

# Faith

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## *I Faith and Knowledge*

Whether faith is to be classified as a kind of knowledge or whether these are two mutually exclusive categories depends, of course, on how one defines each. Certainly faith is a kind of cognition in that it has a noetic content, but yet what is held by faith is not immediately and directly seen to be true in the way that a self-evident principle or fact of experience can be affirmed by the human mind. There are some who interpret St. Augustine and the Augustinian tradition as holding that all (or much) of our knowledge ultimately rests on faith (not necessarily religious faith) of some kind or other. In his essay »The Will to Believe« William James has stressed how much of what we hold to be true either is held by faith or depends on some antecedent faith. Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae* IIa-IIae, q. 1, art. 4) observes that the intellect can be moved to assent in two ways: first, either directly or indirectly by the object itself, in which case we have »science«, or knowledge in the strict sense, or secondly, not entirely by the object, but by the will, in which case we have faith. In both instances there is certitude. William James takes a similar position in his essay »The Will to Believe«.

While it cannot be shown that SK had an accurate or more than minimal awareness of the Augustinian position, and he knew almost nothing about Aquinas, it can be said that SK had a general affinity for the Augustinian point of view on faith, despite some critical remarks in the *Papirer* (cf. XI A 237; J & P, I, 180).

However, in *Philosophical Fragments* SK explicitly denies both that faith is a kind of knowledge and that it is an act of the will. Yet in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript (to Philosophical Fragments)* he seems to say just the opposite: faith is a kind of knowledge, and the will is very much involved. There are several reasons for this seeming anomaly. Both

the *Fragments* and the *Postscript* are major contributions to SK's extended polemic against Hegel and Hegelianism (cf. KR), and thus much of what is said in these two works must be seen in that light. In the *Fragments*, among other things, he is also emphasizing the paradoxical aspect of faith (see below). Thus in the *Fragments*, he says that »this relationship of owing all to the Teacher [can] be expressed ... only in that happy passion we call Faith, whose object is the Paradox. But the Paradox unites the contradictories, and is the historical made eternal, and the Eternal made historical ... It is easy to see, though it scarcely needs to be pointed out, since it is involved in the fact that the Reason is set aside, that Faith is not a form of knowledge; for all knowledge is either a knowledge of the Eternal, excluding the temporal and historical as indifferent, or it is pure historical knowledge. No knowledge can have for its object the absurdity that the Eternal is the historical.« (6:58; IV, 254; Eng., 76) Kierkegaard's point here is that by itself human reason is incompetent to attain to faith properly so called, i.e., the Christian Faith. While SK may not be directly attacking Hegel in this passage, the rejection of speculative idealism (including especially Hegel), with its confident dialectical resolution of conflicts is evident throughout *Fragments*.

Surely, though, for SK, that which is proper to faith does have a cognitive content. But first and last, he emphasizes that what is involved here is not ordinary »objective« knowledge. As early as 1835, in the important Gilleleie entry, he sees very clearly that the most important »... thing is to find a truth which is truth *for me*, ...« (I A 75; J & P, V, 5100). And so, although SK would not agree with Aquinas that the assent of faith carries total certainty with it, still for SK, what is affirmed in faith is held to be true.

In fact, SK explicitly identifies subjective truth and faith. For example, in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846) he repeats the theme of I A 75 in defining subjective truth as: »*objective uncertainty, adhered to in the most passionate dedication of intensity [Inderlighed] is the truth*, the highest truth there is for an existing individual.« (9:169f; VII, 188-189; Eng., 182). A few lines further on he says that this definition of truth amounts also to a definition of faith. It may well be that had he known of it SK would have approved of Aquinas' distinction between faith and knowledge as two different cognitive states.

Certainly, also in harmony with traditional philosophy, for SK, one of

the chief factors in faith is the will. But SK also explicitly says in *Fragments* that »... Faith is not an act of the will«; (6:59; IV, 254; Eng., 77). The reason for this is that, again in line with traditional Christian teaching, SK wants to emphasize that faith is a gift of God. »Unless the God grants the condition which makes it possible to understand this, how is it to be supposed that the learner will be able to discover it! But that the God himself gives this condition has been shown above to be a consequence of the *Moment*, and it has also been shown that the *Moment* is the *Paradox*, and that without it we are unable to advance, but return to Socrates.« (6:55; IV, 250; Eng., 72).

But within a few lines, SK indicates quite clearly that although the impulse from God is a *sine qua non*, still the individual must dispose himself for it and ratify that impulse when it is vouchsafed, so that here the will *does* have an indispensable part. »But how does the learner come to realize an understanding with this *Paradox*? We do not ask that he understand the *Paradox* but only understand that this is the *Paradox*. How this takes place we have already shown. It comes to pass when the Reason and the *Paradox* encounter one another happily in the *Moment*, when the Reason sets itself aside and the *Paradox* bestows itself.« (6:56; IV, 251; Eng., 72-73). For the reason to set itself aside would seem to require a conscious decision, an act of the will. SK adds that a third element is involved here: reason is set aside, the *Paradox* bestows itself, and so it must take place *in* something. »The third entity in which this union is realized ... is that happy passion ... [called] *Faith*.« (Ibid.) SK's stress on faith as a »leap«, casting oneself out over »seventy thousand fathoms of water«, in the *Postscript* (9: 170; VII, 189; Eng., 182) also indicates that faith involves an act of the will.

It appears then, that for SK, neither divine grace alone nor the act of the will alone can bring about faith, but both are required. In this way, Kierkegaard reaffirms a traditional Christian view that may have become blurred through the rationalistic excesses and apologetical enthusiasms of the period between Descartes and Hegel. Several years after the publication of the *Postscript*, in a comment reminiscent of Plotinus, SK notes in his *Journal*: »If you do not have faith, then at least believe that you will indeed come to have faith -- and then you do have faith.« (X 3 A 536; J & P, II, 1141). This entry again indicates that the individual must will to dispose himself for the gift of faith.

Kierkegaard had a keen appreciation of the nuances of language. Thus, when he refers to faith as a passion, »that happy passion«, etc., he is not thinking of faith as a mere emotional state. In the languages he was most familiar with (i.e., Danish, German, Latin, and Greek) there is a very close relationship between the words for »passion« and for »suffering«. Only rarely do we use the word »passion« in this sense in English. Also, especially in Greek (*παθεῖν*) and Latin (*pati*), the root verb (and its derivatives) involves the notion of something done *to* the subject, i.e., that the subject is the recipient of something. The English word »passive« reflects this, of course, but all too often suggests that the recipient is totally inert, which would be misleading in the present instance. When SK speaks of faith as »that happy passion« it is very likely that all of these considerations were present in his mind, so that he was aware that faith may indeed involve suffering and that it requires that »the learner« put himself as far as possible into a state of active readiness to receive the Paradox in the Moment by setting Reason aside, but that this is all that »the learner« can do by his own will. Faith, if and when it comes, comes as a gift. No human being can give it to himself or to anyone else. But when faith does come, not only is »the leap« of the will required, but it must be made continuously thereafter: »... if I want to preserve myself in the faith, I must constantly see to it that I adhere to the objective uncertainty, that in the objective uncertainty I am 'out over seventy thousands fathoms of water', and yet believe.« (*Postscript*, 9:170; IV, 189-190; Eng. 182).

## *II Concept of Faith*

Kierkegaard does not give us a single unequivocal definition of faith that we might conveniently memorize or enshrine in a catechism. Rather, he suggests a number of viewpoints which, taken together, give us a richer view than any one »objective« definition.

Thus, in an undated entry in his *Journal* from the same year (1846) he published the *Postscript*, he observes: »Faith is always related to that which is not seen – – in the context of nature (physically contrasted [*sandseligt modsat*]) to the invisible [*Usynlige*]; in the spiritual context (spiritually) to the improbable [*Usandsynlige*]« (VII<sup>1</sup> A 203; J & P, II, 1119). But about two years later he says, in part: »Faith is essentially this – – to hold

fast to possibility ...« (IX A 311; J & P, II, 1126). Faith, then, may be regarded as the firm adherence to the possibility of that which (to mere reason) is improbable.

After all, what could be more improbable than the promise to Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son in their old age, that Abraham should sacrifice Isaac and yet he would be the father of a great people? What could be more improbable than the Incarnation – – that God could become present in time and thus be both eternal and historical? What could be more improbable than that the omnipotent God should take on an incognito, suffer, die, and rise again after three days in the grave? Yet all these and more faith demands.

Kierkegaard does not hesitate to call the principal tenets of Christianity absurd, and he challenges those who would like to think of themselves as Christians to face up to that and other inconvenient facts squarely. SK is fond of quoting Tertullian's embarrassing dictum: »*Credo quia absurdum* (I believe because it is absurd).« But he is also fond of quoting the principle associated with Augustine and Anselm: »*Credo ut intelligam* (I believe in order that I may understand).« His point is again the traditional one: the central truths of Christianity are at odds with worldly wisdom, they are an offense to intellectual pride, but unless one believes, one can never hope to go beyond merely human categories of thought so as to achieve a kind of understanding that is, however, not comprehension. Both Augustine and Anselm would insist that the understanding that is sought within faith does not at all dissolve the mystery (or the paradox) that is immanent in faith. The understanding they speak of may involve an illumination or elucidation of the paradox so that it may be more clearly and firmly grasped, but it remains a mystery or a paradox. In fact, its paradoxical character may be even more vividly recognized.

Admittedly, one takes a chance in leaving aside the comfortable and familiar criteria of ordinary human reason. »Without risk there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of intensity and the objective uncertainty. If I could grasp God objectively, then I would not believe, but precisely because I cannot do that, then I must believe; ...« (*Postscript*, 9:170; VIII, 189; Eng., 182). Faith, like subjective truth, is the daring venture of choosing objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite.

But faith (and truth as subjectivity in the nobler and more proper sense (*sensu eminentiori*; cf. 9:172n; VII, 191-92; Eng., 184-85) is not just any passionate affirmation in the face of objective uncertainty. Socratic ignorance, which did not forget the importance of the existing individual and the reality of the eternal, is, in SK's interpretation, an example of subjectivity (and faith) in the wider sense, an »analogy« to faith in the stricter sense. Faith in the proper meaning of the term contains some specifically Christian ingredient. In this way, SK makes a distinction between faith in a general sense or a secular, but firmly held conviction which may not be objectively or scientifically verifiable but which is nevertheless passionately affirmed, and faith in the proper sense, religious faith, the prime analogate by reference to which the former may be called faith.

Although the leap of faith is an act of the will, it is far from an easy thing to accomplish. As Torsten Bohlin has observed, Kierkegaard did not achieve faith himself easily, but only after a long struggle (*K:s Tro*, 39). In fact, it appears to be not entirely within the power of the individual to bring about the leap of faith. *Repetition* and *Fear and Trembling* describe two phases, infinite resignation and faith. The biblical figure of Job typifies infinite resignation in *Repetition*, and Abraham exemplifies both resignation and faith in *Fear and Trembling* (FT). The pseudonymous author of FT, Johannes de Silentio, cannot understand Abraham. He can praise Abraham, he can admire him, »... I bow seven times before his name and seventy times before his deed.« (SV, 5:35; III, 98-99; Eng., 47), but he is also appalled (*ibid*). But Johannes de Silentio cannot understand Abraham (5:36, III, 99; Eng., 48) – when he tries to think about Abraham he is annihilated, despite all his effort he cannot get anywhere, when he »strains every muscle« he is at the same instant paralyzed (5:32; III, 95; Eng., 44). But throughout FT Abraham is presented as the paradigm of faith. Abraham is both a »knight of infinite resignation« and a »knight of faith«, but Johannes de Silentio has been able to go no further than resignation – he stands on the boundary (*confinium*) between resignation and faith. This is because one can by his own powers renounce everything, but this takes all his strength, and this leaves no strength for making the next movement – into faith (5:46f; III, 112; Eng., 60). Johannes de Silentio describes Abraham as having done both simultaneously, he makes a »double movement« of resignation and faith in the same instant. Abraham did not resign him-

self to the sacrifice of Isaac and then later believe that Isaac would be restored to him, but in the very instant of relinquishing Isaac Abraham believed he would get Isaac back.

### *III Paradox*

Throughout his discussion of the story of Abraham and Isaac in FT, SK brings out the paradoxical aspect of faith. God's promise to Abraham and Sarah of a son in their old age is patently absurd to all human reckoning, and yet Abraham believed (Genesis, 17-18). Abraham left mere human reason and understanding behind, embraced the paradox, and the humanly impossible became actual (Genesis 21). »By faith Abraham received the promise that in his seed all races would be blessed. Time passed, ... it became absurd [*urimeligt*], Abraham believed ... Then came the fullness of time ... He accepted the fulfilment of the promise, he accepted it by faith, and it came to pass according to the promise and according to his faith – – then there was joy in Abraham's house, when Sarah became a bride on the day of their golden wedding.« (5:19-20; III, 81; Eng. 32-33). But God, from the human point of view, does not leave well enough alone. Although Abraham has been promised that through Isaac he would be the father of a great race of people, now Abraham is commanded to take his only beloved son off to the land of Moriah and offer him as a burnt offering – thereby apparently negating the possibility of a great race of descendants (Genesis 22). »Yet Abraham believed and did not doubt, he believed the absurd [*det Urimelige*].« (5:21; III, 83; Eng. 35) SK is clearly fascinated with the story of Abraham and Isaac, as he has his pseudonymous author, Johannes de Silentio, embellish the sparse account in the Bible with several alternative versions. While FT provokes consideration of many issues, not least the ethical problem of the fact that what Abraham was prepared to commit was murder, for our present purposes it is enough to point out that the compounded paradox of Abraham and Isaac typifies faith for SK. One might be inclined to reflect that there is an additional paradox in the fact that SK takes Abraham as the exemplar of faith when it is the Christian faith that SK is really concerned about.

In his later discussions of faith SK seems to have dropped the notion of the double movement, infinite resignation – – faith, but the notion of paradox remains and grows stronger.

While the entire work *Philosophical Fragments* may be taken to be concerned with the topic of faith in its highest form, viz., the Christian faith, and especially the relationship between philosophical idealism and Christianity, there are some passages in this work that illuminate in a particularly striking way the topic of the present essay.

Ordinary thought, »objective« knowledge, for all its precision and clarity and undisputed importance, is rather pedestrian. It does not challenge the mind to its limits. Modern thought has perhaps been seduced by Descartes' ideal of clear and distinct knowledge. But SK reminds us that even in the realm of purely secular knowledge we encounter paradox, so we should not be surprised to find it in the divine. It is not only basically dishonest to reject the possible legitimacy of paradox, it is also an unjustifiable a priori limitation on the potentialities of human nature which, in SK's view is also paradoxical. Paradox offers the opportunity to complete the striving of reason by going beyond reason. As SK puts it: »... one should not think slightly of the paradoxical; for the paradox is the source of the thinker's passion, and the thinker without a paradox is like a lover without feeling: a paltry mediocrity. But the highest pitch of every passion is always to will its own downfall; and so it is also the supreme passion of the Reason to seek a collision, though this collision must in one way or another prove its undoing. The supreme paradox of all thought is the attempt to discover something that thought cannot think. This passion is at bottom present in all thinking, ...« (6:38; IV, 230; Eng., 46).

Thus, also, it is futile to attempt to prove that God exists. »For if the 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. For at the very outset, in beginning my proof, I would have presupposed it, not as doubtful but as certain ...« (6:40; IV, 232-233; Eng., 49). This would, of course, beg the question. The best that one can do with this kind of effort is not to prove anything »least of all an existence, but merely develop the content of a conception.« (*Ibid.*) This is nothing more than the laudable attempt to explore the implications of belief, in the tradition of Augustine & Anselm (*credo ut intelligam*). SK's comment on Anselm's famous »ontological« argument (X 5 A 120; J & P, I, 20) is very much to the point.

So too with all the essential truths of the Christian faith. Reason is not only incompetent to prove them (or disprove them), but reason collides with them, and so reason must be left aside.



In every argument bearing on the essential truths of the Christian faith, no matter how cleverly the argument is constructed, no matter how tightly linked its premises, no matter how formally correct its procedure, there is always a gap, even a chasm, between the premises and the conclusion. That gulf is traversed only by a leap, a leap into the dark. The premises might persuade one to take that leap, but it is still a leap not a logically necessary inference. Taking this kind of leap obviously entails taking the chance of being wrong: »... when faith resolves to believe it runs the risk of committing itself to an error, but it nevertheless believes. There is no other road to faith; if one wishes to escape risk, it is as if one wanted to know with certainty that he can swim before going into the water.« (6:76n; IV, 25; Eng., 103).

No one has the right »... to make others believe that faith is something lowly, or that it is an easy thing, whereas it is the greatest and the hardest.« (5:48f; III, 115; Eng., 62).

Yet the man of faith is not necessarily dramatically different from others in externals. Johannes de Silentio gives an unforgettable description of how ordinary, even bourgeois, the knight of faith may be in external appearance; yet he has a rich interior life, and somehow he is able »... absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian...« (FT 5:37-39; III, 100-104; Eng., 49-52).

With all his emphasis on leaving reason aside, the absurd, the paradox, »the leap«, as central to the faith, it remains an open question as to whether SK regarded the Christian faith as irrational, arational, or suprarational. Good arguments based on textual evidence can be adduced for each of these interpretations. One can argue that the paradoxical ingredients of the Christian faith openly clash with reason, and so are incompatible with reason, are plainly irrational, i.e., contrary to reason. This position is troublesome only for those who hold that reason is the only vehicle and criterion for what is intellectually respectable. The difficulty with such a view is that there are no rational grounds (without begging the question) for maintaining that reason is the exclusive norm and way to knowledge. Secondly, one may argue that for SK, faith and reason are mutually exclusive categories, that neither has anything to do with the other, i.e., that faith is arational, not rational, but not contrary to reason either. Finally, one might argue that SK means that faith is suprarational – – reason is competent in certain areas, part-

icularly in »objective« knowledge, but faith, cognition of the most important things, goes absolutely beyond the limitations of mere reason. In any of these interpretations it is important to recall SK's role as a corrective, and that for all his direct and indirect polemic against Hegel and the speculative idealists, he was still to a certain extent inclined to use the terminology and thought categories of those he opposed, even though he used it against them (cf. KR).

*Literature and Abbreviations:*

Søren Kierkegaard, *Samlede Værker*, 20 vols., cited according to the third edition (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1962-1964) volume number followed by colon, then page number. Reference to the second edition, 15 vols., (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1920-1936, volume (in Roman) followed by page number. Reference to English translations is by page number.

*Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, 2. forøgede Udg. ved Niels Thulstrup, 25 vols., (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968-1978) cited according to standard entry numbers, e.g., I A 75.

J & P = *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 7 vols., (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1967-1978), cited according to volume and entry number, e.g., J & P, I, 20.

K:s Tro = Bohlin, Torsten, *Kierkegaards Tro och Andra Kierkegaardstudier* (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelsens Bokförlag, 1944).

Malantschuk, Gregor, *Kierkegaard's Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

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KR = Thulstrup, Niels, *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).