

“Silence, friend Sancho;” replied Don Quixote. “Matters of war are more subject than most to continual change. What is more, I think—and that is the truth—that the same sage Friston who robbed me of my room and my books has turned those giants into windmills, to cheat me of the glory of conquering them. Such is the enmity he bears me; but in the end his black arts shall avail him little against the goodness of my sword.”

Just so the religious man buttresses his faith in the infinite goodness of God against his inescapable experience of suffering, evil, and disaster with the supplementary myth of a divine Providence. For it has the same power to transform suffering into goodness as the wicked Friston has to turn giants into windmills.

It is inevitable that it should be so. The myth of the enchantments of the wicked Friston permits Don Quixote to rub his wounds, get to his feet, mount his horse, and be off again in the service of his beloved dream. And for the religious man also, as Unamuno says: what else is his mysticism but a knight-errantry of the heart in the divine warfare?

II. By Walter Kaufmann

## KIERKEGAARD

THAT KIERKEGAARD with his prolific contempt for parsons and professors should at long last have been translated into English largely by a parson and a professor, that is ironical but not ultimately serious. But that a man who wanted to “create difficulties everywhere”<sup>1</sup> and be an offense should be

1. *Postscript*, 166. The abbreviations of the titles should be self-explanatory. Most references are to the editions of the Princeton University Press; but *Fear and Sickness* are cited according to the Anchor edition, and *Point of View and Journals* (“J”) cited by sections, not pages) were published by the Oxford University Press. “Lowric” means *A Short Life of K.*, “Thomte” *K’s Philosophy of Religion*, and “Bretall” *A K. Anthology*, all Princeton University Press.

praised and buried in academic appreciations without offending anybody, that is tragic. With other writers one may begin with an appreciative exposition and end with a criticism or two; with Kierkegaard one should first be offended. We should work our way through initial objections.

Because these objections reflect the vexation and offense of what Kierkegaard might have called an existing individual, and because eventually they give way to another attitude and are qualified, it would be misleading to state them either impersonally as assured results or personally as convictions. What else remains? I shall follow Kierkegaard's example and invent a pseudonym. This device will permit me to offer in short order and without judicious qualifications the offense that must precede appropriation. I shall borrow a chapter heading from Kierkegaard's own *Fear and Trembling* and begin with

"A PRELIMINARY EXPECTORATION,"

By Brother Brash

SK may be considered in at least four ways: as a stylist, a religious writer, a psychologist, and a philosopher. All ways he is remarkable but, in one of his favorite words from St. Paul, a *skandalon*.

As a *stylist* he is most imaginative but verbose and repetitious; his theoretical prose is often needlessly involved; and in his attempts at philosophy he out-Hegels Hegel. Occasionally he writes sentences of which his many commentators and translators are unable to make any sense. If, as some of them plead, his intention in such cases was humorous and he was trying to satirize Hegel, he would seem to have failed in an endeavor in which success should have been relatively easy to attain. Another translator claims that "Kierkegaard often deliberately strained for an involved and difficult syntax to force the reader to proceed slowly" and admits that this attempt results in a "twisted and

intricate style.”<sup>2</sup> But what is most distressing is SK’s inimitable blend of existential urgency and epic digressions—and his highly imitable and fateful fusion of this urgency with verbal acrobatics which at times defy analysis and at other times clothe trivialities in pomp.

As a *religious writer*, SK is, first of all, one of the foremost recent spokesmen of authoritarian religion. Consider a dictum from his voluminous *Journals* (1847):

They would have us believe that objections against Christianity come from doubt. This is always a misunderstanding. Objections against Christianity come from insubordination, unwillingness to obey, rebellion against all authority. Therefore they have hitherto been beating the air against objectors, because they have fought intellectually with doubt, instead of fighting ethically with rebellion. (Lowrie, 122; J 630)

Any attempt to defend Christianity only undermines its authority, and SK argues that “he who first invented the notion of defending Christianity in Christendom is *de facto* Judas No. 2; he also betrays with a kiss.” SK exhorts his reader “to become a believer—*nota bene!* by adoringly humbling himself under the extraordinary.” It is in “the absurd” that “Christianity begins—and the offense”; and we must believe without any possibility of comprehension. (*Sickness*, 217 f., 229 f.) It is blind obedience that SK demands; and it is noteworthy that his authoritarianism extends beyond religion. Thus he writes in 1847, in his preface to *The Confusion of the Present Age*, posing, as he often does, as the mere editor of a book which in fact he has written himself:

For the misfortune of our age—in the political as well as in the religious sphere, and in all things—is disobedience, unwillingness to obey. And one deceives oneself and others by wishing to make us imagine that it is doubt. No, it is insubordination. (*Adler*, xviii)

A year later, after the revolutions of 1848, SK reaffirmed this

2. Emanuel Hirsch in his translation of SK’s *Die Schriften über sich selbst*, 121.

position. (*Adler*, xix ff.)

The ethical import of SK's authoritarianism is expounded in *Fear and Trembling*, which SK himself considered one of his best books. Here Abraham is celebrated for the faith he showed in being willing to sacrifice Isaac. The book deals less with Abraham than with the meaning of faith, and the central sentence is this: "If faith does not make it a holy act to be willing to murder one's son, then let the same condemnation be pronounced upon Abraham as upon every other man." (41) Abraham is "the knight of faith" because his faith did not shrink from the absurd. But here SK is guilty of two anachronisms. First, he attributes to Abraham a rigid distinction between the religious and the ethical order. Some inkling of such a distinction may indeed be found in an earlier chapter (Genesis 18) where Abraham pleads with God that he must not destroy Sodom if there be just men in it. But this wonderful story, which is utterly incompatible with SK's authoritarian reading of Genesis, certainly does not justify SK when he attributes to Abraham a full-fledged ethical code entirely apart from his relation to God. On this anachronism, however, SK's book depends. The second and crucial anachronism is this: if a man today proposed to act as Abraham did, I should not, like SK, "saddle my horse and ride with him" (43); for I should not believe the man that it was God who had asked him to sacrifice his son. SK places the intuitive certainty that we are confronted with God's will above all critical reflection. For him faith is "everything." (42) In Genesis it is assumed that Abraham knows God well, that there is no doubt whatever that it is God who speaks to him, and above all that in fact—*ex hypothesi*—it is God. In this last respect the situation may be compared with that of Job who also—*ex hypothesi*—has never done anything evil. These conditions cannot simply be taken over.

Now it might be objected that SK's attitude is simply the religious attitude, and that without its authoritarianism no religiousness whatever would remain. But this objection is un-

tenable, and we need not even adduce Buddhism and the other Oriental religions to show this. Consider the “knight of faith” himself, Abraham. “Kierkegaard holds that ‘When the righteous punishment was decreed upon Sodom and Gomora . . . Abraham came forward with his prayers.’ But it is quite clear from the Biblical text that things were quite different. Abraham does not acknowledge the righteousness of the punishment, but questions it. He does not pray for Sodom and Gomora, but demands that justice be done. . . . But when Kierkegaard reads even such an open text he sees it through the transforming powers of his own conception of Abraham.”<sup>3</sup>

Another splendid illustration of non-authoritarian religion which contrasts sharply with SK’s outlook and will permit us to see SK’s authoritarianism in bold relief, may be found in the Talmudic story of Rabbi Eliezer’s dispute with some other rabbis:

Rabbi Eliezer said to them: If the law is as I think it is then this tree shall let us know. Whereupon the tree jumped from its place a hundred yards (others say four hundred yards). His colleagues said to him: One does not prove anything from a tree. . . . He continued and said: If the law is as I think then the walls of this house will tell. Whereupon the walls began to fall. But Rabbi Joshua shouted at the walls and said: If scholars argue a point of law, what business have you to fall? So the walls fell no further out of respect for Rabbi Joshua, but out of respect for Rabbi Eliezer did not straighten up. . . . Rabbi Eliezer took up the argument again and said: If the law is as I think they shall tell us from heaven. Whereupon a loud voice said: What have you against Rabbi Eliezer, for the law is as he says. Whereupon Rabbi Joshua got up and said: It is written in the Bible [Deut. 30.12], It is not in heaven. What does this mean? Rabbi Jirmijahu said: The Torah has been given on Mount Sinai, so we no longer pay attention to voices, for on Mount Sinai already thou hast written into the Torah to decide according to the majority. When Rabbi Nathan later met Elijah, he asked him what the Holy One, blessed be His Name, did

3. Marvin Fox, “K. and Rabbinic Judaism” in *Judaism*, April 1953, n. 6 a.

in that hour. And he answered: God smiled and said, My children have won against me, my children have won. (Baba Meziah 59b)

Although these rabbis lived some time after Christ, this story illuminates the Gospels, the Pharisees' attitude toward Jesus, and perhaps also some crucial differences between Judaism and traditional Christianity, far better than most volumes devoted to these subjects. In this story God is the father; but not all fathers are stern, humorless authoritarians, and here God is rather like the proverbial Jewish father. It is as if he had taught his sons to play chess and was delighted and proud that one of them had beaten him for the first time. He has given his children priceless gifts and is pleased when they grow up and learn to use them independently.

SK's conception of God, and of the proper relationship between father and son, is utterly different and authoritarian through and through. Consider his own words:

In case a son were to say, "I obey my father, not because he is my father, but because . . . his commands are always profound and clever"—then . . . the son accentuates something which is entirely beside the point . . . [and] undermines obedience. And this too is affectation when there is so much about accepting Christianity and believing in Christ on account of the profundity. . . . The whole of modern Speculation is therefore "affected" by reason of having done away with *obedience* . . . and authority. (*Adler*, 116b.)

Clearly, modern liberal Protestantism is not authoritarian in SK's sense and would be included in his condemnation. Thus SK continues:

A clergyman who is entirely correct in his eloquence must speak thus in introducing a word of Christ: "This word was spoken by him to whom, according to his own statement, all power hath been given in heaven and in earth. Now, thou, my hearer, must consider by thyself whether thou wilt bow to this authority or no. But if thou wilt not do so, then for heaven's sake do not go off and accept the

word because it is clever and profound or wondrously beautiful, for this is blasphemy, it is wanting to treat God like an aesthetic critic."

Any suggestion that we must examine the content to determine whether a saying or a command is indeed from God is emphatically rejected by SK:

The apostle says he is from God. The others answer, "Well then, let us see whether the content of the doctrine is divine, for in that case we will accept it along with the claim that it was revealed to thee." In that way both God and the apostle are mocked. . . . And meanwhile the apostle and God must presumably wait at the door or in the porter's lodge until the case has been decided by the wise men in the *bel étage*. The elect man should according to God's ordinance assert his divine authority to chase away all impertinent people who will not obey him but argue. (109f.)

If the label of authoritarianism is amply justified by SK's repeated insistence on "authority" and by his equation of critical thinking with insubordination and blasphemy, it is yet plain that he himself refused to submit to the authority of any man or institution. While firmly believing in the necessity of authority and blind obedience, he placed the blame for the lack of both in the 19th Century at least in part on those representatives of Christianity who had forfeited their authority and did not deserve obedience.

What, then, are the criteria of genuine authority? What may we ask, short of blasphemy, before we submit humbly to any man who claims authority? In the whole work that SK devoted to the problems of "Authority and Revelation" we find only two criteria, repeated a number of times: "An apostle has no other proof but his own assertion, and at the most by his willingness to suffer everything for the sake of the doctrine." (117 f.) It would almost be an understatement to say that no safeguard whatever remains against fanaticism: indeed, fanaticism and the lack of a sensitive intellectual conscience are made the proof of

authority, and SK wistfully deploras his own intelligence.

Those who favor an authoritarian faith may not consider these reflections a critique of SK as a religious writer. If so, they should remember that the problem has an ancient history, and ask themselves what SK has contributed to its clarification. The Catholic Church, of course, has always employed other criteria, and the willingness of scores of heretics to suffer the stake has never persuaded the Church that they were true apostles. Nor did Calvin change his mind about the Trinity after he had burnt Servetus, the Unitarian. Luther, to be sure, began by claiming the supremacy of conscience but soon found that he had invited anarchy by sanctioning all kinds of doctrines and actions that he could not but condemn as utterly outrageous. And since he had begun by ruling reason out of court, as he considered reason a whore whom a Christian must reject before he could enter the kingdom of heaven, nothing remained to him but to set up another authoritarian church. Those who thrill to the young Luther who made the Reformation and repudiate the "old" Luther who, only a very few years later, became an authoritarian, should ask whether Luther had not staked his Reformation on an unsound issue when he postulated a spurious alternative between the authority of the Catholic church and the supremacy of the individual conscience which has thrown reason to the winds.

Many Protestants still thrill to Luther's insistence that he would not recant unless refuted from Scripture. Have they forgotten how soon he repudiated the Epistle of James, the brother of Jesus, as "an epistle of utter straw"? Or how easily the Catholic Church, or any other denomination, not to speak of the devil, could cite Scripture against Luther? Or how difficult it is to reach agreement about the teaching of Scripture? The Pharisees knew that; the rabbis in our Talmudic story knew it; and the Church found it out and gradually developed an elaborate machinery of arbitration. Luther himself, who began by assuming

that Scripture was on his side while the Catholic Church simply ignored Scripture, soon found that he could not agree about Scripture with Zwingli, nor with Calvin, nor with the Anabaptists, nor with any number of others who were no less sincere, and occasionally more scrupulous, than he was.

Looking back on this history, what does SK contribute? A single-minded insistence on authority and obedience, a superior contempt for doubt and “insubordination”—but no clarification of the genuine difficulties that have beset religious men and women for centuries. Of course, he is right that reason cannot conclusively settle some of life’s central questions, but he is fatally wrong when he minimizes, or altogether ignores, the all-important difference between a thoughtful and a fanatical decision, between a choice that is responsible and one that is not; and what calls for censure above all else is his deliberate disparagement of critical scrutiny as blasphemy, impertinence, and insubordination.

Nor is this all that needs to be said against SK as a religious writer. His stature is further limited by the fact that he has no understanding whatever of any religious attitude other than his own—the two between which he himself is torn. He has no inkling of the religiosity of Genesis, or of later Jewish or Buddhist or Hindu or Confucian piety, no remote grasp of Congregationalist or Unitarian religiousness, and, as Lowrie remarks, “he ignored the Calvinistic branch of Protestantism as completely as if it did not exist.” (219) The point is not that he does not mention these religions but that he ignores them when, for example, he defines religiosity. SK maintains

that religiosity is inwardness, that inwardness is the relationship of the individual to himself before God, his reflection into himself, and that it is precisely from this that the suffering derives, this also being the ground of its essential pertinence to the religious life, so that the absence of it [suffering] signifies the absence of religiosity. (*Postscript*, 391)

This passage is doubly self-centered. Most religious people are less preoccupied with themselves and their own relationship to themselves; and we may therefore say in the first place that SK's religiosity is unusually self-centered. And secondly he writes as if his own self-centered religiosity were the only one.

This self-centeredness and this addiction to self-projection are SK's most central faults. They limit his stature not only as a religious writer but also as a human being. He becomes embarrassing when he enthuses about "The religious genius" and offers us an oblique self-portrait (*Dread*, 96 ff.); when he pictures himself, again obliquely, as "the most eminent poet-existence" (*Sickness*, 208); or when he decides not to publish *The Point of View for my Work as an Author* in his lifetime because he is not sure "whether a man has a right to let people know how good he is." (Lowrie, 212) Even those who relish the sarcasm of Socrates' Apology and the impudence of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* may well find parts of the Introduction to *The Point of View* sanctimonious, like ever so much else in SK's books and Journals. He writes: "But however much I have suffered from misunderstanding, I cannot but thank God for what is of infinite importance to me, that He has granted me understanding of the truth." And elsewhere: "I have never fought in such a way as to say: I am the true Christian, others are not Christians. No, my contention has been this: *I know what Christianity is*, my imperfection as a Christian I myself fully recognize—but I know what Christianity is." (*Point*, 8 f., 159)

Unlike the Hebrew prophets, SK is charged with self-importance. He does not disappear in his message like Amos; nor does his life become a mere parable of his message—of no interest in itself—like Hoseah's: SK's individuality is always with us—a tormented individuality like that of a character in Dostoevsky, without the open horizon of Nietzsche, Goethe, or Kant—a limited, poor, infinitely pathetic and upsetting individuality. It would be absurd to censure him for not writing a comparative

history of religion; but his studied ignorance of all other forms of religion amounts to nothing less than a deliberate blindness to human possibilities.

It is SK's *psychology* that suffers most seriously from his peculiar self-centeredness. Some of his books, notably including *The Concept of Dread* and *The Sickness Unto Death*, have subtitles which characterize them as "psychological"; and SK himself admits that his psychology is based on introspection. (*Dread*, 46, 70 f.) He certainly offers some shrewd flashes of psychological insight, but as soon as one tries to make a list of them one is disappointed to find how few of them there are. He does not develop a comprehensive theory like Freud, or even Nietzsche with his conceptions of the will to power, sublimation, and resentment. SK offers only sundry observations, and even these suffer from two crucial defects.

The first of these is self-projection coupled with a range of experience which is far too narrow to permit significant generalizations. He shows no understanding of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, none of Antigone in *Either / Or*, none of Solomon in *Stages on Life's Way*: he always writes about himself. His brilliant sketch of "Stoic" defiance in *The Sickness Unto Death* is such that SK himself is driven to admit that "this sort of despair is seldom seen in the world." (206) When he adds, "Nevertheless such a despairer is to be met with also in real life," we are served notice that he projects himself, as if that did not go without saying. SK's strange Stoic does not doubt God, has no qualms about the meaning of "God," but out of sheer pride refuses obedience. It is, SK says, as if a "clerical error would revolt against the author, out of hatred for him were to forbid him to correct it, and were to say, 'No, I will not be erased, I will stand as a witness against thee, that thou art a very poor writer.'" Being physically deformed, SK knew the temptation of flinging himself into the face of God with words like these; and for him obedience to God meant humble acceptance of the absurd.

If this interpretation should seem unduly personal, consider the deeply moving pages in *Fear and Trembling* which deal ostensibly with Shakespeare's Richard III. SK considers the famous monologue in the first scene "worth more than all the moral systems which have no inkling of the terrors of existence" and quotes from it:

I, that am rudely stamped and want love's majesty  
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;  
I that am curtailed of this fair proportion,  
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,  
Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time  
Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,  
And that so lamely and unfashionable  
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them.

These lines, of course, are pathetically applicable to SK who comments: "Essentially such natures . . . are either lost in the demoniacal paradox [like Richard] or saved in the divine [as SK hoped to be]." (114 f) As so often, the generalization does not at all stand up; such passages demand to be read as fragments of the soul's dialogue with itself.

In his Journals SK noted with characteristic coyness:

After my death no one will find in my papers (this is my comfort) a single explanation of what it was that really filled my life, the secret writing in my inmost parts which explains everything and often transforms what the world would call bagatelles into events of prodigious importance for me, which I too regard as insignificant apart from the secret gloss which explains them. (Lowrie, 70; J 431)

This note should be compared with Nietzsche's observation:

The worst readers of aphorisms are the writer's friends if they are intent on guessing back from the general to the particular instance to which the aphorism owes its origin: for with this pot-peeking they reduce the author's whole effort to nothing, and thus they only deserve it when, instead of a philosophic outlook or instruction,

they gain nothing but—at best, or at worst—the satisfaction of a vulgar curiosity. (*Human II*. 129)

For Nietzsche his own experience is the mere occasion for more general insights which are meant to have objective validity: he develops theories, offers analyses, and is a psychologist and a philosopher. SK, on the other hand, considers all such enterprises frivolous as long as his salvation is at stake. While Nietzsche says, "Of all that is written I love only what a man has written with his blood," he does not equal SK's subjectivity.

I have said that SK's range of experience was narrow; and yet his life was certainly no less interesting than Freud's or Nietzsche's. The point is rather that he was so largely preoccupied with four experiences which he projects endlessly: his father's sin in cursing God when he was a poor boy, long before SK was born; his father's dissoluteness, particularly his probable seduction of SK's mother when she was a maid in his house; his own dissoluteness after he first found out about his father's; and the way he broke his engagement, pretending that he was a frivolous person, unworthy of Regine. In *The Concept of Dread*, for example, where he deals psychologically with original sin and admits that his psychology is based on his own case, he is preoccupied with the relation of his own sin to his father's; and he probably wondered whether his own deformity was not a punishment for his father's sins. We should also recall his remark about his father: "I learnt from him what father-love is, and thereby I got a conception of the divine father-love." (J 335) Much more important, his own love of his father, whom he probably considered not only sinful but responsible for his own misfortune, but to whom he dedicated book after book, became for him the paradigm of how he should love God: without reason, overriding moral scruples, humbling himself lovingly before the utterly absurd.

If the uncritical projection and generalization of a very few

unusual experiences constitutes the first major defect of SK's psychology, the second defect is self-deception. *Fear and Trembling*, for example, was clearly prompted by his own broken engagement to which it alludes constantly. (Cf. J 965) But SK does not only project his own problems into Abraham and into ever so many others whom he introduces in endless digressions; he also deceives himself about his own motivation by sanctimoniously celebrating himself as a "knight of resignation" who acted as he did because God himself had told him to do so. And he congratulates himself on his humility in not applying to himself the highest title, that of the "knight of faith." Whoever compares SK's endless pseudo-explanations of his broken engagement, now in terms of three stages and now in terms of a "teleological suspension of the ethical," with Kafka's treatment of his own profoundly similar experience in *The Judgment* and, above all, in the magnificently honest and humane *Letter to the Father*, can hardly help asking himself whether SK's cant has ever been equalled by a writer of equal rank.

How naive is SK psychologically when he reiterates, "if he does not love like Abraham, then every thought of offering Isaac would not be a trial but a base temptation" and "that I loved him with all my soul is the presumption apart from which the whole thing becomes a crime." (42, 46) He is trying to justify himself, but surely the agent's suffering and anguish can no more establish that God demands an act than absurdity can prove that God wants us to believe something. And why should God be such a good Kantian that when he overrides our ethical duty he always overrides our inclination too? If he commands the absurd, why should he not for once side with our inclination against our duty? To cite Max Brod: "Is it impossible after all that God might give the command to kill his son not to an Abraham who loves his son but to an Abraham who hates his son . . . ?"<sup>4</sup>

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4. *Heidentum, Christentum, Judentum* (1922), I, 315.

It may seem impertinent to psychologize SK; but his discussions are so pointedly subjective and incomplete, so close to special pleading, and so full of allusions to his life that it seems convenient not to list all the omissions, oversights, and fallacies, but to say once and for all that his psychology is vitiated by uncritical self-projection and sanctimonious self-deception.

SK's failure to search his heart whether he was not also afraid of marriage, at least in part for all-too-human reasons, and his insistence on explaining his behavior religiously in terms of faith, bring to mind Nietzsche's malicious but profound epigram: "'Faith' means not *wanting* to know what is true." (*Antichrist*, 52)

Let me summarize my case so far by briefly comparing SK's *Attack on Christendom* with Nietzsche's *Antichrist*. Each came at the end of the author's career; neither of them is the author's greatest work; both inveigh against hypocrisy. But in all three respects so far considered Nietzsche's work is more substantial. However we may disagree with him, his style is powerful where SK's is enfeebled by his repetitiousness; Nietzsche deals with a great variety of religious attitudes where SK merely contrasts purity and impurity, black and white; and as a psychologist Nietzsche offers not merely sundry flashes but a budding psychology of *Weltanschauungen*, including a provocative "psychology of 'faith'" (Sec. 50 ff.) in which he calls attention to all sorts of problems which SK consistently avoids. Obviously, Nietzsche's attack is open to scores of criticisms, but it is far meatier than SK's. For Nietzsche is a philosopher and a psychologist while SK, to cite his own words once more, is "fighting ethically with rebellion." SK is essentially a moralist who diverts and dazzles us with stories and psychological tidbits.

SO MUCH for the stylist, the religious writer, and the psychologist. But what of SK as a *philosopher*? Let me enter four charges against him—or rather against those who would turn him into

a philosopher. First and most important, SK neither was nor wanted to be a philosopher. Hegel's dictum, "philosophy, however, must beware of wishing to be edifying," only embittered SK. (J 320) To be sure, the really great philosophers, including Hegel, *are* edifying and say to us among other things: "You must change your life." But the decisive difference between their challenge and that of religious teachers and preachers is that the philosophers' demand is a paraphrase of Socrates' dictum in the *Apology*, that the unexamined life is not worth living. It is a call to become critical, to place convention on the rack. SK, on the other hand, says:

The important thing is to understand what I am destined for, to perceive what the Deity wants me to do; the point is to find the truth which is truth *for me*, to find *that idea for which I am ready to live and die*. (Lowrie, 82f.; J 22)

Philosophy, to be sure, will never give him this idea, but it might well safeguard a man against some ideas for which he might better not live or die. SK admits that "philosophy cannot and should not give faith"; but he adds that it should "take nothing away, and least of all should fool people out of something as if it were nothing." (*Fear*, 44) But a training in philosophy must fool people out of ever so many childhood beliefs, religious and non-religious, not by attacking them specifically, but incidentally by developing our critical powers. In violently objecting to this, SK is deeply and essentially opposed to philosophy.

The second charge is merely a minor variant of the first. Reversing the whole trend of modern philosophy, he goes back to the authority of Scripture and cites verses and even single words to establish points; and he dogmatizes, for example about original sin, like a theologian rather than a philosopher. His psychological observations add spice, no more—as when he psychologizes God and, projecting his own broken engagement, explains God's predicament thus: "not to reveal oneself is the

death of love, to reveal oneself is the death of the beloved.” (*Fragments*, 23) This is hardly a concession to critical thinking.

The third charge is that SK accepts Christian and Hegelian categories and modes of thinking without examining them and juggles around such phrases as dialectical, spirit, the eternal, nothing, infinite reflection, potentiate, the posited sin, self, freedom, and many others without seeking clarity about their meaning. His discussion of God’s existence, proofs, and the Unknown, in the *Fragments*, is on the level of sleight-of-hand apologetics, as are such entirely representative statements as these: “if he has no God, neither has he a self,” and “we can demonstrate the eternal in man from the fact that despair cannot consume his self.” (*Sickness*, 173, 153) Those who know SK will easily recall dozens of more intricate passages which are less easily found out.

The fourth and final charge against SK as a philosopher is that the kind of dialectic in which he excels could be used to “prove” anything. Although he constantly invokes Socrates, he fails to understand the central point of Socrates’ mission: the relentless questioning of convention, prompted by the evident conviction that even holy and respectable ends do not justify unanalysed concepts, murky arguments, and the lack of a sensitive intellectual conscience. The pious ruse that a man is too serious to concern himself with anything so frivolous as mere concepts cannot allay the suspicion that he is not serious enough. And if he insists that he is not a philosopher, why should we contradict him?

That SK does not offer any philosophic theory is a far less serious matter, although a suggestive theory might go far toward balancing some of the aforementioned defects. The closest thing to a theory that we find is SK’s notion of the three stages, and next to that his dictum that “truth is subjectivity.” Neither of these can stand scrutiny. To wind up my critique, I shall try to show this.

To begin with the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages, these

are clearly not exhaustive but mere projections of what were for SK himself live options. When he discusses the religious stage he speaks of what tempts him, not of Calvinism, Catholicism, or Judaism. When he speaks of the ethical stage, he does not speak of Spinoza or the Stoics but of possibilities that mean a great deal to himself.

If a man decides to set himself a task—for example, to create works of art as Goethe did, or Sartre's hero at the end of *La Nausée*—does he leave the aesthetic stage and enter the ethical, seeing that the life of pleasure gives way to a committed life? SK has no answer: he pontificates about marriage and suggests that the ethical stage is marriage. Again, to respect another person as another person and not merely as a character in one's own biography, that might be one important meaning of being an ethical person. But SK fails to clarify the relation of this attitude to the phenomenon of commitment. In fact, he does not understand this attitude at all. For him the suffering of others is of concern only insofar as he himself is responsible for it or somehow the protagonist. He is that strange phenomenon, a solipistic moralist.

Thus SK can say of Abraham:

This is his comfort, for he says: "But yet this will not come to pass, or, if it does come to pass, then the Lord will give me a new Isaac, by virtue viz. of the absurd." (*Fear*, 124)

Isaac is not recognized as an independent person. "What Kierkegaard overlooks completely is that Abraham might have prayed for Isaac; he might have seen this as Isaac's cause, as well as his own." (Fox, *op. cit.*) Similarly, the Regine for whom SK wrote so many of his books was not the real Regine who actually read them—out loud to her husband. The real Regine had signally failed to play the role assigned to her: she had not allowed herself to be sacrificed but had promptly married another. And SK did not rejoice in her happiness, as Kafka did in much the same situation; SK felt hurt. In book after book he tried to explain

himself and to pour gall into her happiness. She, however, used SK's accomplishments to impress her husband and enjoy his respectful love that much more.

Agreeing with such other interpreters as Hirsch, Geismar, and Lowrie, Thomte maintains that

Kierkegaard presents only one great choice: *Either* the aesthetic mode of life, whether it be a life of pleasure, despair, or religious and metaphysical contemplation, *or* the ethical mode of life . . . culminating in Christianity. (104)

Or to cite SK's own note "On my literary work as a whole":

In one sense it is a question put to the age, about a choice: they must choose either to make aesthetics everything and so explain everything in that way, or religion. (J 991)

SK constantly uses the word "aesthetics" when he does not really mean aesthetics but a variety of other things, including both art and an aesthetic, or a hedonistic, attitude toward life. As for the content of the choice he poses: this happens to be his problem; so he infers that it is *the* problem.

To evaluate SK's three stages we must go back to Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. In *The Mind of Kierkegaard* James Collins remarks:

The reader is liable to overlook the anti-Hegelian significance of certain points of agreement between the aesthetic and ethical spokesmen [in SK's works]. . . . They jointly satirize the marvelous objectivity of systematizers, who are so concerned with the plight of others that they forget their own, who can dismiss the "unhappy consciousness" [in Hegel's *Phenomenology*] in a couple of disinterested paragraphs and then pass on, just as unconcernedly, to a disquisition on other equally impersonal topics. (113)

Actually, Hegel devotes to the "unhappy consciousness" more than a dozen closely printed penetrating pages. He tries to show that *Weltanschauungen* are not so many theories in books, on

library shelves, but correlates of the states of mind of individuals. He considers them not contemporaneous but stages in the development of the spirit like the Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque style, or Storm and Stress, Classicism, and Romanticism. Most individuals know only one stage, while a Goethe traverses many as his passion impels him to push each to its extreme and thus to discover its limitations and go beyond it. The dialectic of Hegel's *Phenomenology* is the logic of passion. And what Collins calls "the marvelous objectivity of systematizers who are so concerned with the plight of others that they forget their own" is in fact the attitude of a man who wants to transcend the provincialism of his own immediate environment, who tries to educate his mind by immersing it successively in different states of mind, and who believes that this is an essential part of a training in philosophy.

SK, on the other hand, is so concerned with his own plight that he is willing to forget that of others. He accepts Hegel's correlation of *Weltanschauungen* with states of mind but gives up the conception of the many stages. He selects three in terms of which he can discuss his own plight—roughly, the "unhappy consciousness," one of the several ethical sections, and what Hegel calls "the spiritual animal kingdom"—and embellishes them, alternating between urgency and anecdotes. The result is interesting but not a philosophical theory.

The one other point, finally, at which some would find a philosophic theory is SK's dictum, "truth is subjectivity." (*Postscript*, 169 ff.) But this is not a theory but a multiple confusion. SK has in mind several different ideas. His first and main point is that what makes a man a true Christian is not so much correct belief as sincerity and devoutness. But even about this SK is far from clear. In places he approximates a broadly tolerant, non-dogmatic, even non-denominational attitude. But he is by no means prepared to press his passing contrast between the insincere Christian and the passionate pagan. The only contrast he

is prepared to press is that between sincere and insincere Christians. This contrast involves no theory of truth at all. While SK thinks he is engaging the Hegelians on their own plane, what he says is utterly incommensurate with Hegel's teaching. Hegel is a philosopher who tries to clarify concepts—but sometimes obfuscates them—while SK wants to go to heaven and dogmatizes about the conditions one must meet to get there. He tells us in so many words that Hegel and the parsons and professors and most of his readers are excluded from the kingdom of heaven which he himself hopes to enter. (*Postscript*, 20) He presupposes the truth of Christianity and says in effect: we all believe these propositions to be true; the question is merely what attitude we should adopt toward them. Philosophy is entirely out of the picture: the choice is between sincerity and hypocrisy, black and white.

The second point which SK injects into this discussion is a simple confusion between subjective certainty and objective truth.

When one man investigates objectively the problem of immortality, and another embraces the uncertainty with the passion of the infinite: where is there most truth, and who has the greater certainty?

SK further compounds this confusion by introducing Socrates and claiming—against both the *Phaedo* and the *Apology*, simply ignoring both—that Socrates neither offered proofs of the immortality of the soul nor was agnostic but staked his whole life on his faith in immortality. With a passionate disregard for objectivity SK rewrites history in accordance with the requirements of his own inwardness. But even if he were right about Socrates, a martyr does not establish the truth of a proposition by dying for it. Yet SK concludes: “Is any better proof capable of being given for the immortality of the soul?”

The third point with which SK confuses the issue is a psychological observation which diverts the uncritical reader and

gives him the feeling that here at last is a thinker worth reading:

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 insofar indeed had proofs, but strangely enough has not enjoyed *quod erat demonstrandum*.

Surely, the relative bliss of the two women does not tell us which of them is really loved. The moral of the story is not that “truth is subjectivity” but that, as Nietzsche says, for some people—not for Nietzsche himself—

it is a matter of complete indifference whether something is true, while it is of the utmost importance whether it is believed to be true. Truth and *faith* that something is true: two completely separate realms of interest—almost diametrically opposite realms—they are reached by utterly different paths. (*Antichrist*, 23)

The fourth point which SK seems to have in mind is brought out by James Collins when he says that SK’s position is

an indirect protest against the Hegelian pretensions to serve up all truth in an objective, cut-and-dried way. He contended strongly that truth is no finished product, which can be handed over the counter of philosophy, quite impersonally and effortlessly. (39)

This alleged protest against Hegel comes straight out of Hegel who says in the preface to the *Phenomenology*: “truth is not a minted coin that can be handed over and accepted as a finished thing.” And Hegel specifically castigates that “dogmatism” which insists “that truth consists in a sentence which represents a fixed result.” Elsewhere Hegel remarks sarcastically that every church claims that nothing is

as easy as finding the truth; one only needs to memorize one of its catechisms. And it does not accept that

Only seriousness paled by no toil  
Finds the deeply hidden fount of truth.

The church holds open market with it; the river of churchly truth roars noisily through all the streets, and everybody can fill his brains with its water.<sup>5</sup>

What does SK add to this? Only confusion. He accepts Hegel's point that simple propositions are not enough. But where Hegel adds that what is wanted is analysis, or what he sometimes calls differentiation or mediation or comprehension, SK calls for passion. "What our age lacks," he says, "is not reflection but passion." (*Fear*, 53) That certainly is not true today; and even in the 19th Century Nietzsche was surely far more right in calling for more passion and more reflection, too. He avoided the egregious blunder of SK who wrote: "The conclusions of passion are the only reliable ones, that is, the only convincing conclusions." (*Fear*, 109)

Confronted with belief in a proposition, Hegel, as a philosopher, asks: what does it mean? SK, as a moralist, asks: are you willing to die for it? And SK adds misleadingly that, if you are, the proposition is subjectively true; and sometimes he even leaves out the word "subjectively" and construes passion as a proof of propositional truth. In fact, however, my attitude proves nothing about my proposition, only something about me.

In this connection it should be noted that Hegel's formulation that "truth is not a minted coin" comes from Lessing's *Nathan* (Act 3, scene 6), the work most frequently cited by the young Hegel. Early in his *Postscript* SK devotes two enthusiastic chapters to another of Lessing's remarks about truth and assumes that in Lessing he has found the antipodes of Hegel, though in fact Hegel had absorbed the lessons of Lessing. It is noteworthy that Lessing's position, like Hegel's, was free of SK's confusions and, of course, by no means anti-critical. On the contrary. Lessing had written in the preface to *Wie die Alten den Tod gebildet*:

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5. *Hegel's theologische Jugendschriften*, 204. The verse is from Schiller's poem, "Das Ideal und das Leben."

It may be that the truth has never yet been determined through a dispute: nevertheless, the truth has gained from every dispute. The dispute has nourished the spirit of examination.

And directly before saying that if he had to choose between all the truth in God's right hand and the ever live striving for truth, coupled with eternal error, in God's left, he would choose the latter—the dictum SK so admired—Lessing explained very clearly indeed:

Not the truth in whose possession any man is, or thinks he is, but the honest effort he has made to find out the truth, is what constitutes the worth of man. For it is not through the possession but through the inquiry after truth that his powers expand, and in this alone consists his ever growing perfection. (*Duplik*)

Lessing distinguished very sharply between what constitutes the truth of a proposition and what constitutes the worth of a human being; he believed that a man could be wrong about many things and yet a worthier man than another who was right; and he realized that this attitude was incompatible with any Christian orthodoxy, let alone SK's belief that doubt is really insubordination, and critical thinking blasphemy.

As SK's argument progresses the confusion mounts. To show that truth is subjectivity he distinguishes *what* is said from *how* it is said, and then proceeds:

At its maximum this inward "how" is the passion of the infinite, and the passion of the infinite is the truth. [Surely, this is wrong and begs the question.] But the passion of the infinite is precisely subjectivity, and thus subjectivity becomes the truth. Objectively there is no infinite decisiveness, and hence it is objectively in order to annul the difference between good and evil, together with the principle of contradiction [why?], and therewith also the infinite difference between the true and the false. [Why?] Only in subjectivity is there decisiveness, to seek objectivity is to be in error. [Why?] It is the passion of the infinite that is the decisive factor and not its content,

for its content is precisely itself. [??] In this manner subjectivity and the subjective “how” constitute the truth. (181)

Confronted with this dazzling demonstration, the general reader will perhaps assume that his intelligence is at fault, while at least one apologist has explained a similar passage thus: “Here we have S.K., almost with tongue in cheek, expressing himself with great precision in the terminology of that Hegelianism which he hated above all else.” (Bretall, 340) Hegel is certainly often very difficult, but I think every serious student of Hegel would admit that he did not write this kind of thing. It may be more to the point to remember that SK was then 32 years old—and made no secret of his contempt for philosophy.

In the passage cited SK argues that the content of the infinite passion is “precisely itself.” He requires eight more pages to show that “the absurd is the object of faith, and the only object that can be believed,” and another five pages to establish that the dogmas of Christianity are so absurd that they alone can be believed: “That God has existed in human form, has been born, grown up, and so forth, is surely the paradox *sensu strictissimo*, the absolute paradox.” SK argues that Christianity must be believed because (1) nothing could be more absurd and (2) the greatest passion and sincerity can be developed in believing what one knows to be absurd. The second premise is obviously false, at least as far as sincerity is concerned; and as for the first, the suggestion that Nero was God incarnate seems much more absurd than the same claim regarding Jesus; some portions of the Koran are perhaps more absurd than at least some Christian beliefs; and so forth.

SK here invites comparison with William James at his worst, in the famous essay on “The Will to Believe” where James argues with great rhetorical skill that a man who gives up his childhood beliefs because they might be wrong is like “a general informing his soldiers that it is better to keep out of battle forever than to risk a single wound,” while the man who accepts a

belief that tempts him is heroic because he takes a risk. But SK, of course, was conscious of the humor in his claim that nothing could be more absurd than what one has always believed—and that precisely for this reason nothing could be believed with greater passion.

I have argued against SK as a stylist, a religious writer, a psychologist, and a philosopher. Nor does he compare with the great masters of satire; and his humor, finally, is the indecisive humor of the romantic who is not quite sure of himself (remember SK's many pseudonyms, too) and, to permit himself a saving ambiguity, writes, to cite Bretall's happy phrase once more, "almost with tongue in cheek."

Thus spoke Brother Brash.

BROTHER BRASH's "expectoration" is indeed emphatically "preliminary" in at least two ways. First, as suggested at the outset, it reflects the vexation which should precede appropriation. To "appreciate" Kierkegaard is to betray him. He wants to be confronted, existing individual against existing individual. And secondly, Brother Brash may be considered the devil's advocate. The devil's advocate, of course, was originally an official appointed by the church to marshal all relevant objections before a person was canonized. Today many would canonize Kierkegaard as a philosopher. It is in the face of these attempts that Brother Brash has done his job. The prosecution rests.

Brother Brash must be answered. But if even the objections had to be presented in a somewhat abrupt condensation, how much more does the same consideration apply to any possible defense, seeing that criticism is always easier! Hence the reply, too, ought to be entrusted to a pseudonym; for it cannot get beyond a point of view; it cannot be formulated as an assured result, at least not short of a vastly more comprehensive discussion.

“KIERKEGAARD’S SIGNIFICANCE,”

By Brother Brief

The right defense should not rebut the strictures here assembled, but insist that they tell only half the story. However SK overestimated his achievements as a stylist, a religious writer in the sense discussed by Brother Brash, a psychologist, and a philosopher, it was clearly not his primary ambition to win fame in any of these categories, let alone to earn a place in histories of philosophy. His central category was that of the individual—as a category that cracks all other categories. “If I were to desire an inscription for my tombstone, I should desire none other than ‘That Individual.’” (*Point*, 131) And as an individual he certainly was like scarcely any other writer in world literature.

As soon as we consider his style, his religious writings, his psychology, and his philosophic efforts from the point of view of that which mattered most to SK himself, Brother Brash’s objections are seen to be of limited relevance.

In spite of his many pseudonyms, SK never disappears behind his work like Plato, Shakespeare, or Hegel. But any such self-effacing attitude appears immoral to SK. He may not have understood the seriousness of which this attitude may be born, and it was certainly presumptuous of him, if not sanctimonious, to arrogate such terms as “ethical” and “religious” almost as if they were his monopoly. But from his own point of view, his preoccupation with himself was not an all-too-human failing but the one thing needful.

His style, however aggravating, is a splendid medium for his purpose. With its epic digressions and its urgency, and even with its philosophic acrobatics, dancing on the tightrope between seriousness and satire, SK’s prose never permits us to lose ourselves in a story or an argument: we are constantly confronted with the author’s individuality—and made to think about our own.

His psychology is not a mirror psychology but a vortex psy-

chology that draws us into self-reflection against our will and never permits us to rest content with impersonal results. He makes us aware not of facts but of decisions which we have made and which we might make. He forces on us not answers but questions. He abolishes the untenable analogy of the self with an object or a brute fact that is given and solid, and replaces it with an awareness of possibilities.

His relation to philosophy is best expressed by changing one small word in Marx's famous dictum: "The philosophers have merely interpreted the world differently, but what matters is to change"—not "it," as Marx said, but ourselves.

His central idea is that Christendom has forgotten the core of Christianity—to change our hearts—and that philosophy, by no means only Hegel's, has aided and abetted Christendom in this betrayal. Brother Brash's critique does not eliminate the possibility that SK came closer to the heart of original Christianity than Hegel and Aquinas, Schleiermacher and Harnack, and the whole of liberal Protestantism. Perhaps SK understood the differentia of Christianity better than those who have given up almost everything that originally, and for centuries, distinguished Christianity, while assimilating their religion to the outlook of non-Christians.

If liberal Protestantism were right about "the essence of Christianity"—to use Harnack's phrase—then the evangelists betrayed Jesus and Christianity almost as much as Paul, and Luther and Calvin no less than the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches. Indeed, some of the most outstanding liberal Protestant scholars, notably including Albert Schweitzer, find the conclusion inescapable that Jesus himself failed to represent the essentials of Christianity—that is, of what Schweitzer and others take to be the essentials. In effect, they find the essence of Christianity in the moral teachings of the Hebrew prophets and their passionate concern with social justice, of which Schweitzer and others wistfully admit that it is absent from the New Testament

and formed no part of Jesus' teaching. Even those who prefer Schweitzer's dedication to his social and ethical conception of the kingdom to SK's preoccupation with himself cannot brush aside the question whether Schweitzer is not closer to the outlook of the prophets while SK is closer to the spirit of the New Testament. More than any other writer, SK confronts us with the question: What does it mean to be a Christian? And he does not permit us any permanent escape into history or philology. He presses us for a decision, one way or the other.

At this point his significance is not restricted to Christianity. He sees that religion without intensity is a contradiction in terms.

Essentially, then, SK is a moralist with a rare power to upset—a moralist in a perfectly recognizable sense, though one would be at a loss to find anyone else in quite the same genre. One can hardly be satisfied with him or pleased; but his greatest value may well be that he does not allow us to be satisfied or pleased with ourselves.

His philosophic significance is less clear. Brother Brash compared SK with Hegel, very much to Hegel's advantage. But do different outlooks really correspond to different stages of maturity, as Hegel argued? Surely, Hegel's dialectical "deductions" of these outlooks often lack all plausibility, and we cannot write off the religions of ancient Asia as Christianity in embryo. SK insists that we cannot escape a decision between contemporaneous possibilities. He flies in the face of all attempts to establish Christianity as the end product of a world-wide development or progressive revelation. He challenges every endeavor to establish the Christian ethic, or more likely one's own—whether one parades it under this name or not—on the basis of any form whatever of intuitionism, Kantianism, or utilitarianism. It is the necessity of decision—the central theme of Deuteronomy and the Prophets which was rediscovered by Milton in his *Areopagitica* as the great antithesis of every form of Platonism—that SK, another anti-Plato, calls to the attention of philosophers.

Perhaps Nietzsche sometimes made the same point even clearer. I recall Zarathustra's words "On Those Who Are Sublime": "You tell me, friends, that there is no disputing of tastes and tasting? But all of life is a dispute over tastes and tasting." But where Hegel had sought to reduce basic differences to different degrees of maturity, Nietzsche correlated them with more or less power; and this solution of the problem of decision distracts from the problem itself: indeed, most readers do not understand Nietzsche's solution because they do not see the problem.

I am ready to summarize SK's possible importance for philosophy in terms of a few closely related points. First, his vortex psychology with its radical revision of the popular conception of the self has led, and may yet lead, to new ways of understanding man. Secondly, Christianity has so profoundly influenced Western philosophy, especially ethics and metaphysics, that a man who changes previously accepted notions of Christianity is almost bound to affect philosophical discussion, particularly in these two fields. The works of Jaspers, Heidegger, and Sartre bear witness to both points; but SK's impulse may yet lead other philosophers into different directions. Thirdly, SK, together with Nietzsche, confronts us with the problem of decision which has been consistently avoided in almost every ethic, not to speak of metaphysics, throughout the history of Western philosophy. That both men are forerunners of existentialism is well known; that SK, like Nietzsche, is at this point close to modern positivism, too, is hardly ever recognized: if it were, there might be more hope of some *rapprochement* between these two great revolts against traditional philosophy.

Those who would credit SK with a theory, or partial but imperfect formulations of ideas, which were better formulated by Aquinas, may well underestimate their man. Against all such endeavors, and many more, Brother Brash's critique may stand; but it does not do justice to Søren Kierkegaard, "that individual."

Thus spoke Brother Brief.