

## **“Hidden Inwardness” and “Subjectivity is Truth”: Kierkegaard and Kant Again**

### Abstract

This chapter reconstructs the concept of hidden inwardness, arguing that this term refers to moral characters (and religious characters) that are expressed with deeds and words, rather than referring to a private inner world. By relying on the distinction between morality and legality, the chapter argues that “hidden inwardness” is not compatible with all kinds of behavior, and that it is better described negatively than positively. The concept of hidden inwardness need, therefore, not be as problematic as is often assumed, since it mainly involves the idea that we do not know our hearts and minds. Finally, the chapter shows that “hidden inwardness” sheds light on Kierkegaard’s (Climacus’) controversial theses “Subjectivity is truth” and “Subjectivity is untruth” in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. “Subjectivity is truth” does not involve objectionable subjectivism, but rather pragmatism about religious belief and subjective appropriation of objective ethico-religious truth.

Keywords: Kant, Kierkegaard, Legality, Morality, Moral Character, Religious Faith, Inwardness, Pragmatic Reasons for Religious Belief

### **1. Introduction**

In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard (the pseudonym Climacus) complains that we have “forgotten what it is to exist and what inwardness means” (SKS 7, 226 / CUP1, 249). Hidden inwardness is described as the true religiousness, which uses all its tricks (*Kunst*) to prevent it from being noticed (SKS 7, 430 / CUP1, 475). Still, the

meaning of “inwardness” is hardly clear, perhaps precisely because it is forgotten or hidden. In this paper, I will try to make sense of “hidden inwardness” by arguing that it concerns morality rather than legality, and character rather than actions. The idea is that our characters ground our actions, although we only know characters from actions.

Alastair Hannay describes Kierkegaard’s concept of inwardness as follows:

“Inwardness” is by no means a perfect translation of “Inderlighed”. As with Hegel’s *Innerlichkeit*, the sense is not that of inward-directedness [...] [but of] an inner warmth, sincerity, seriousness and wholeheartedness in one’s own concern for what matters, a “heartfeltness” not applied to something but which comes *from* within. However, since “inwardness” has become a standard translation for Kierkegaard’s “Inderlighed” and in this sense even finds a place in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it has been retained here.<sup>1</sup>

The Danish Wolffians and Kantians coined many Danish philosophical terms in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> *Inderlighed* in particular is a Danish equivalent of the German *Innerlichkeit* and *Innigkeit*, terms Kantians associated with the moral-religious character or disposition (*Gesinnung*) that is hidden. Although Kant repeatedly uses the term “inward [*innerlich*],”<sup>3</sup> he prefers the term *Innigkeit* instead of *Innerlichkeit*. Still, he uses

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<sup>1</sup> Alastair Hannay (2009) “Note on the Translation,” in Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*, ed. and transl. by Alastair Hannay, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, xxxvii–xl, xxxviii–xxxix.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Harald Høffding (1909) *Danske Filosofer*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 16, 21, 26f.; Søren Holm (1967) *Filosofien i Norden før 1900*, Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 13, 33–43; Anders Thuborg (1951) *Den Kantiske periode i dansk filosofi 1790-1800*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 17f., 121–49, 181; Carl H. Koch (2003) *Dansk oplysningsfilosofi 1700–1800*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal (*Den danske filosofis historie*, vol. 3).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Immanuel Kant (1999a) *The Metaphysics of Morals*, in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. by Mary Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 6:222, 6:306, 6:354, 6:357, 6:377, 6:418,

*Innigkeit*, not in the sense of intimacy, but in the sense of inwardness. For instance, he speaks of “the inwardness of a benevolent disposition [*der Innigkeit der wohlwollenden Gesinnung*]”.<sup>4</sup> Like Kierkegaard, he claims that “the outer [...] does not disclose the inwardness of the [moral] disposition [*der innern sittlichen Gesinnung*]”.<sup>5</sup> We do not know hearts and reins – neither in our own case nor in the case of others.<sup>6</sup>

It seems that instead of merely resorting to idiosyncratic terminology, Kierkegaard uses the same terms as Danish Kantians (and Fichteans) used in order to describe the distinction between the free moral disposition and intersubjective phenomena, as well as the related distinction between internal freedom (*homo noumenon*) and external freedom (independence from being constrained by another’s choice).<sup>7</sup> The distinction between the inner (*det Indvortes*) and the external (*det Udvortes*) in Kierkegaard (and Climacus in particular) seems to correspond to Kant’s distinction between the supersensible (*übersinnliche*) disposition (*Gesinnung*) and phenomena that are intersubjectively

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6:441, 6:463, 6:470. References to Kant use the volumes and pagination of Immanuel Kant (1900ff.) *Gesammelte Schriften*, vols 1–29, Berlin: Reimer, later de Gruyter.

<sup>4</sup> Kant 1999a, 6:456.

<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant (2001), *Religion within the Boundaries of Bare Reason*, in Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. and trans. by Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 6:63, cf. 6:95, 6:99. Dieter Henrich argues that in the *Inquiry concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality* Kant admired Francis Hutcheson’s recognition of the “original inwardness of the ethical [*ursprünglichen Innerlichkeit des Sittlichen*]”. See Dieter Henrich (1957/58) “Hutchinson und Kant,” *Kant-Studien* 49: 49–69, 64.

<sup>6</sup> Kant 2001, 6:47f.; cf. SKS 20, 325, NB4:78/KJN 4, 326. Kant presents his account of the disposition or character as a philosophical reconstruction of the biblical idea of that only God knows hearts and reins. See Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:438f. I prefer “hearts and reins” (King James Bible) to “hearts and minds”. The former is closer to Kant and Kierkegaard, since “reins” means not only the seat of feelings and passions but “kidneys,” like Kant’s “*Nieren*” and Kierkegaard’s “*Nyrer*”.

<sup>7</sup> For examples of how external and internal freedom were rendered inward (*indvortes*) and external (*udvortes*) freedom by the Danish Kantians and Fichteans, see Thuborg 1951, 125. My Kantian approach to inwardness in this chapter is partially anticipated by Wimmer and Palmquist. Wimmer takes Kierkegaard’s concepts of inwardness and subjectivity to correspond to Kant’s noumenal *Gesinnung*, something that is also suggested by Palmquist. Harbsmeier, by contrast, focuses on the importance of Romanticism and Pietism for Kierkegaard’s “inwardness”. See Reiner Wimmer (1990) *Kants kritische Religionsphilosophie*, Berlin: de Gruyter (*Kantstudien-Ergänzungshefte*, vol. 124), 207; Stephen Palmquist (2016) “The Paradox of Inwardness in Kant and Kierkegaard: Ronald Green’s Legacy in Philosophy of Religion,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 44 (4): 738–51; Eberhard Harbsmeier (1999) “Der Begriff der Innerlichkeit bei Søren Kierkegaard,” *Kierkegaardiana* 20: 31–50.

available, including the consequences of our acts.<sup>8</sup> For both Kant and Kierkegaard, “inwardness” refers not so much to the lower-level maxims that underlie various actions, as to the moral character (the supreme maxim) that underlies these maxims. Finally, as we will see, Kierkegaard (and the pseudonym Climacus) often reserve “inwardness” for an ethico-religious character based on neighbor-love.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Legality, Morality, and Character

Like Kant, Kierkegaard distinguishes between doing the right thing and doing the thing for the right reason. He writes: “even if people did *what* duty commands, they would still not [necessarily] be doing their duty” (SKS 10, 215 / CD, 206). *Works of Love* stresses that “No one can decide” “whether it is actually out of love” that one acts or not; “it is possible that it is vanity, pride – in short something bad, but it is also possible that it is love” (SKS 9, 367 / WL, 374).

It is clear that Kierkegaard distinguishes between *legality and morality*, between acting in accordance with the law and acting out of respect of the law. We can know the legality of actions based on experience, but we do not know their morality in any straightforward manner. Because of this, legality is compatible with egoism *and* altruism, with radical evil *and* morality.

Still, we can know that acts without legality are *not* moral. Since legality is necessary, Kierkegaard (Climacus) concludes that “the religious person’s incognito [. . .]

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kant 1999a, 6:237, 6:418, 6:340; Immanuel Kant (1999b) *Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Practical Philosophy*, 5:161. See also n12 below. Palmquist (2016, 748) argues that *Gesinnung* should be translated as “conviction” rather than “disposition” or “attitude”. However, I focus on our fundamental *Gesinnung* in the sense of our supreme maxim, which is identical to our moral character or personality.

<sup>9</sup> Judge William describes the choice of the ethical in terms of inwardness (SKS 3, 164 / EO2, 167). But his use of the term seems somewhat loose, sporadic and non-technical, whereas the use in the *Postscript* is more consistent and systematic.

does not mean that his [. . .] is the actuality of a robber, a thief, a murderer” (SKS 7,453n / CUP1, 500n).<sup>10</sup> This appears to be a formal point to the effect that one cannot possibly have the right reasons or motivation (e.g. faith) if one does the wrong thing (e.g. kill). In this sense, legality is necessary. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard (Climacus) fails to specify whether he is thinking of moral or juridical legality (i.e. whether the law in question is moral or juridical). Still, on balance we can infer that the former seems more likely than the latter, since the discussion centers on ethics, religion, and characters. The concept of ethics, both here and elsewhere in Kierkegaard, is not secular but religious, since the good and the divine are regarded as identical (SKS 4, 160 / FT, 68; SKS 6, 439 / SLW, 476; SKS 7, 133–43 / CUP1, 142–54; SKS 8, 151–3, 364/ UD, 39–41, 268).

Perhaps because he focuses on characters rather than actions (and the formal aspects of morality rather than its material aspects), Kierkegaard tends to be vague (if somewhat traditional) about the content of morality. It is therefore difficult to ascertain what accepting legality would amount to on Kierkegaardian terms. Surely, it should not mean that we always ought to accept whatever practice is established by society. Kierkegaard is clearly opposed to an ethics that justifies and deifies the established order, attributing such a view to the pseudonym Judge William.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, it is even more complicated with *characters* than actions, since characters are only know from actions (while also being the source of actions). For this reason, characters are more hidden, or less explicit, than the motives and causes of actions. For Kant, an action presupposes a lower-level maxim, which again presupposes a

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<sup>10</sup> Kierkegaard also relies on the distinction between legality and morality in his journals (SKS 23, 384, NB19:86 / KJN 7, 392). Like Kant, he even contrasts Jewish legality with Christian morality (SKS 18, 381, KK:11 / KJN 2, 348; SKS K18, 558, see also SKS 11, 196 / SUD, 82; SKS K11, 216).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Merold Westphal (2014) *Kierkegaard's Concept of Faith*, Grand Rapid: Eerdmans, 48f.

character (supreme maxim). Indeed, Kant describes the character as a disposition (*Gesinnung*), which is supersensible and therefore not directly accessible to us.<sup>12</sup>

Kierkegaard also denies that we have any direct access to our own disposition or character (although he seems less explicit about whether the disposition is supersensible).

Like Kant, Kierkegaard insists that we have an unconditional obligation to be moral, irrespectively of how others act towards us. Still, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to avoid assumptions about our moral characters and personalities. In many situations, for instance, we need to choose who we are to trust and who we should not. It seems impossible to do this, unless there is a way to distinguish a life of virtue from evil that stays within the bounds of legality. It thus seems that inwardness cannot be entirely hidden. Jack Mulder writes:

[T]he problem with hidden inwardness is not that it is inward, the problem with hidden inwardness is that it is *hidden*. To hide something one necessarily contains it. And this is the problem. An inwardness that confines itself (in order not to be seen for what it is) is not in fact inwardness, but negative outwardness.<sup>13</sup>

An entirely hidden inwardness seems to be a false inwardness, a negative outwardness.

Kant thinks that we need many observations in order to confirm that someone has a moral

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<sup>12</sup> Kant 2001, 6:63, 6:67; Robert B. Louden (2002) *Kant's Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 136, 152. See also n8. In his 1833–34 lecture notes, Kierkegaard refers to Kant's view of the moral rebirth, whereby moral character is established. See SKS 19, 57, Not1:7 / KJN 3, 52.

<sup>13</sup> Jack Mulder, jr. (2000) "Re-Radicalizing Kierkegaard: An Alternative to Religiousness C in Light of an Investigation into the Teleological Suspension of the Ethical," *Continental Philosophy Review* 35: 303-24, 317.

character, but only one observation to know that there is no (moral) character.<sup>14</sup> One act without legality (e.g. killing) indicates an underlying evil character, whereas acts that appear good need not involve a good character.<sup>15</sup>

Like Kant, Kierkegaard holds some acts to be incompatible with morality (and genuine religiousness). *Works of Love*, which provides a notable example, describes several types of behavior that are incompatible with neighbor-love. In the case of bitter mockery, poisonous distrust, and cold callousness, he says that “it will be recognizable from the fruits that there is no love within” (SKS 9, 15 / WL, 7). And someone who accuses and condemns others is thereby said to reveal and condemn himself indirectly (SKS 9, 373f. / WL, 380f.).<sup>16</sup> After this, Kierkegaard emphasizes that one must forgive one’s neighbor if one is to be forgiven by God, since “the forgiveness you give is the forgiveness you receive” (SKS 9, 373 / WL, 380).

Furthermore, he adds: “[T]here is nothing, no ‘thus and so,’ that can unconditionally be said to demonstrate unconditionally the presence of love or to demonstrate unconditionally its absence.” (SKS 9, 22 / WL, 14).<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, Kantians could concede that there is nothing that unconditionally demonstrates the presence of charity (practical love). Still, some acts *are* incompatible with morality (e.g. murder) and would seem to demonstrate the absence of love (given sanity and accountability). Despite this, Kierkegaard is probably right that the absence or presence of love cannot be

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<sup>14</sup> Immanuel Kant (1923) “Reflexionen zur Anthropologie,” in Kant 1900ff., 15:55–654, especially 15:541, *Reflexion* 1230; cf. 15:526, *Reflexion* 1191; Kant 2001, 6:20, 6:68.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Kant 2001, 6:71, 6:63. This presupposes the doctrine of moral rigorism at the level of character, i.e. that characters are either good or evil. See 6:22–5.

<sup>16</sup> *Practice in Christianity* makes a similar point by claiming that condemning a Christian for confessing his faith, is to condemn yourself (SKS 12, 215f. / PC, 220).

<sup>17</sup> Ferreira writes that “inner does not always reveal outer and vice versa. [...] Any act can be done lovingly or unlovingly.” M. Jamie Ferreira (2001) *Love’s Grateful Striving: A Commentary on Kierkegaard’s Works of Love*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 253.

demonstrated unconditionally with a single proof or consideration. To know this we would not only need to know the nature of an individual act, but also the relevant context, intentions, reasons, causes, and whether the person was sane or not. We need not only an act, but also a purposive action that is grounded in moral character. We must then rely on inferences from the outer to the inner that involve judgments that are uncertain, as Kant points out.<sup>18</sup> These judgments are conditioned on many different fallible considerations about the agent and the context, as Kierkegaard in turn suggests (SKS 9, 15 / WL, 8f.).

In the case of neighbor-love, Kierkegaard contrasts the hiddenness of love with its visible fruits (SKS 9, 15ff. / WL, 8ff.). Words and deeds indicate something about the underlying disposition or character, even if the character is hidden. Rather than being absolutely hidden, inwardness is the disposition or character that grounds ethico-religious actions.<sup>19</sup> The “inner” and “inward” – “*det Indvortes*” and “*det Inderlige*” – therefore do not need to refer to a private, inner space, life, or experience that is available through introspection. (For this reason, the translation of “*det Indvortes*” as “the inner world” seems questionable. See SKS 3, 96 / EO2, 94.)

Still, “inwardness” is better described negatively than positively, because it is easier to make the case that “inwardness” is lacking than to make the case that it exists. The concept of hidden inwardness need, then, not be as problematic as it seems, since it mainly involves the broadly Christian and Kantian idea that we do not know the hearts and reins of others – or even ourselves.<sup>20</sup> It is only God, as a scrutinizer (knower) of

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<sup>18</sup> Kant 2001, 6:63-7; Louden 2002, 136-52.

<sup>19</sup> The exception to this is the private revelations discussed in *Fear and Trembling* and *The Book on Adler*. By definition, such revelations are private, even if they involve inwardness and lead to outward acts (e.g. the sacrifice of Isaac). *The Book on Adler* discusses whether Adler’s deeds and words are compatible with a putative private revelation, something Kierkegaard denies.

<sup>20</sup> See n6.

hearts, who knows our innermost being (SKS 10, 244 / CD, 237), including whether we have attained inwardness or not.<sup>21</sup> Gordon Michalson comments:

[J]ust as there is a noumenal shield protecting the Kierkegaardian object of faith, there is a corresponding noumenal shield protecting the inner recesses of this all-important subject of faith, the true disciple. This becomes clear in Kierkegaard's claim that we can never truly "know" or recognize an authentically religious person, the presumptions of Christendom notwithstanding. The Kantian attitude toward the profound concealment of the true moral worth of another person is recapitulated almost exactly in Kierkegaard's idea of the "knight of faith," whose identity remains forever hidden from the scrutiny of others.<sup>22</sup>

Yet, Kierkegaard does not seem to accept Kant's transcendental idealism.<sup>23</sup> But he does accept associated Kantian ideas about the finitude and limits of human cognition, denying that we can have knowledge of the *Gesinnung* in particular and the supersensual in general (as suggested by Platonists and rationalists). He also accepts Kant's related critique of theoretical proofs for the existence of God. Even if Kierkegaard is not a

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<sup>21</sup> Harbsmeier 1999, 31ff.

<sup>22</sup> Gordon Michalson (1985) *Lessing's "Ugly Ditch": A Study of Theology and History*, London and University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 90. Marilyn Piety writes: "Kierkegaard clearly holds something like a Kantian view of the relation between the phenomenal and noumenal view of a person. This view can be found, for example, in the section of *Either-Or Part II* entitled "The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage." It may be challenging to make sense of how the phenomenal and noumenal aspects of a person can be brought together in such a way as to preserve human freedom, but Kant asserts they can be, and Kierkegaard appears to follow Kant in this respect. In fact, Kierkegaard distinguishes between "rationalism" and "naturalism" in a journal entry that examines this aspect of Kant's thought (SKS 19, 159 [Not 4:11 / KJN 3, 139f.])." See Marilyn G. Piety (2017) "Kierkegaard on Nature and Miracles: A Reply to Hampson," <https://pietyonkierkegaard.com/tag/kierkegaard-on-kant/> (2018/02/01).

<sup>23</sup> Ulrich Knappe (2004) *Theory and Practice in Kant and Kierkegaard*, Berlin: de Gruyter (*Kierkegaard Studies. Monograph Series*, vol. 9), chs. 1–2; Roe Fremstedal (2014) *Kierkegaard and Kant on Radical Evil and the Highest Good: Virtue, Happiness, and the Kingdom of God*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 229.

transcendental idealist, he nevertheless accepts broadly Kantian points about the limits and finitude of human cognition, sketched by Kant in *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* prior to his more celebrated transcendental idealism in *The Critique of Pure Reason*.

### 3. Did Kierkegaard's View of Inwardness Change?

Many scholars have pointed out that Kierkegaard's earlier works tend to defend hidden inwardness, whereas his later works tend to attack it.<sup>24</sup> In 1846, he in the guise of Climacus calls for inwardness, whereas he takes up the persona of Anti-Climacus when he calls for outwardness in 1850.<sup>25</sup> Kierkegaard sketches the following historical narrative. First, Medieval Christianity over-emphasizes outwardness by privileging the monasteries. As a corrective, Protestantism and the *Postscript* emphasize worldliness and inwardness. Finally, Kierkegaard's later writings react against the latter by stressing outwardness in the form of Christian suffering, martyrdom and imitation of Christ (cf. SKS 22, 241, NB12:162 / KJN 6, 243; SKS 23, 435, NB20:74 / KJN 7, 443; SKS 24, 368, NB24:78; KJN 8, 373; SKS K26, 243).

The late Kierkegaard is worried that Christendom uses "hidden inwardness" as an excuse for moral laxness and mere legality. If inwardness is essentially hidden, nobody can know whether I am moral or not. Keeping up appearances, or negative outwardness, would suffice. To counteract moral laxness, the late Kierkegaard emphasizes the moral need for action and for renouncing self-interest, holding that neighbor-love must either

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<sup>24</sup> Joachim Bold (2006) *Kierkegaards "Furcht und Zittern" als Bild seines ethischen Erkenntnisbegriffs*, Berlin: de Gruyter (*Kierkegaard Studies. Monograph Series*, vol. 13), 108ff. referencing Garff and others.

<sup>25</sup> Ferreira 2001, 254. Even Anti-Climacus is originally described as an extraordinaire Christian in hidden inwardness. See Pap. X-6 B48 / JP 6, 6349.

express itself outwardly or die.<sup>26</sup> Although love as such is hidden, its presence is still indicated by its visible fruits (SKS 9, 15ff. / WL, 8ff.). Christian discipleship in particular involves confessions, suffering, and martyrdom that is polemical against worldliness. The late Kierkegaard therefore stresses the scandalous nature of Christianity as a corrective against “hidden inwardness”. Nevertheless, this change in use of the term need not involve a radical change of theoretical position; it is best considered a change of emphasis, which counteracts the misuse of “hidden inwardness” in Christendom.

In 1844, Kierkegaard (now using the persona of Haufniensis) stresses that inwardness is *in* action, and that inwardness can only be achieved *through* action (SKS 4, 439 / CA, 138). In 1846, he (now as Climacus) admits that inwardness without outwardness can easily involve self-deception (SKS 7, 369 / CUP1, 406). Nevertheless, inwardness as such cannot be seen or contemplated, since it can only be expressed or realized (SKS 7, 292 / CUP1, 320). For this reason, the point is that inwardness can only be achieved through ethico-religious words and deeds.

#### **4. Inwardness and Second-Order Volitions**

Judge William describes “the inner [*det Indvortes*]” as a “will [that] is directed towards itself” (SKS 3, 96 / EO2, 94). Rather than referring to an “inner world” (Hongs’ translation), *det Indvortes* are second-order volitions, wills to will something. It does not concern first-order volitions (that is, the different objects or events I desire). Rather, it concerns my will (or desire) to act on first-order volitions (or desires) or not. Putting it in Kantian terms, it requires different incentives (*Triebfedern*) that are prioritized and incorporated into my maxim by the power of choice (*Willkür*). Putting it in contemporary

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<sup>26</sup> Ferreira 2001, 253; cf. Palmquist 2016.

terms, “the inner” concerns *volitional identification* with, or alienation from, first-order volitions and desires. This second-order volition also separates selfhood (and spirit) from human nature, since the self is a reflexive self-relation that relates actively to the human synthesis (of necessity and freedom, finitude and infinitude) by identifying with some first-order states, while alienating itself from other such states (SKS 11, 129 / SUD, 13).<sup>27</sup>

In this respect, “inwardness” is like “the inner” and selfhood, since all these concepts concern second-order volitions. Still, not just any second-order volition or desire would qualify as genuine inwardness or authentic selfhood. Proper inwardness and selfhood requires unconditional ethico-religious commitments that are *long-term*, by being grounded on one’s very character. For this reason, Judge William describes the categorical choice of the ethical in terms of inwardness (SKS 3,164 / EO2, 167), whereas Climacus reserves inwardness for natural religion and Christian faith. Both see it, however, as being based in one’s fundamental attitude towards one’s life as a whole

Inwardness can then be interpreted either as a perfect moral character or as a character that is fundamentally committed towards morality by wholeheartedly engaging in self-improvement. At least, one must be unconditionally striving for the good if one is to achieve wholeheartedness (SKS 8, 139f. / UD, 24). The process of moral improvement can be interpreted both as a never-ending temporal process of reform (a process of sanctification that gradually improves moral behavior), or as a sudden rebirth or conversion at the level of character. Unlike many pietists, Kierkegaard thinks that it is unimportant to specify a point in time for conversion.<sup>28</sup> He emphasizes that being good is

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<sup>27</sup> See John Davenport (2013) “Selfhood and Spirit,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, ed. by John Lippitt and Georg Pattison (eds), 230–51.

<sup>28</sup> SKS 10, 225 / CD, 217; Patrick Stokes (2015) *The Naked Self: Kierkegaard and Personal Identity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 213.

a never-ending task, and that it is always possible to lapse back into evil. Judge William describes the process of moral improvement in terms of human effort, whereas Kierkegaard focuses on the dialectics between human effort and divine grace (which is not irresistible). As we will see, even Climacus, who is a mere humorist, sees moral improvement and eternal happiness, as lying beyond our human ability.

##### **5. Irony and Humor in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript***

Kierkegaard (Climacus) does not just connect religiousness to “hidden inwardness,” but also to humor. Religious inwardness is not entirely hidden but expressed as humor, whereas the ethical is expressed as irony (SKS 7, 457ff. / CUP1, 504ff.). Irony here refers to a specific way of existing that requires (1) legality (a point that seems implicit); (2) personal awareness of unconditional moral responsibility; and (3) that one ironically comprehends all the relativities of life by seeing the conflict between the infinite ethical requirement and everything finite or relative (SKS 7, 455–8 / CUP1, 502–5). Not only does irony require first-order representation of the ethical task and reality, but it also requires a second-order representation of how these first-order representations conflict. Nevertheless, the ethicist goes beyond mere irony by being unconditionally committed towards morality. Since we cannot verify if someone is fully committed towards morality, we cannot then know whether he is an ethicist or a mere ironist.

Humor, on the other hand, goes beyond irony (although it may presuppose it) by requiring that one “joins the conception of God together with everything [else] and [then] sees the contradiction” (SKS 7, 458 / CUP1, 505). Instead of focusing on the conflict between ethical ideals and reality, the humorist focuses on the conflict between a

transcendent (or hidden) God and reality. Humor requires not only first-order representations of God and everything else, but also a second-order representation of how these first-order representations conflict.

Still, humor does not require inwardness (SKS 7, 458ff. / CUP1, 505ff.). Neither does it require theistic belief, since humor need not involve natural religion or Christian faith (SKS 7, 483n / CUP1, 531f.n); the mere humorist is said to have an abstract relation to God (SKS 7, 408n / CUP1, 448n). Presumably, he relies on a regulative idea of God as a transcendent idea,<sup>29</sup> or sees God as possible rather than actual.

Nevertheless, humor does require the concept of infinite guilt. “Infinite guilt” is the rigorist idea that any immoral action involves total guilt. Any moral failure involves a radical and essential failure, not a partial one.<sup>30</sup> To the humorist, any finite human attempt to improve the human condition appears to be a jest, given the infinite ethical task (or God’s will) and our infinite guilt.<sup>31</sup> The humorist is aware of “infinite guilt,” but he revokes it with jest, despite being committed towards morality. He has some awareness of his guilt but does not take it seriously, something that separates him from the religious believer who sees himself as infinitely guilty and therefore totally in need of divine forgiveness. But since we cannot verify if someone is a believer or serious about his personal guilt, religiousness expresses itself as humor that takes as its object the contrast between God and world.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Kierkegaard’s notes from H.L. Martensen’s lectures refer explicitly to the regulative status of God as a transcendent ideal that we should strive to approximate. See SKS 19, 140, Not4:11 / KJN 3, 139.

<sup>30</sup> Fremstedal 2014, ch. 2. See also n15 on Kant’s doctrine of moral rigorism at the level of character.

<sup>31</sup> John Lippitt (2000) *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 94.

<sup>32</sup> Neither the religious believer nor the ethicist want to appear better outwardly than other humans do. See C. Stephen Evans (1999) *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript: The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus*, New York: Humanity, 193, 205.

Unlike *Either/Or*, the *Postscript* is clear that inwardness requires religious suffering. Both natural religion and Christian religiousness require religious suffering, in which one suffers by virtue of being separated from the highest good (eternal happiness), one's final end.<sup>33</sup> By its very nature, the highest good is impossible to realize fully in this life (as Augustine maintained),<sup>34</sup> which results in the fact that faith in it cannot find a suitable external expression either (SKS 7, 446 / CUP1, 492). While happiness and virtue coexist in the afterlife, this is not the case in this life. For this reason, in the *Postscript* Kierkegaard (Climacus) claims: "the specific sign that one relates oneself to the absolute [*telos*, the highest good] is that not only is there no reward to expect but suffering to endure." (SKS 7, 366 / CUP1, 402, cf. SKS 5, 326–8 / EUD, 337–9) Suffering involves both general passivity and more specific *Qual* (agony, anguish, or torment). We are passive insofar as we cannot save ourselves, being dependent on divine assistance in order to realize the highest good.<sup>35</sup> We are subject to *Qual* insofar as we experience injustice, hardship, or loneliness, since virtue in this life guarantees neither happiness nor the communion of the saints.

Suffering requires relinquishing our natural tendency to relate unconditionally or absolutely to finite, lesser goods. Only the highest good, eternal happiness, has unconditional and infinite value.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, this means that we must give up our self-assertiveness and pride, and accept our passivity, since we are not capable of saving

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<sup>33</sup> Merold Westphal (1996) *Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 161–5.

<sup>34</sup> John D. Glenn, Jr. (1997) "'A Highest Good ... An Eternal Happiness': The Human Telos in Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*," in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to 'Philosophical Fragments'*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press (*International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 12), 247–62; Fremstedal 2014, chs. 4–9.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Westphal 1996, 161.

<sup>36</sup> Evans 1999, 168–73; Westphal 1996, 158–65.

ourselves. We are not even able to understand sin without Christian revelation (SKS 7, 483–5 / CUP1, 532–4; SKS 11, 197–213 / SUD, 83–101).

## 6. “Subjectivity is Truth” – *and* Untruth

The concept of hidden inwardness sheds light on the controversial theses “Subjectivity is truth” and “Subjectivity is untruth” in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Indeed, the former thesis is formulated “Subjectivity, inwardness, is truth” (SKS 7, 186f. / CUP1, 204), whereas the latter is described as a more inward expression of the former (SKS 7, 189 / CUP1, 207). Note that Kierkegaard (Climacus) is not giving a general account (or theory) of truth here. He is only concerned with the cognition of truth *essential* to ethical and religious existence (SKS 7, 181 / CUP1, 197f.). It seems he is concerned, therefore, with moral and religious epistemology, with how we know ethico-religious truth that is needed in order to exist truthfully, without despair or self-deception.

A straightforward reading takes these two theses to refer to the subjective appropriation of objective truth (i.e. truth that holds independently of the subject’s response to it).<sup>37</sup> Truth is then subjective insofar as an individual appropriates (objective) truth (cf. SKS 7, 176, 186, 220f. / CUP1, 192, 203, 242), presumably by identifying volitionally with it and by acting upon it. Conversely, subjectivity is untruth insofar as one alienates oneself volitionally from objective truth, thereby failing to act on it. Both volitional identification and alienation involve second-order volition, since (as we have seen that) inwardness does. The terminology here is similar to Kant’s use of subjective and objective principles in ethics. Whereas the moral law is an objective principle, our

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<sup>37</sup> Thanks to Jörg Disse who suggested this interpretation at the August 2017 SKC conference. Thanks are also due to the other participants for comments and discussion of an earlier version of this chapter.

maxims are subjective principles which we act on. We only exist in truth then if our subjective principles are based on objective ones.

In ethics, Kierkegaard (Climacus) is an anti-consequentialist who thinks that the moral worth of actions lies in the will or intention behind an action, not in its consequences (SKS 7, 270n / CUP1, 296n). Ulrich Knappe comments: “The ‘how’ to which Kierkegaard refers characterizes the subjective or motivational aspect of a moral action and [...] the how is in truth if it denotes an act from duty”.<sup>38</sup> On this Kantian interpretation, the subjective aspect of moral action can only be said to be true if we act from duty, if the motivational reasons are also normative reasons. The “how” then refers to the inwardness of the moral agent. This is not a secular point, but rather an ethico-religious one, since Kierkegaard identifies the good and the divine as the same thing.

“Subjectivity is truth” and “Subjectivity is untruth,” then, concerns the subjective, phenomenological aspects of objective ethico-religious truth; that is, they concern how objective, ethico-religious ideals appear in the first-person perspective of an agent. The agent either identifies with these ideals or alienates himself from them. But even the acknowledgement that “Subjectivity is untruth” involves inwardness insofar as one acknowledges personal failure by being conscious of one’s state of sin. Indeed, “Subjectivity is untruth” is more inward than “Subjectivity is truth,” since inwardness lies not in human perfection without God, but in human sin-consciousness before God.

A subjectivist reading may give a literal account of “Subjectivity is truth,” but it is hard to see how it can account for “subjectivity is untruth,” and why the latter is described in terms of sin (in the Christian sense). It also overlooks the assumed correspondence between the subjective “how” and the objective “what” (SKS 22, 414,

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<sup>38</sup> Knappe 2004, 84n.

NB14:121 / KJN 6, 420), as well as Kierkegaard's (Climacus') denial that he is giving a general account of truth. Both here and elsewhere, Kierkegaard (Climacus) presupposes a notion of truth that is not relativistic. For instance, he presupposes that there is a true God, an eternal happiness, and an ethical task. Take for example this notorious passage:

If someone who lives in the midst of Christianity enters, with knowledge of the true idea of God, [...] the house of the true God, and prays, but prays in untruth, and if someone lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all the passion of infinity, although his eyes are resting upon the image of an idol—where, *then*, is there more truth? The one prays in truth to God although he is worshipping an idol; the other prays in untruth to the true God and is therefore in truth worshipping an idol. (SKS 7, 184 / CUP1, 201)

This passage suggests that the best is a Christian who prays sincerely (in truth) to the true God. The second best is a sincere pagan who prays in truth to an idol. The third best is an insincere Christian who prays to the right God wrongly. The worst is an insincere pagan who prays to an idol wrongly. The passage thus distinguishes between subjective and objective aspects of faith. Merold Westphal argues that the subjective “how” here refers to the faith whereby we believe, a faith that can be either sincere or insincere. By contrast, the objective “what” refers to doctrine that is believed. “Subjectivity is truth,” therefore, implies that dogmas are less important than the faith whereby we believe.<sup>39</sup> Simple-minded although sincere believers who are confused about religious doctrine are preferable to insincere believers who have got the dogmas right. Having the right inward

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<sup>39</sup> Westphal 2014, 163.

disposition is more important than holding exactly the right beliefs. The latter would privilege elite theologians, whereas the former is universally available to all humans.

Still, the *Postscript* goes further by connecting subjective truth to a pragmatic argument (or pragmatic reasons) for religious belief. In the middle of the discussion of “Truth is Subjectivity,” the *Postscript* sketches a pragmatic argument for postulating God that is reminiscent of Kant’s God-postulate (SKS 7, 183n / CUP1, 200n).<sup>40</sup> Pragmatic arguments involve subjective, practical justifications for belief that are not warranted by evidence, something that is found in Kant, Kierkegaard, and the American Pragmatists.<sup>41</sup>

The *Postscript* describes subjective truth as “*objective uncertainty*” held fast in the “*most passionate inwardness*” of faith (SKS 7, 186 / CUP1, 203). Objective uncertainty implies insufficient evidence from the epistemic perspective. We cannot possibly have sufficient objective knowledge of the existence of God and immortality (eternal happiness), since such knowledge lies beyond the limits of human cognition. Any evidence for God and immortality is therefore insufficient rather than irrelevant.

Still, pragmatists argue that we can have decisive practical reasons for settling the matter, in much the same way that Kant argues that we must postulate God and immortality on moral grounds, since this is an urgent matter that must be decided upon to ensure that our moral motivation does not erode. The *Postscript* defends religious faith as self-defense (*Nødverge*) against despair (SKS 7, 183n / CUP1, 200n), something that anticipates the analysis in *Sickness unto Death*, according to which only genuine religious faith avoids despair consistently (SKS 11, 195f. / SUD, 81). This is a *reductio ad*

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<sup>40</sup> See the discussion in Fremstedal 2014, ch. 6.

<sup>41</sup> This involves a much weaker subjectivism than the relativistic subjectivism discussed previously. For Kierkegaard’s pragmatism about religious belief, see C. Stephen Evans (1982) *Subjectivity and Religious Belief: An Historical, Critical Study*, Washington, DC: University Press of America; Steven Emmanuel (1996) *Kierkegaard and the Concept of Revelation*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

*absurdum* of the alternative to faith, but the absurdity does not so much take the form of a formal contradiction (although despair involves two conflicting wills – see SKS 8, 144 / UD, 30), but is rather an existential absurdity in the form of hopelessness and despair.

The *Postscript* claims that “Christianity is a perfect fit” if “subjectivity is truth,” since the Christian “paradox and [human] passion [thereby] fit each other perfectly” (SKS 7, 210 / CUP1, 230). Putting it differently, there is a “how” that only fits one object (SKS 22, 414, NB14:121 / KJN 6, 420; SKS K22, 528). This correspondence between the “how” and the “what” rules out relativistic subjectivism. The “how” is represented by passion and the maximum of religious inwardness (SKS 7, 210, 554–9 / CUP1, 230, 610–6; SKS 22, 414, NB14:121 / KJN 6, 420). By contrast, the “what” is represented both by the paradox, in the Christological sense of being both human and divine (SKS 7, 210 / CUP1, 230), and by “eternal happiness” (SKS 7, 354–9, 388 / CUP1, 389–94, 426f.), a synthesis of virtue and happiness associated with the kingdom of God.<sup>42</sup> The object of faith, the “what,” therefore, represents Christian doctrine, whereas the “how” concerns the faith whereby we believe. Faith is therefore assumed to fit the doctrines of the incarnation and the kingdom of God as the highest good.

Christian doctrine is not based on human needs or natural theology alone, however. Still, belief in Christian revelation is justified on pragmatic grounds as something that fits a natural need by making it possible to overcome despair. Despite the lack of evidence, religious belief is justifiable. Such pragmatism remains controversial, although it is not always clear that beliefs should only be based on sufficient evidence.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Glenn 1997, 260f.; Fremstedal 2014, chs. 5–9.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Andrew Chignell (2013) “The Ethics of Belief,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2013 ed., Edward Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/ethics-belief>; C. Stephen Evans (2014), “Moral Arguments for the Existence of God,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,

## 7. Conclusion

“Subjectivity is truth” and “hidden inwardness” represent two of Kierkegaard’s most controversial contributions to European philosophy and theology. Whereas “Subjectivity is truth” gives the impression of objectionable subjectivism, “hidden inwardness” seem to involve either a private, inner domain or a “negative outwardness” (Mulder). Still, this chapter indicates that these two ideas are not as problematic as they may seem if we employ a charitable, Kantian reading of Kierkegaard. More specifically, “Subjectivity is truth” involves pragmatism about religious belief and subjective appropriation of objective truth. “Hidden inwardness,” by contrast, describes an ethico-religious character that is only indirectly available to us through its expressions in words and deeds.

This chapter does not prove that Kant influences Kierkegaard,<sup>44</sup> but it does indicate that it is possible to make sense of the concept of hidden inwardness and the thesis that “Subjectivity is truth,” and that these ideas are largely defensible, if we rely on a Kantian reading of Kierkegaard. This is not to say that Kierkegaard must only be read along Kantian lines, although he does accept pragmatism about religious belief and what amounts to a broadly Kantian view about the limits of human cognition.<sup>45</sup>

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Summer 2014 ed., Edward Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/moral-arguments-god>.

<sup>44</sup> For a recent discussion of Kant’s influence on Kierkegaard, see Fremstedal 2014, ch. 11.

<sup>45</sup> This chapter limits itself to key elements that seem necessary in order to reconstruct “hidden inwardness” and “Subjectivity is truth”. It does not try to exhaust these two ideas or intend to do full justice to the rich, multifaceted use of them in Kierkegaard’s corpus. For a different, less Kantian, approach to “inwardness” in the 1843–46 writings, see Matthias Engmann (2017) *Innerlichkeit. Struktur- und praxistheoretische Perspektiven auf Kierkegaards Existenzdenken*, Berlin: de Gruyter (*Kierkegaard Studies. Monograph Series*, vol. 36). See also Christian Tolstrup (2016) “Inwardness/Inward Deepening” in *Kierkegaard's Concepts: Individual to Novel*, ed. by Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald and Jon Stewart, London: Routledge (*Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, vol. 15, tome IV), 33–8.