

Kierkegaard and Truth as Subjectivity¹ **Stephen James Minton**

"So it goes on, and once I'm dead, men's eyes will be opened; they will admire what I wanted to do."

(Kierkegaard, 1996; from *Papirer* ; Entry 46 VII I A 98 (1846)).

Although Kierkegaard's works were practically ignored during his lifetime, his works have become, over the last century, increasingly cited as influential in theology and philosophy; and, over the last forty years especially, psychology and existential psychotherapy. Amongst the first of the many who would now claim to have had their 'eyes opened' by Kierkegaard were philosophers who were later to be identified as being of the phenomenological and existential schools. Mary Warnock (1970) counts Kierkegaard, along with Nietzsche, as an 'ethical predecessor' of existential philosophy, which in turn is characterised by the aim of its thinkers being not only to explore the notion of human freedom – for much non-existential philosophy has been devoted to this – but to show people that they *are* free, via the attempt to 'rescue' readers from various 'illusions'. For Kierkegaard, this illusion was *absolute objective certainty*. Although Kierkegaard did not seek to *deny* objective, propositional truth, he did attempt to emphasise the importance of subjective truth over it, at least so far as in the truths that are most influential in a person's life (and hence for Kierkegaard, in the sphere of religion). For instance, I can demonstrate that two items plus two items will equal four items - this fact is objectively true – but I can never be *objectively certain* as to whether something of my consciousness will be preserved after my physical death. Significantly, this second proposition is far more likely to concern me; and my only possible means of absolute reconciliation here is *faith*: a passionate commitment to a subjective truth held in the face of objective uncertainty, which becomes ontologically primal for me, colouring all subsequent truth judgements. To reformulate, using Kierkegaard's own words:

"When subjectivity, inwardness is the truth, the truth becomes objectively a paradox; and the fact that truth is objectively a paradox shows in its turn that subjectivity is the truth.... The paradoxical character of the truth is its objective uncertainty. This uncertainty is the expression for passionate inwardness, and this passion is precisely the truth." (Kierkegaard, 1845a).

Kierkegaard's focus on 'truth as subjectivity' – now all so familiar to us from the realms of the later existentialist philosophy² – was originally arrived at in his attempts to stake out the Christian's faith relationship to God (Kierkegaard 1844, 1845a and 1845b).³ Hegel, like Kant before him, had sought to understand religion within the framework of reason, but Kierkegaard's overall aim was to assert the primacy of faith over reason, and thus to do away with the Hegelian notions of the 'Absolute Spirit' as a manifestation of rational human consciousness, and Christianity as an expression of his philosophy of history (cf. Kierkegaard, 1843a , 1845a, 1996, Vardy, 1996). Be this through philosophical means, or through political and theological scripts, it remained

¹ A longer version of this paper can be found on the *Practical Philosophy* web site at <http://www.practical-philosophy.org.uk>

² The source of this emphasis in existential philosophy, it must be stated, is far more directly attributable (and, as we shall see, significantly so) to the influence of Husserlian phenomenology than Kierkegaard's writing, which remained curiously obscure to a sizeable majority of the existentialist philosophers (with the notable exceptions of Heidegger and Tillich).

³ The nature of Christian faith was extensively explored elsewhere by Kierkegaard - his arguments along these lines, for instance, are also expanded in *'Fear and Trembling'* (1843b) and *'The Sickness Until Death'* (1849).

Kierkegaard's life-long aim to recover Christianity's position from being, to use Hannay's (1992) words, "just one more item on the agenda of finitude".

Objective uncertainty was very much part of Kierkegaard's early personal life: between the childhood bereavements, his often strained relationships with his father and brother, and especially his ill-fated affair with Regine, little (other than his oft-quoted melancholia and his fervent literary productivity) remained stable. For Kierkegaard, life (most of all, his own, but also that of 'the individual' that he hoped would one day understand him) was a process of becoming: for him, the central tenet, personally as well as philosophically, was Christian faith. Kierkegaard's pseudonyms served not only a philosophical purpose; in most, aspects of himself and his development were echoed therein. For example, in the 'young man' of *Stages on Life's Way*, 'A', the aesthete of 'Either-Or', 'Johannes Climacus', the 'author' of *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, and 'Johannes de silentio' ('author' of *Fear and Trembling*), we see the inwardness of the student Kierkegaard - ever-questioning, ever-doubting, in transition from his inherited (his father's) version of faith to that of his own. In 'Judge Vilhelm' (the 'ethicist' of 'Either-Or'), we see some self-consolation, or maybe self-torment, in the accounts of the ethically fulfilling married life that had one time seemed open to him. In 'Anti-Climacus' (the 'author' of *The Sickness Unto Death*), we see a self-imposing of a limit, perhaps, to the level of Christianity to which Kierkegaard could aspire:

"....whereas Johannes Climacus places himself so low that he even says that he himself is not a Christian, one seems to be able to detect in Anti-Climacus⁴ that he considers himself to be a Christian on an extraordinarily high level.... I would place myself higher than Johannes Climacus, lower than Anti-Climacus." (from *Søren Kierkegaard's Papirer*, in H.V. Hong and Edna H. Hong's footnotes to *Philosophical Fragments* (Kierkegaard, 1844)).

When Kierkegaard questioned life, after he exhausted the books of his youthful studies, he returned to look within; when he questioned faith (which Kierkegaard saw, as we have seen, as an absolute pre-requisite of an ethically-fulfilling life) – after venting his spleen at Hegel – he looked within also. On a personal level, Kierkegaard trusted his individual subjective truth – in the matters of the most critical importance - and encouraged his reader to do so.

One of the major challenges, though, of the notion of 'truth as subjectivity' (and, in a wider sense, existential philosophy in general) is its necessary focus on the *individual*. Whilst this, to its adherents, might form part of the aesthetic appeal of existential philosophy and literature, and most people would accept that human beings are indeed individuals, it is not easy (or, indeed, necessarily useful) to discard objectivity entirely. For the fact is, that although we are capable of thinking our own thoughts, feeling our own feelings, and living our own lives, very often we disappear into the 'mass': we "identify ourselves with a group or sect and think their thoughts and accept their standards" (Warnock, 1970). Here, Nietzsche would probably have chided us for succumbing to the 'herd mentality'; the early Sartre, too, would have been equally unforgiving, dismissing our denial of our own individual freedom as 'bad faith' (c.f. Sartre, 1943).⁵ In a way,

⁴ *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849) is a phenomenological account of the Christian ideal of direct accountability to God in this life, and the desirability of the sickness (denial, despair and refusal) that accompanies the possibility of such spiritual development through selflessness.

though, it is refreshing to find that Kierkegaard was never as uncompromising in his focus on the individual (or, indeed, truth as subjectivity) as the existential philosophers who followed him. To hold something passionately and deeply is not enough to make it true; Vardy (1996) notes that if this were the case, there would be no way of distinguishing someone who has faith from someone who has madness, and that it is here that Kierkegaard finds a place for the objective approach to truth:

"... the objective way deems itself to have a security which the subjective way does not have (and, of course, existence and existing cannot be thought in combination with objective security); it thinks to escape a danger which threatens the subjective way and this danger is at its maximum: madness. In a merely subjective determination of the truth, madness and truth become in the last analysis indistinguishable." (Kierkegaard, 1845a).

So, in order to avoid the pitfalls of nihilism and ethical insensibility that spring from an overly individualistic or subjective focus, it may well be beneficial to carefully consider Kierkegaard's acknowledgement of the sometime advantages of the objective approach to truth. One is, of course, free (!) to follow the extremes of the individualistic / subjective approach to truth, and the subsequent implications for freedom and authentic human existence, in Sartre's early work (see especially *Being and Nothingness*, 1943); but from a reading of Kierkegaard himself, we may gain a perspective that demonstrates the importance of subjectivity in the *personal truths that affect us the most deeply* – and not (apart from in matters of religious faith)⁶ the inevitable primacy of subjectivity over objectivity. At this point, and with a view towards a *practical* application of the notion of 'truth as subjectivity', this seems to me to be quite reasonable.

Truth as Subjectivity in the Psychotherapeutic Context

When questioned on the subject, psychotherapists of 'phenomenological' orientations (in the widest sense, i.e. inclusive of person-centred, gestalt and existential therapists) will *generally* allow considerable importance to their clients' subjective truth. However, far from prematurely celebrating this factor as a triumph of the hidden influence of the spirit of Kierkegaard, I should like to contend that the person-centred therapist's notions around the importance of subjectivity in the psychotherapeutic encounter are of a fundamentally different nature to Kierkegaard's notion of truth as subjectivity, which has not even proved to be a covert influence in the person-centred approach. Consequently, due to the prevalence of the influence of the person-centred approach, there exists an under-appreciation of the possibilities of a Kierkegaardian understanding of the principle of truth as subjectivity. In other words, although an application of this principle *seems* to be apparent in much of 'phenomenological' psychotherapy, especially in the value placed on subjectivity in the person-centred approach, this is illusory: in reality, the influence and application of this principle to date has been very restricted indeed. It is my suggestion, of course, that this situation should be remedied; although, as we shall see, this may not be achieved as readily as one might hope.

⁵ Sartre's attempts to reconcile his uncompromisingly individual perspectives on freedom with ethical and societal directives led him, of course, through Marxism and away from existentialism (Sartre, 1960; Warnock, 1996). In the final analysis, though, it seems that this point proved elusive to him.

⁶ It seems to me that Kierkegaard's relevance as 'the father of existentialism' has been overplayed at the expense of acknowledging his more primary position as a Christian writer. I have done my best to emphasise this in this piece; and I am of the opinion that any reader of Kierkegaard does well to remember this.

In person-centred therapy, the importance of the client's subjective truth seems to be two-fold. In the first place, in terms of therapeutic practice, respect for the client's individuality and subjectivity would appear to be a pre-requisite of the therapist's key attitudes of empathic concern, unconditional positive regard and congruence (cf. Rogers, 1951; see also Graham, 1995; Mearns & Thorne, 1988), and general 'non-directedness' – what is traditionally, in this approach, known as 'working from the client's personal framework'. Secondly, in terms of this approach's overall philosophy, person-centred therapy is inextricably bound to the rise and influence of *humanistic psychology* in psychological research – for after all, Rogers was an innovator in both (see Rogers, 1951, 1961). Humanistic psychology rose, during the 1960s, to become a 'third force' in psychology,⁷ and championed the consideration of human wholeness and potential in psychological research; consequently, at the outset at least, it had to defend itself almost as a 'protest movement' in theoretical psychology. Hence, the subjectivity it stood for was often cast (and, more often still *understood*) as 'non-objectivity' – for only then could the prevailing shackles of reductionistic experimentation as a basis for human enquiry (as practised by the behaviourists) be broken. Indeed, a frequent reproach of humanistic psychology and psychologists is that such researchers speak up less often about what they contribute to the understanding of human behaviour than what they reject in other approaches. Hence, the value placed upon subjectivity in the person-centred approach owes its origin to three sources: firstly, and perhaps most peripherally, the reworking of ideas concerning human consciousness apparent in Husserlian phenomenology;⁸ secondly, the need to express the tenets of humanistic psychology against supposedly objective accounts of human nature and behaviour (i.e. behaviourism); and finally, due to the need to position subjectivity as a core-value 'backdrop' against the key attitudes deemed imperative to successful work as a person-centred therapist (which emerged from Rogers' own diligent research (see Rogers, 1951)).

So it is apparent, then, that although person-centred therapists have one understanding of the value of subjectivity in the psychotherapeutic encounter, it is not one that it is not in any way derived from Kierkegaard's account of truth as subjectivity. Their understanding of subjectivity no doubt serves them well. But for me, as an existential therapist, what is most important about the value of subjectivity in psychotherapy is what is *missing* from the person-centred understanding - which coincides exactly with what is *apparent* in Kierkegaard. As we have seen, Kierkegaard's understanding of truth was *inwardness* (or, the truth that is true for me" (c.f. Storm, 2000)), *uncertainty* and *passion* (Kierkegaard, 1845a). Now, although these factors may very well, in the long run, spontaneously arise and be congruently accepted (undoubtedly, with unconditional positive regard) by a person-centred therapist during her or his empathic mode of being with her or his client, what strikes the reader of Kierkegaard is these aspects of truth's existence as *givens*. It is *this* reading of Kierkegaard's principle of truth as subjectivity that I consider to be of critical importance – and to which I believe we should *actively* attend.

⁷ The first two 'forces' (in order) were psychoanalysis and behaviourism.

⁸ Husserl saw phenomenology not as a philosophical, but as a *scientific* method to be applied to gaining an understanding of human consciousness (Husserl, 1907; Warnock, 1970). Ironic, then, that humanistic psychology (which, it should be remembered, often uses the term 'phenomenological' as a self-referential prefix in its applications) should come, in the understanding of many, to represent a radical alternative to, and protest *against* scientific psychology.

Cameron: An Application of 'Truth as Subjectivity' in Psychotherapy

Cameron presented himself to counselling in the context of a training analysis some years ago. Whilst he felt that he had already usefully engaged himself in one year's counselling, he decided to approach a new therapist with the avowed intent of doing some deeper work on himself. Although the initial sessions focused around an extensive look at parental relationships, a more immediately emotionally fraught issue, concerning the comparatively recent break-up of a romantic relationship, became apparent. Having the therapist listen to his story was not enough; what Cameron wanted, and initially expected help in finding from the therapist, was answers; he was deeply engaged in the almost perpetual mulling over of *why* the break-up had occurred. Much of his low affect outside of the counselling sessions was dominated by the persistent working and re-working over the precise biographical details of the relationship, in order to pin-point the *causes* of what he felt to be faulty communicative patterns of the final few months of the relationship. His initial belief was that should the causes be apparent, and provided that he could put himself somehow outside of those causes, he could find his peace with the unhappy ending of the relationship.

Cameron's scientific training during undergraduate studies, and his general love of science, had contributed significantly to this 'fact-finding' approach to his personal difficulties; of this, he was aware, and yet was unable to give this pattern up. His therapist gently focused his efforts away from an adoption of the 'mental health expert' Cameron expected; instead, he encouraged Cameron to explore his inner world of feelings and values, more often than not in areas tangentially, but not directly related to the relationship break-up. In this apparent 'moving away' from the presenting issue, Cameron was able to identify, and become increasingly aware of, what he first came to think of and refer to as 'stable patterns of behaviour', but later as 'ways of being' with people through a broadly-defined set of insight-orientated techniques such as role-play, psychodrama and art.

With an increased contact with a known set of internally subjective truths in place, Cameron's therapist encouraged the expression of his own heartfelt values and a degree of action planning on these same; his capacity to make decisions without appeal to 'objective' sources or authority was, without ever being 'co-authored', consistently encouraged. Cameron was able to 'let go' of the relationship, including the previously unidentified aspects of deeply felt loss and anger at his former partner. Subsequently, or perhaps consequently, Cameron was then able to reapply himself to his continued training as a therapist and long-term personal and career goals, with no resurfacing of the anguish connected with the end of the relationship that had formerly hampered his efforts to do so. On reflection on these therapeutic encounters, Cameron expressed the accrual of a long-term gain. In addition to the relief from his short-term suffering, he now felt more able to act more in accordance with what he knew to be true *for himself*, and he considered this to be a life-long piece of learning which had immense value.

Concluding Thoughts

A reservation that has troubled me, in terms of my recent attempts to demonstrate Kierkegaard's relevance in the fields of counselling and psychotherapy, has been as to

whether Kierkegaard's process of generation and original (and limited) scope of application of the notion of 'truth as subjectivity' precludes the reapplication of this theme in the psychotherapeutic context. Kierkegaard was able, through his own 'inwardness' and 'religiousness' (cf. Storm, 2000) to 'find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live or die' (Kierkegaard, 1996; Storm, 2000): essentially, the leading of a passionate Christian life. One must acknowledge that as Christian faith was Kierkegaard's 'starting point', and that as he was unable to find accordance with Kantian or Hegelian notions of an objectively verifiable religiosity, his answers to questions of faith must *necessarily* have been located in subjective truth. But if we start from a different, non-religious⁹ subjective truth, for which we are willing to 'live or die' – should we even be successful in ever locating such a truth in our post-religious modern society – how necessary is it that such a truth *must* be upheld in the face of objective uncertainty? Are there not truths of deep, personal significance of which we may become objectively certain? Such problems - and, one must concede, these are of a fairly serious philosophical nature - seem to appear in multitudes, without immediately apparent modes of resolution, when we try to generalise Kierkegaard's highly individualistic philosophy beyond its primary purpose of the exploration of Christian faith.

Psychotherapeutically, in any event, I feel that the *passionate* and *inward* aspects of the client's subjective truth are evidenced when the client undertakes critical decisions: as illustrated above in Cameron's 'letting go', and as I have commented elsewhere (Minton, 2000). It must be remembered, of course, that the psychotherapist is in a somewhat rare position in contemporary society of being privy to the individual human being's most passionate and inward aspects, whilst very obviously (by the nature of the relationship) being faced with a considerable amount of the client's *uncertainty*. If therapy or counselling is to be, as is often argued in this journal, cast along similar lines as philosophical enquiry – namely, that through discourse, a search for (personal) truth is conducted, by which our love for (personal) wisdom is satisfied, the outcome of which should be (personally) meaningful – then a valid application, even given my reservations, of Kierkegaard's principle of truth as subjectivity would seem to be a re-focus on the practising therapist's active facilitation of client's decision-making in the psychotherapeutic process.¹⁰ Through this, the individual can be assisted towards the realisation of her or his own truth, wisdom and meaning, the facilitation of which is surely a noble cause to devote oneself to in the practise of *either* philosophy *or* psychotherapy.

Recommended further reading

Kierkegaard, S. (1843a / 1992) *Either / Or: A Fragment of Life*, Transl. A. Hannay. Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics.

Now published in one lightly annotated volume, Kierkegaard brings together an astonishing variety of material – including the legendary '*Seducer's Diary*' – through the

⁹ A further problem arises here when we remember (see above, 'Truth as Subjectivity' section) Kierkegaard's comments about the role of the objective – 'in a merely subjective determination of the truth, madness and truth become in the last analysis indistinguishable' (Kierkegaard, 1845a). Is religiosity the only truth worth realising by subjective means? Should we be cautious in upholding other deeply held personal truths in the face of uncertainty, for fear that we be charged with madness? If this is so, then a secular application of 'truth as subjectivity' in the field of psychotherapy, whilst being delightfully ironic, would also seem dreadfully inappropriate.

¹⁰ My personal bias would be towards the adoption of an existential framework in doing this (existential psychotherapists have long since recognised that the process by which individuals create meaning in their lives is the decision-making process (see Maddi, 1985; Minton, 2000)).

presentation of the 'papers' of an *ethicist* ('Judge Vilhelm') and an *aesthete* (the 'young friend' of 'Judge Vilhelm', known only to the reader as 'A') under the pseudonymous 'editorship' of 'Victor Eremita'. Kierkegaard shows us both of these ways of life; as Hegelian synthesis is rendered unattainable, we are forced into a position of radical choice. The 'explosive either-or' is thus revealed.

Kierkegaard, S. (1843b / 1985) *Fear and Trembling*, Transl. A. Hannay. Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics.

Written under the pseudonym of 'Johannes de silentio'; for the main part, a consideration of the Biblical story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, to Yahweh God (Genesis, 22:1-19). According to the Hegelian notion of universal ethics that prevailed at the time, such Abraham's action would be indefensible; it may only be understood via the 'teleological suspension of the ethical': when the individual makes a choice 'on the strength of the absurd', in accordance with the *telos* of God's will.

Kierkegaard, S. (1844 / 1985) *Philosophical Fragments*, Transl. D. Swenson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Written under the pseudonym of 'Johannes Climacus', whose central focus is doubt, the book contrasts firstly Greek, and then modern philosophy with the paradoxes of Christian thought (see footnote 2). Faith, and not 'the system', Kierkegaard felt, could conquer doubt; but as all 'Johannes Climacus' had was philosophy, the result of his efforts could only be despair.

Kierkegaard, S. (1845a / 1992) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, Transl. W. Lowrie & D. Swenson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. The sequel to *Philosophical Fragments*; in this lengthy tome, Kierkegaard (again, as 'Johannes Climacus') further develops the ideas of the subjective approach to truth, and the resolution of the 'Absolute Paradox' through faith

Kierkegaard, S. (1845b / 1985) *Stages On Life's Way*, Transl. H. & E. Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

A sequel to *Either-Or*; a full development of three spheres of existence: the aesthetic, ethical and religious stages. Three previous pseudonyms appear (including 'Victor Eremita' and 'Johannes the Seducer' (the author of *The Seducer's Diary*), from *Either-Or*) collected by (of all pseudonyms) 'Hilarius Bogbinder'. For an excellent and applied commentary, see Hill and Chung (1999).

Kierkegaard, S. (1996) *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, Translated and edited by Alistair Hannay. Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics.

A selection of journal entries in one volume, linking Hannay's biographical text.

Storm, D.A. (2000) *D. Anthony Storm's Web Site on Kierkegaard*.

Available on the World Wide Web: <http://www.2extreme.net/dstorm/sk/sk.htm>. A superb website, including a commentary on Kierkegaard's major works, two essays on his writing method, a primer on Kierkegaardian motifs, a biography, a gallery of images and a very useful links section.

Vardy, P. (1996) *Kierkegaard*, London: Harper Collins Publishers.

An excellent brief introduction (98 pp) to Kierkegaard's life and philosophy, firmly underlining Kierkegaard's continued relevance as a Christian writer.

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