235-36).

that the proposition: the principle of contradiction is annulled, itself rests upon the principle of contradiction, since otherwise the opposite proposition, that it is not annulled, is equally true.¹⁷

But it hardly follows from this that the paradox of Christianity is a *logical* contradiction. Such an interpretation simply fails to recognize that the terms “contradiction” and “self-contradiction” have a significantly broader use in Kierkegaard’s conceptual vocabulary than the narrowly logical one.¹⁸ But more importantly, it fails to recognize that the word “paradox” is used almost exclusively by Kierkegaard in its etymological sense.¹⁹ Far from denoting a necessary falsehood, Kierkegaard affirms that the Christian paradox is an absurdity that must be true.²⁰

Finally, the “irrationalist” interpretation is at odds with the religious purposes Kierkegaard claims for his authorship. The main purpose, which is revealed in *The Point of View*, is to win people over to Christianity. But Kierkegaard could not reasonably have expected to win converts to the faith by portraying the believer as one who embraces nonsense.

Still, the characterization of Christianity as in some sense “paradoxical” or “absurd” is in accord with the larger Christian purpose Kierkegaard claimed for the authorship. For the Climacus writings in particular are intended to expose the religious inadequacies of the speculative outlook, which assumes that “understanding” is higher than faith, or the key to a more profound expression of faith.²¹ The terms “paradox” and “absurd” are thus introduced as a conceptual means of indicating that God’s appearance in the temporal order transcends the possibilities of human knowledge, and that it cannot be grasped at a purely intellectual level.²² Kierkegaard’s strategy is clearly not to demonstrate the impossibility of accepting the truth of Christianity, but the impossibility of appropriating that truth on purely objective or intellectual terms. By show-

¹⁶ *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers* (hereafter cited as *SKJP*) 7 vols. edited and translated by Howard and Edna Hong (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1967-1978), vol. 1, p. 5 (X² A 354).

¹⁷ *Philosophical Fragments* (hereafter cited as *PF*), translated by David Swenson and revised by Howard Hong (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 136-37 (SV VI, p. 97).

¹⁸ Cf. *SKJP*, vol. 1, p. 11 (X⁵ A 120); p. 61 (VIII¹ A 88); p. 329 (IV A 57); p. 329 (V A 68); vol. 3, p. 274 (VII¹ A 191); *PF*, pp. 107-9 (SV VI, pp. 79-80); *CUP*, pp. 32, 151-52, 188 (SV IX, pp. 31, 141, 175).

¹⁹ Cf. *SKJP*, vol. 3, p. 400 (IV A 47); pp. 402-3 (V B 5:10); p. 406 (VIII¹ A 273); pp. 410-11 (X⁵ A 142); *PF*, pp. 46-49, 58-59 (SV VI, pp. 38-40, 46-47); *CUP*, pp. 194-95, 201 (SV IX pp. 181-82, 187).

²⁰ *SKJP*, vol. 3, p. 402 (IV B 75).

²¹ *CUP*, pp. 194-98 (SV IX, pp. 181-85).

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 191-92 (SV IX, pp. 178-79).

ing faith to be an existential as opposed to a speculative enterprise, Kierkegaard attempts to remove the confusion that prevents people from seeing the true requirements of faith; requirements which are far more exacting than their speculative substitutes.

In the following section, I shall present textual evidence in support of the thesis that Kierkegaard did not intend the Absolute Paradox to be understood as a logical contradiction.

II

In a series of journal entries from 1850, Kierkegaard comments extensively on the meaning of the terms “absurd” and “paradox.” What is significant about this discussion is that Kierkegaard draws a sharp distinction between the absurd of Christianity and what he calls vulgar absurdities or nonsense. He insists, for example, that “not every absurd is the absurd or the paradox.”²³ One must in fact take great care to define the Christian absurd with accuracy and conceptual clarity. What distinguishes the Christian absurd from vulgar absurdities or nonsense is that it *can* be believed—by faith. It is directly affirmed that when the believer has faith, “the absurd is not the absurd...for...faith transforms it.”²⁴ Even though reason cannot grasp what faith believes, there is something about the nature of faith that determines reason to honor it.²⁵ These remarks clearly suggest that Kierkegaard did not think it possible to believe a logical contradiction, and that to define faith in this way would result in the ultimate identification of Christianity and nonsense.²⁶ The Christian absurd is, as J. Heywood Thomas has aptly pointed out, “an absurdity that must be true.”²⁷

What then is the Christian absurd? Kierkegaard explains: “The absurd is the negative criterion of that which is higher than human understanding and knowledge. The operations of understanding are to note it as such—and then submit it to everyone for his belief.”²⁸ The absurd is neither nonsense nor anything which can be known within the categories of human understanding:

The *absurd*, the *paradox*, is composed in such a way that reason has no power at all to dissolve it in nonsense and prove that it is nonsense; no, it is a symbol, a riddle, a compounded riddle

²³ *SKJP*, vol. 1, p. 4 (X² A 354).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 7 (X⁶ B 79).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 4 (X² A 354).

²⁶ Henry Allison, “Christianity and Nonsense,” *Review of Metaphysics* 20 (1967), p. 432.

²⁷ J. Heywood Thomas, *Subjectivity and Paradox* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 133.

²⁸ *SKJP*, vol. 1, p. 8 (X⁶ B 80).

about which reason must say: I cannot solve it, it cannot be understood, but it does not follow thereby that it is nonsense.²⁹

The Christian absurd is “a category, the negative criterion, of the divine or of the relationship to the divine.”³⁰ As such it represents a limit to human reason.³¹ Kierkegaard characterizes the Absolute Paradox as a sign of transcendence, a point at which reason realizes its natural limitations. At this juncture it might be suggested that a logical contradiction represents a limit to reason, and in a sense this is true. But it is a different kind of limit altogether from that which Kierkegaard here describes. A paradox in the sense of a logical contradiction occurs within the sphere of reason, it is a point at which reason collides with itself and is thereby brought to a standstill. But Kierkegaard’s paradox occurs outside the sphere of reason, it is a point at which reason collides with something foreign to itself, something other. While human reason has recourse to various techniques for dissolving the force of a logical paradox, there is no such recourse in the case of the Absolute Paradox. For here reason encounters that which has a purely negative determination, that which cannot be thought. As Kierkegaard writes: “The human dialectic cannot advance further than to the admission that it cannot think this...but also to the admission that this does not imply anything more than that it cannot think this.”³²

The main point I wish to make here is the following. When Kierkegaard uses the terms “absurd” and “paradox” to characterize the object of Christian faith, he uses them in an extended sense. Revelation is not absurd or even paradoxical in the strict (logical) sense of these terms, but rather in the sense that it absolutely transcends human standards of knowledge (and morality). Revelation is marked by its complete heterogeneity with respect to the purely human order of things. It is the communication of a truth which is so superior that it reveals our judgments (both epistemic and moral) to be in error. On this view, revelation is not absurd or paradoxical in the sense that it stands *against* reason, but rather in the sense that it stands *above* reason. Kierkegaard expressly draws such a distinction:

What I usually express by saying that Christianity consists of paradox, philosophy in mediation, Leibniz expresses by distinguishing between what is above reason and what is against reason. Faith is above reason. By reason he understands, as he says many places, a linking together of truths (*enchainement*), a conclusion from causes. Faith cannot therefore be *proved*,

²⁹ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 5 (X² A 354).

³⁰ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 7 (X⁶ B 79).

³¹ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 5 (X² A 354).

³² Ibid., vol. 3, p. 365 (VIII² B 15).

demonstrated, comprehended, for the link which makes a linking together possible is missing, and what else does this say than that it is a paradox.³³

This point is well documented in the work of a few scholars, who maintain that the Absolute Paradox is intended to express what is *supra rationem*.³⁴ The “suprarationalist” interpretation has been criticized, however, on the grounds that it is too heavily dependent upon Kierkegaard’s later journal entries.³⁵ The implication is that there seems to be a conflict between Kierkegaard’s early view of the Absolute Paradox (e.g. in *Philosophical Fragments*) and what he says about that concept in his later writings. In the next section, I shall attempt to show that there is in fact substantial agreement between these two accounts.

III

The view Kierkegaard presents of the Absolute Paradox in the later writings may be characterized briefly as follows: (i) it is “paradoxical” in some meaningful sense of the term; (ii) it is “absolute” in some meaningful sense of the term; (iii) it is not a logical contradiction; and (iv) it is such that it can be believed by faith. What follows is a reading of the third chapter of *Philosophical Fragments*, in which I attempt to show that the view of the Absolute Paradox developed there is consistent with the view characterized above.³⁶

In the introduction to the Swenson translation of *Philosophical Fragments*, Niels Thulstrup summarizes the main question of the book as follows:

The question is: how is a human being related to the highest truth, whether one possesses it within himself or does not possess it; or, formulated more precisely, in what comprehensive view is it affirmed that man possesses the highest truth and what consequences does this affirmation have, and within what comprehensive view or, more correctly, in what Kerygma is it affirmed that man does not possess the highest truth and what are the consequences of this?...The point of departure is in the Socratic (the Platonic, the Idealistic), and thereupon—in Platonic, Greek linguistic forms—Christianity is construed.³⁷

According to the Platonic-Socratic model, the existing individual is already in possession of the highest truth and has the power to recover it

³³ Ibid., vol. 3, pp. 399-400 (IV C 29).

³⁴ Cf. N. H. Soe, “Kierkegaard’s Doctrine of the Paradox,” and Cornelio Fabro, “Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard’s Dialectic,” in *A Kierkegaard Critique*, edited by Howard Johnson and Niels Thulstrup (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

³⁵ Louis P. Pojman, op. cit., p. 131.

³⁶ *PF*, pp. 46-67 (*SV VI*, pp. 38-52).

³⁷ Ibid., p. lxix.

through a process of introspection and recollection. Christianity sets itself in opposition to the Platonic-Socratic view in two ways: first, by assuming that the existing individual is not in possession of the highest truth; and second, by assuming that such truth can be attained only through divine grace. This distinction sets the stage for Kierkegaard's first formal discussion of the Absolute Paradox.

Kierkegaard begins his exposition of the concept with an observation on the Socratic "paradox" of self-knowledge. It is observed that Socrates, who devoted his entire life to the pursuit of self-knowledge, finally arrived at the "paradoxical" conclusion that he could not decide whether he was "a stranger monster than Typhon, or a creature of a gentler and simpler sort, partaking of something divine."³⁸ Here Kierkegaard clearly has in mind the etymological meaning of "paradox." In the original sense of the word, a proposition was said to be paradoxical if it expressed what was contrary to received opinion. To the ancient Greek mind, which regarded man as the measure of all things, it surely must have seemed paradoxical to assert that man cannot know himself. Following this usage, Kierkegaard characterizes the paradox as "the passion of Reason," the passion which strives to discover that which cannot be thought. It stands as an expression for the refusal of reason to recognize its own limitations. This passion must, however, inevitably bring about the downfall of reason.³⁹

Kierkegaard goes on to say that the paradoxical is not something to be taken lightly, since it is the very source of the thinker's passion, and that the thinker without passion is but a "paltry mediocrity." More to the point, it is explained that passion has transforming power, and thus represents the possibility for an entirely new point of departure for existence. Kierkegaard uses the example of a lover's passion to illustrate this point.⁴⁰

In reflecting upon what he thought he knew, Socrates encountered something he did not know, namely, the Unknown. Kierkegaard calls this Unknown "the God," though in keeping with the hypothetical nature of the general inquiry he explains that this is nothing more than a name he assigns it.⁴¹ The Unknown cannot be assimilated by the categories of human understanding: "It is the limit to which the Reason repeatedly comes, and in so far, substituting a static form of conception for the dynamic, it is the different, the absolutely different."⁴²

³⁸ Ibid., p. 46 (SV VI, p. 37).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 48 (SV VI, p. 40).

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 49 (SV VI, p. 41).

⁴² Ibid., p. 55 (SV VI, p. 45).

The fact that Socrates experiences the paradoxical passion of reason is evidence that he stands in some kind of relationship to the God, the Unknown. But that he is unable to advance further than to the paradoxical realization that he cannot know the highest truth is itself evidence of the inherent conceptual limitations of the Platonic-Socratic view. The highest expression of the fact that Socrates has encountered the God is irony.⁴³

Christian revelation represents a radically new point of departure for the human understanding of self and God. Negatively, it is intended to teach human beings that they are devoid of the highest truth, that all human points of view are in principle inadequate and need to be corrected with reference to a transcendent point of view.⁴⁴ Positively, it is intended to give human beings the condition necessary to attain the highest truth. Christianity assumes that neither the highest truth nor the means to attain it are found in human beings in their natural condition. Human beings cannot even know that they are devoid of the highest truth prior to the communication of this fact in revelation.

In revelation, the God reveals himself in the form of an individual human being who is, by all appearances, quite indistinguishable from other human beings. However, that this individual man is also the God is something that transcends the possibilities of human knowledge. As Kierkegaard puts it: "This man is also the God. How do I know? I cannot know, for in order to know it I would have to know the God, and the nature of the difference between God and man; and this I cannot know, because Reason has reduced it to likeness from that which it was unlike."⁴⁵ To claim that the God is knowable is an incoherent claim: "When qualified as absolutely different [the God] seems on the verge of disclosure, but this is not the case; for the Reason cannot even conceive an absolute unlikeness."⁴⁶

This surely is a paradoxical state of affairs. For in order to know that we are separated from the God by an absolute unlikeness, we require the help of the God. But how are we supposed to acquire knowledge of the divine from one who appears by all accounts to be an ordinary human being?⁴⁷ If there is to be any possibility of a reconciliation between the God and human beings, the latter must become conscious of the fact that the absolute unlikeness which separates them from the God is their sin.⁴⁸ They must acknowledge that all their judgments are in error and need to be corrected in the light of divine revelation.

⁴³ *SKJP*, vol. 4, pp. 213-14 (X³ A 235).

⁴⁴ *PF*, p. 58 (*SV VI*, p. 46).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57 (*SV VI*, p. 46).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55 (*SV VI*, p. 45).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57 (*SV VI*, p. 46).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Far from claiming that the Absolute Paradox is a logical contradiction, Kierkegaard offers us the following characterization:

In order to be man's Teacher, God proposes to make himself like the individual man, so that [man] might understand him fully. Thus our paradox is rendered still more appalling; or the same paradox has the double aspect which proclaims it as the Absolute Paradox: negatively, by revealing the absolute unlikeness of sin, positively by proposing to do away with the absolute unlikeness in absolute likeness.⁴⁹

On this view, the Absolute Paradox is *paradoxical* in the (etymological) sense that the God, who is absolutely unlike human beings, reveals himself in a form which appears by all accounts to be knowable.⁵⁰ It is *absolute* in the sense that the God infinitely transcends human knowledge. His divinity cannot be empirically verified; there is no higher explanation of whether revelation is true or of how it is even possible. Where truth is defined as the standard of itself and of the false, revelation will be seen to fall outside the circle of possible human knowledge. Thus, Kierkegaard makes the following unambiguous assertion concerning Christian revelation: "Our hypothetical assumption of this fact and of the particular individual's relationship to the God contains no self-contradiction, and thought is free to occupy itself therewith as with the strangest proposal possible."⁵¹

The Absolute Paradox manifests itself not only as an invincible limit to human reason, but also, and more importantly for religious purposes, as an "opposition" to human reason. Here, I follow Dr. Swenson in interpreting the Kierkegaardian use of "reason" not in an abstract-intellectual sense, "but quite concretely, as the reflectively organized common sense of mankind, including as its essential core a sense of life's values. Over against the 'Paradox,' it is therefore the self-assurance and self-assertiveness of man's nature in its totality."⁵² Thus, revelation is not absurd or paradoxical in the sense that it violates fundamental principles of logic, but in the sense that it disturbs our common sense view of ourselves and our values.

Revelation deliberately undermines the self-assurance of human reason and frustrates our attempts at self-assertion. And it does so for the purpose of enabling us to discover that we are in a condition of error, that we suffer from the noetic effects of sin, and that the standards by which we measure ultimate reality are therefore inadequate and need to be transformed in the light of divine revelation. Gordon D. Kaufman comments on this aspect of the doctrine in the following passage:

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 58-59 (SV VI, pp. 46-47).

⁵⁰ *SKJP*, vol. 3, p. 400 (IV C 84) and (IV A 47); *CUP*, pp. 194-95 (SV IX, pp. 181-82).

⁵¹ *PF*, p. 127 (SV VI, p. 91).

⁵² Ibid., p. 222.

From this point of view revelation can be conceived as that which impinges upon us in such a way as to enable us to see the *inadequacy* of all our standards for measuring ultimate reality, and thus it is that which stimulates us to a constant attempt to transform our standards themselves rather than simply to measure everything we meet in terms of them. Revelation, if it is revelation, judges us and our standards; we are in no position to judge it.⁵³

This same point is expressed by Kierkegaard in many places. In *Philosophical Fragments*, for example, it is asserted that the Christian paradox is properly the standard of itself and of the false (*index et judex sui et falsi*).⁵⁴ And again in *On Authority and Revelation*, he writes: "The fact that the eternal once came into existence is not something which has to be tested in time, not something which men are to test, but is the paradox by which men are to be tested."⁵⁵ When confronted by revelation, reason is left with only two choices: either to acknowledge the impossibility of assimilating revelation to the categories of human understanding, or to reject it. The former choice opens the way to faith,⁵⁶ the latter ends in offense.⁵⁷

What remains to be shown is the manner in which Kierkegaard thinks it is possible to believe in Christianity. I suggest that this may be understood along pragmatist lines. As I read Kierkegaard, the Absolute Paradox lies in the fact that ordinary human standards of truth and knowledge are inadequate to assess the possibility of revelation. God lies beyond the reach of our cognitive resources. In this way, the Absolute Paradox clears logical space for faith by showing that theoretical reason is incapable of deciding the issue one way or the other. But where theoretical reason cannot decide the option between belief and unbelief, and where the attainment or forfeiture of an eternal happiness hangs in the balance, the venture to believe may be validated on practical grounds. In the following section, I shall attempt to characterize the main features of Kierkegaard's pragmatism.

IV

There are doubtless many who will be surprised at the suggestion that there is a pragmatist element to Kierkegaard's thought. One might anticipate several possible objections. It might be objected, first of all, that we do not find in Kierkegaard the straightforward wager-style argument presented in Pascal. He does not argue that it must be rational to accept

⁵³ Gordon D. Kaufman, "Philosophy of Religion and Christian Theology," *Journal of Religion* 37 (1957), p. 238.

⁵⁴ *PF*, p. 63 (SV VI, p. 49).

⁵⁵ *On Authority and Revelation*, translated by Walter Lowrie (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 58 (VII² B 235, pp. 75-76).

⁵⁶ *PF*, p. 73 (SV VI, p. 56).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61 (SV VI, p. 48).

Christianity, despite the insufficiency of evidence, on the grounds that the resulting sacrifice of worldly pleasure is but a finite loss, whereas eternal happiness represents an infinite gain. Second, it seems that the pragmatist's appeal to self-interest is at odds with the teaching of the New Testament, and hence also with the orthodox view of Christianity held by Kierkegaard. And finally, there is ample textual evidence indicating that Kierkegaard took a very dim view of prudential reasoning. In the authorship, prudence is always set in opposition to faith.⁵⁸

As these concerns have a direct bearing on the plausibility of my thesis, I shall try to address each of them briefly before proceeding. First, although Kierkegaard does not present a wager-style argument, it does not follow that there is not a pragmatist argument to be found in the authorship. Broadly construed, pragmatism is an attempt to expand the limits of rationality from the point of view of practical considerations. It has taken various forms in the writings of Pascal, Kant, and William James. Though Kierkegaard's view is admittedly not identical with any of these formulations, I believe it can be shown that he holds a place within this larger tradition of pragmatism in religious thought.

Second, it would be a mistake to suppose that the notion of self-interest is at odds with the teaching of the New Testament, or with Kierkegaard's orthodox interpretation of the latter. According to the gospel of Matthew, for example, Jesus is reported to have spoken this way:

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?⁵⁹

Here, the founder of Christianity himself encourages his disciples to consider their own interests in the matter of salvation. Similarly, Kierkegaard contends that only those individuals with an "infinite passionate interest" in the possibility of eternal happiness are eligible for this reward.⁶⁰ Every individual must come to terms with the question of human mortality; and this question, if it is to be meaningful, must be framed in the first person singular: given that I will someday die, what does the possibility of an eternal happiness mean to me?⁶¹ To the extent that I fail to address this question as an interested individual, I do not address it at all.⁶²

⁵⁸ *SKJP*, vol. 2, p. 321 (X¹ A 455).

⁵⁹ Matthew 16: 25-26. Cf. Luke 14: 28-33.

⁶⁰ *CUP*, pp. 20, 23-24, 28, 33, 116 (*SV IX*, pp. 19, 23-24, 27, 32, 108).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-58 (*SV IX*, pp. 138-48).

⁶² For a detailed discussion of this point, see Jeremy Walker, "Ethical Beliefs: A Theory of Truth Without Truth-Values," *Thought* 218 (1980), pp. 295-305.

And finally, Kierkegaard frequently uses two expressions, *Forstandighed* and *Klogskab*, both of which are translated into English as “prudence.” It is clear from the contexts in which these words appear that they pick out a very specific attitude, one characterized by caution and reserve.⁶³ The prudent man (*den Forstandige*) “feels his way with the understanding in the realm of the probable, and finds God where the probabilities are favorable.”⁶⁴ This attitude is sharply contrasted with that of faith: “The probable is so little to the taste of a believer that he fears it most of all, since he well knows that when he clings to probabilities it is because he is beginning to lose his faith.”⁶⁵ It is not prudent to be Christian. Kierkegaard expresses this by saying that faith lies precisely in the realm of the improbable.⁶⁶

According to this narrow construal of the word, prudence is much different from pragmatism. For the latter does not avoid risk, but provides a practical justification for taking risks in view of the actual or expected consequences. Thus, Kierkegaard says that in Christendom, where people live in the relaxed notion that salvation is a foregone conclusion, it is hardly a prudent thing to want to sacrifice everything in the name of Christianity.⁶⁷ Yet, he affirms that it is precisely “the terror of eternity [that] can oblige and also motivate a human being to venture in such a decisive way and justify his actions.”⁶⁸

What then is Kierkegaard’s pragmatist faith? As the quotation in the last paragraph suggests, his view bears a strong resemblance to that of William James. But there are important differences. I shall start then by putting forward what I take to be a noncontroversial account of James’s view, which will be our philosophical framework for understanding Kierkegaard.

In his celebrated defense of religious faith, James challenges the view of reason (and rationality) implicit in the evidentialist view of his day.⁶⁹ Evidentialism is a prescriptive doctrine, which says that a person ought to believe only those propositions for which there is sufficient evidential warrant. Its champion, W. K. Clifford, summed up this view in a rather terse aphorism: “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for everyone, to be-

⁶³ *SKJP*, vol. 3, pp. 543-45 (X³ A 143).

⁶⁴ *CUP*, p. 208 (SV IX, p. 184).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 208-9 (SV IX, pp. 194-95).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 209 (SV IX, p. 195).

⁶⁷ *SKJP*, vol. 2, p. 320 (X¹ A 455).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ William James, “The Will To Believe,” in *The Works of William James: The Will To Believe* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 13-33.

lieve anything upon insufficient evidence."⁷⁰ In opposition to this view, James questions the assumption that only evidential considerations should determine whether or not it is rational to believe. He argues that there are clear cases where it is rational to accept a belief on the basis of nonevidential considerations; that interest and passion may, under certain circumstances, provide legitimate bases for belief. "Our passional nature," writes James, "not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds."⁷¹

Even the most hard-nosed empiricist, whose inquiry is regulated by the dual principle of seeking truth and avoiding error, is not free from the influence of passion. For whether one gives priority to acquiring true beliefs or avoiding false ones is itself a passionate affirmation of desire.⁷² One may say, "Better go without belief forever than believe a lie."⁷³ Or one may prefer to run the risk of believing falsely, and thereby avail oneself of certain truths whose realization would be precluded by an overly cautious attitude.⁷⁴ But whichever attitude one finally adopts, one must remember that these are "in any case only expressions of our passional life."⁷⁵

If James is right, then Clifford's commitment to evidentialism is merely an expression of his passional life. It reflects his personal preference for a more cautious methodology. However, James adds to this a further argument designed to undercut the ethics-of-belief position. For Clifford not only expresses a preference for the evidentialist rule of thinking, he argues that it ought to take precedence over all others. To this James replies that any "rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent [him] from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule."⁷⁶ The trouble with Clifford is not that he recommends a cautious attitude in matters of belief, but that he recommends this attitude across the board.

James is the first to concede that the "dispassionately judicial intellect" ought to be our ideal in purely theoretical matters.⁷⁷ But he also recognizes that human beings think and act in a wide variety of situations, and that it is necessary to take into account the practical implications of employing a certain rational standard of evidence in a particular context.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

What counts as an acceptable standard of rationality in the laboratory may well give rise to undesirable results when applied to a wide range of practical situations.⁷⁸

Consider the practical situation described in the following scenario. A person is lost in an underground cave. She has only a lantern and a limited supply of fuel. In her wandering, she comes upon an exit. It is not known to her whether this exit leads back to the surface or whether it leads even deeper into the labyrinth. The hypothesis (p) that the exit leads to the surface has just as much evidential support as the rival hypothesis ($-p$) that it does not lead to the surface. There is no opportunity to gather further evidence, and it will not be long before her light is spent. If she believes that p , acts on p , and p is true, then she will be rescued. If she believes that $-p$, acts on $-p$, and $-p$ is true, then her prospects for survival will be severely diminished. Her failure to decide in this situation would be the practical equivalent of rejecting p and accepting $-p$.

Our unhappy explorer finds herself confronted with what James describes as a "genuine option."⁷⁹ What this means is that she is confronted with a choice between two *live* (plausible) hypotheses, p and $-p$, which is *momentous* because it involves a question of life or death, and *forced* because even the failure to decide commits her to one of the options. What would be the most rational course of action in this situation? To follow Clifford's ethic, it would seem to be incumbent upon our explorer to suspend judgment. However, given the practical advantages of believing that p , would it be rational for her to suspend judgment in the matter? In view of the practical constraints of the case, suspending judgment would surely seem irrational. Strict adherence to the evidentialist rule of thinking would be no less than suicidal.

Because we affirm that prompt rescue is a more desirable end than perishing (or being trapped in the bowels of a cave for an indefinite period of time), and because we affirm the general principle that an act is rational if it conduces to desirable ends (and irrational if it gives rise to undesirable ones) then in this case we must affirm that the belief that p would indeed be rational. The pragmatist view assumes that rational agents always pursue their interests whenever this is feasible. Moreover, it assumes that in certain practical situations where cognitive reason cannot decide an issue one way or the other, and where a decision is nevertheless forced, there must be some recourse to a procedure of rational deliberation which assures us that there is warrant for the course of action we take.

⁷⁸ Cf. "The Sentiment of Rationality," in *The Works of William James: The Will To Believe* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 57-89.

⁷⁹ "The Will To Believe," p. 14.

Should we conclude, then, that people may generally believe whatever they like, regardless of what the evidence indicates? Though this is often thought to be the upshot of James's argument, it is an uncharitable reading at best.⁸⁰ For James does not say that we should ignore relevant evidence, or that it is sometimes advisable to put the question of truth aside.⁸¹ The pragmatist argument does not set utility against evidence. The point is simply that evidential considerations alone do not always provide the best indication of where truth lies, and so should not constitute the only grounds on which our beliefs may be justified. Nor does the pragmatist argument provide a rational warrant for wishful thinking or self-deception. James is concerned only with cases where cognitive evidence is not decisive; and then only with a certain subset of such cases, dealing with important issues of ethics and religion.

Like William James, Kierkegaard stresses the essentially passional nature of belief and doubt. In *Philosophical Fragments*, he explains: "Belief and doubt are not two forms of knowledge . . . they are opposite passions."⁸² To the skeptical mind, it is better to risk the loss of truth than to be in error.⁸³ And so the skeptic wills to keep himself in suspense (*isostheneia, epoche*).⁸⁴ The believer, on the other hand, thinks it is better to risk the chance of being in error than to suffer the loss of truth. But whether one finally decides to be a believer or a skeptic is not so much a conclusion as it is a resolution,⁸⁵ an expression of will.⁸⁶ As James puts the point:

When we stick to it that there *is* truth...we do so with our whole nature, and resolve to stand or fall by the results. The sceptic with his whole nature adopts the doubting attitude; but which of us is the wiser, Omniscience only knows.⁸⁷

When the skeptic backs the field against the religious hypothesis, he stakes just as much as the believer does. The issue is not one of intellect versus passion, "it is only intellect with one passion laying down its law."⁸⁸

Kierkegaard does not deny that there is a proper place for dispassionate or objective inquiry.⁸⁹ He recognizes that it is generally advisable to be-

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 24-27.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 25-26.

⁸² *PF*, p. 105 (SV VI, p. 77).

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 102-3 (SV VI, pp. 74-75). Cf. James, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 102 (SV VI, p. 75).

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 104 (SV VI, p. 76).

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 102-3 (SV VI, pp. 75-76).

⁸⁷ James, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 30.

⁸⁹ *CUP*, p. 27 (SV IX, p. 26).

lieve statements about history when the available evidence supports their truth, that is, when the probabilities are favorable. However, he questions whether objectivity provides an appropriate model for thinking about important issues of ethics and religion.

The objective mode of inquiry is characterized primarily by an attitude of disinterestedness.⁹⁰ This is not to say that the scholar and the scientist have no interest in the truth of the statements they make. As James points out: "The most useful investigator, because the most sensitive observer, is always he whose eager interest in one side of the question is balanced by an equally keen nervousness lest he be deceived."⁹¹ But it is only truth as technically verified that interests the scholarly or scientific mind.⁹² "Purely intellectual striving," says Kierkegaard, "is occupied solely with discovering the truth."⁹³ The truth of truths might present itself in merely affirmative form, and the objective inquirer would decline to touch it.⁹⁴

Consider the question of death. The objective inquirer affirms the truth of the statement that death is a natural and inevitable part of the human life-cycle. But an objective interest in the question of what it means to die is purely clinical, and the knowledge it yields is of a general nature. We might say that the objective inquirer knows *in general* what it means to die. Kierkegaard himself admits to having such knowledge.⁹⁵ But, he adds, it does not follow that he has understood death:

I can by no means regard death as something I have understood. Before I pass over to universal history...it seems to me that I had better think about this, lest existence mock me, because I had become so learned...that I had forgotten to understand what will someday happen to me as to every human being—sometime, nay, what am I saying: suppose death were so treacherous as to come tomorrow!⁹⁶

To understand death is not merely to have an intellectual grasp of a medical condition, it is rather a process of coming to terms with one's anxiety over the uncertainty of death. But this can only be done subjectively.

Subjectivity is a passionate concern for one's own existence. There is no single idea that does more to heighten this concern than the threat of death. The move from the objective to the subjective orientation is thus a move

⁹⁰ *SKJP*, vol. 3, pp. 239-51 (VII¹ A 182-83, 186, 188-91, 194-200), pp. 252-54 (X⁵ A 73); *CUP*, pp. 23-31 (SV IX, pp. 23-30).

⁹¹ James, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

⁹² *CUP*, p. 27 (SV IX, p. 26).

⁹³ *SKJP*, vol. 4, p. 493 (X¹ A 410). Cf. p. 347 (VI A 64).

⁹⁴ James, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁹⁵ *CUP*, pp. 147-48 (SV IX, p. 138).

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 148-49 (SV IX, p. 138).

from the general and the abstract to the particular and the concrete.⁹⁷ Whereas the objective inquirer is concerned with death in general, the subjective inquirer is concerned with the meaning of death for his own life. Anyone who has not addressed the problem of death passionately, as an interested individual, has not properly addressed it at all.

In the realm of subjectivity, it is not merely having a true belief that is important, it is also a question of the value one places on its being true. Consider, for example, the question of immortality. Whereas the objective inquirer is concerned solely with the question of its truth, the subjective inquirer is also concerned with the question of whether it is good, or would be good if it did exist. This is a decision which properly rests with the subject who is concerned about his own immortality.⁹⁸ And since it is a question which does not have a decisive objective answer,⁹⁹ Kierkegaard reasons that it not only lawfully may, but must be answered in "the personal passion which is infinitely interested in an eternal happiness."¹⁰⁰

It is precisely the question of death, and the possibility of overcoming death, that Christianity throws into sharp relief. Christianity presents the existing individual with a genuine option. This option is characterized by Kierkegaard's philosophical pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, who supposes that there awaits him an eternal happiness, a highest good, and that Christianity proposes itself as the sole condition for the attainment of that good.¹⁰¹

Climacus is fully prepared to acknowledge the possibility that Christianity is true.¹⁰² This follows from his exposition of the Absolute Paradox, which shows that theoretical reason cannot effectively decide the truth or falsity of revelation. As a result, purely evidential considerations warrant neither the acceptance nor the rejection of Christianity. It is, of course, only if Christianity is true that anything Climacus does will bear on the attainment of eternal happiness. And if Christianity is true, then he will attain that highest good only by becoming a believer. Thus, the venture to believe may be validated on practical grounds.

The encounter with the Absolute Paradox brings out a basic tension within the concept of rationality itself. Kierkegaard characterizes this tension, the conflict between pure and practical reason, as the absurd:

Quite simply, the absurd is this: that I, a rational being, must act in the situation where my understanding [and] my reflection say to me: You can just as well do the one thing as the other,

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 149 (SV IX, p. 139).

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 154 (SV IX, p. 144).

⁹⁹ Ibid., pp. 155-56 (SV IX, pp. 145-46).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 35 (SV IX, p. 33).

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 19 (SV IX, pp. 18-19).

where my understanding and reflection say to me: You cannot act—that I nevertheless must act.¹⁰³

The rationality of belief is usually determined by examining the relation of the belief to the evidence in its support, while the rationality of actions is usually determined by reference to actual or expected consequences. But for Kierkegaard, as for James, belief choices *are* actions, and so the criteria of rationality that apply to actions apply to beliefs as well.¹⁰⁴ Thus, he affirms that as a *rational* being he must believe despite the insufficiency of evidence. As a genuine option, the decision to believe in Christianity is properly decidable in the realm of interest and passion.

Because we affirm that an eternal happiness is more desirable than eternal lostness (or eternal nothingness), and because we affirm the principle that an act is rational if it conduces to desirable ends (and irrational if it gives rise to undesirable ones), we must affirm that belief in Christianity is in fact rational. As Kierkegaard says, the terror of eternity can motivate an individual to venture in a decisive way and also justify his actions. Where the realization of an infinite good (salvation) depends on personal action, he affirms that faith based on desire is certainly a lawful and possibly an indispensable thing. Recalling the passage from Matthew, Kierkegaard writes: "A final hour is coming, the hour of death. Christ promises you an infinite good, the blessedness of heaven. Would you dispense with that for something else? Well, then choose him."¹⁰⁵

If the foregoing is an accurate account of the reasoning which underlies the philosophical portion of the authorship, then in what sense does it differ from that of other pragmatists, most notably James? To answer this question, we must return to the concept of sin, and the way that concept functions in Kierkegaard's theologically grounded critique of reason.

V

It is sin, not merely the discrepancy of the finite and the infinite, that is central to Kierkegaard's critique of reason. Sin is the decisive expression for that which separates human beings from God. And in so far as reason represents the very highest achievement of human nature, asserting itself in its totality, it is also the highest expression of human sinfulness. Because human beings suffer from the noetic effects of the fall, it is impossible for

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 31 (SV IX, p. 30).

¹⁰³ SKJP, vol. 3, p. 717 (X¹ A 66).

¹⁰⁴ CUP, pp. 302-5 (SV X, pp. 41-44).

¹⁰⁵ SKJP, vol. 4, p. 118 (X³ A 341).

the unaided reason to discover the ultimate truth about existence. This can be revealed only through divine agency.

Assuming that this revelation has taken place, what are human beings to make of it? The main problem with the objective approach to Christianity, as that approach is exemplified in historical and philosophical modes of inquiry, is that it tries to make revelation conform to the standards of human reason. By attempting to bring the paradox within the sphere of human knowledge, the objective inquiry overlooks the decisive category of sin.¹⁰⁶ It fails to recognize that revelation does not present itself as an object for human knowledge, but is rather an indirect form of communication which provides an occasion for existing individuals to realize that they are in error, and that the standards by which they measure ultimate reality are inadequate. As Kierkegaard explains:

Suppose that a revelation...must be a mystery, and that its sole and sufficient mark is precisely that it is a mystery....Suppose it were after all a blessed thing, critically situated in the extreme press of existence, to sustain a relation to this mystery without understanding it, merely as a believer. Suppose Christianity never intended to be understood; suppose that, in order to express this, and to prevent anyone from entering upon the objective way, it has declared itself to be the paradox. Suppose it wished to have significance only for existing individuals in inwardness, in the inwardness of faith....Suppose it therefore accentuates existence so decisively that the individual becomes a sinner, Christianity the paradox, existence the period of decision.¹⁰⁷

The Absolute Paradox sets the stage for this decision by shifting the issue away from the intellectual (objectivity) to the realm of interest and passion (subjectivity). Revelation is not a logical contradiction, but a mystery which claims to hold the solution to the riddle of human existence. It does not present itself as an object for scientific scrutiny, but as a point of departure for faith. It does this by foreclosing on the objective way, by forcing the individual into himself, into the realm of subjectivity, where the decision must be made.¹⁰⁸

Revelation addresses itself to the passionate nature of human beings. It enables us to reach a decision by giving us the *condition*: the recognition of sin, our separateness from God, and of our inability to discover God through the unaided intellect.¹⁰⁹ Sin is therefore “the decisive expression for the religious mode of existence.”¹¹⁰ Its acknowledgement is the condition for *conversion*, in which the individual comes to see self and world

¹⁰⁶ CUP, pp. 194-201 (SV IX, pp. 180-87).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 191-92 (SV IX, pp. 178-79).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 190 (SV IX, p. 177).

¹⁰⁹ PF, pp. 17-19 (SV VI, pp. 19-20).

¹¹⁰ CUP, p. 239 (SV IX, p. 224).

not from the point of view of reason as supreme, but from the point of view of reason as error.¹¹¹

To overcome the Christian paradox, the mystery of revelation, we must do more than recognize the practical value of believing. What is required is an act (or attitude) of *repentance*.¹¹² Repentance is an act of self-renouncing, an act of giving up our claims about the superiority of human reason. To the extent that we try to overcome the mystery of revelation through historical or philosophical inquiries, in which we take ourselves to be in a position to present conclusive evidences and arguments, we only reaffirm our sinfulness. It is only through repentance that we begin to move toward a recognition that we are saved by grace alone. In the recognition of sin we must acknowledge Christ as the Saviour, without whom we are eternally lost.¹¹³

But nothing that has been said here diminishes the fact that Christianity presents the existing individual with a genuine option, or that it may be rational to accept the verdict of revelation and seek salvation through faith. From the point of view of an infinite passionate interest, the absurd is not the absurd, for faith transforms it.¹¹⁴ Revelation does not destroy reason, rather it requires that the individual acknowledge the limits of reason and accept revelation as pointing the way to a higher truth. In this way, reason is made to honor faith.¹¹⁵ The Absolute Paradox is a scandal and an offense only to those who do not experience the collision of the understanding, and hence, do not reject the supremacy of human reason.¹¹⁶

VI

The picture of Kierkegaard that emerges from this study is quite different from that commonly found in the secondary literature. In support of this picture, I have focused on what I take to be the two chief purposes behind Kierkegaard's philosophical writings. On the one hand, he puts forward a theological critique of reason, the highest expression of which is exhibited in the self-sufficient, sterile ideal of objective inquiry. To this end, he attempts to show that Christianity rests on the Absolute Paradox, and that all attempts at explaining revelation within the finite categories of human reason are doomed to fail. Kierkegaard does not conclude from this, however, that it must be irrational to become Christian. For the Absolute Paradox reveals a basic tension within the concept of rationality itself: the

111 *PF*, pp. 22-23 (*SV IV*, pp. 22-23).

112 *Ibid.*, p. 23 (*SV VI*, p. 23).

113 *Ibid.*, p. 21 (*SV VI*, p. 21).

114 *SKJP*, vol. 1, p. 7 (*X⁶ B 79*).

115 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 4 (*X² A 354*).

116 *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 403 (*V B 11:4*). Cf. vol. 4, p. 109 (*X¹ A 133*).

conflict between pure and practical reason. Whereas purely evidential considerations do not warrant the rationality of becoming a believer, there are important practical considerations which render the decision to believe perfectly rational. And there is no clear reason why we should, under the circumstances, confine our decision to the evidence.

This brings us to Kierkegaard's second purpose, namely, to show that faith requires personal action. Though we are saved by grace alone, this is not something settled and completed once and for all.¹¹⁷ The decision to believe in Christianity must be "related to a striving."¹¹⁸ One must commit oneself passionately to thinking and acting in accordance with the ideal Christian pattern as that is depicted in the doctrinal narratives of the New Testament. Revelation does not aim at increasing our knowledge (in the sense of true justified belief), but at motivating an existential decision and giving us practical guidance. It leads us from reasoning and speculation to existence, where true Christianity resides.¹¹⁹

Kierkegaard aptly characterizes faith as a venture.¹²⁰ It is a venture in the sense that the decision to believe must be undertaken without objective assurances. In faith, the believer stakes his entire existence on the mere possibility of an eternal happiness. Thus, to become a Christian is "to risk everything, to invest absolutely everything in the venture."¹²¹ With respect to the question of whether to become a believer, practical considerations must be decisive.¹²²

The pragmatist proposal has two advantages as an interpretation of the Kierkegaardian view of faith. First, it avoids the sort of criticism that the "irrationalist" interpretation invites. Rather than portraying the believer as one who embraces nonsense, the pragmatist view affirms that we are free to try to achieve by practical means what cannot be achieved otherwise. And second, it accords well with the Christian intention of the authorship, in so far as it provides the believer with a rationale for the pursuit of what he takes to be an answer to his absolute concern: the possibility of an eternal happiness in the face of impending death.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., vol. 2, p. 165 (X² A 198).

¹¹⁸ Ibid., vol. 2, p. 166 (X² A 223).

¹¹⁹ Ibid., vol. 3, pp. 409-10 (X³ A 424).

¹²⁰ *CUP*, pp. 137, 182 (*SV IX*, pp. 128, 169).

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 362 (*SV X*, p. 98).

¹²² *SKJP*, vol. 5, p. 447 (VIII¹ A 650).