1997

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There seems to be general agreement that one of Kierkegaard's primary goals in writing the *Postscript* was to show the tremendous limitations and fallibility of a human being's cognitive powers. In fact, many commentators claim that Kierkegaard is epistemologically a skeptic, and they cite especially the *Postscript* to support their position (even though its author is the pseudonymous Johannes Climacus). For example, Mackey asserts that the very intent of the *Postscript* is to show that every belief and every truth claim about reality have no cognitive warrant.[1] Popkin also believes that skepticism is the final result of Kierkegaard's epistemology; he writes, "When we search for true knowledge we end up in complete skepticism."[2] Many others similarly claim that Kierkegaard holds that it is in principle impossible, at least without God's help, for humans to know if any particular explanation or interpretation of reality is true. Price succinctly sums up this interpretation. He asks, "What then can I know?" and replies, "Nothing, says Kierkegaard, nothing with any degree of real certainty; nothing about God, nothing about the world as it really is."[3]

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[1]L. Mackey, *Kierkegaard, a Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971) 179-80; 189-92.

[2]R. Popkin, "Kierkegaard and Skepticism," in *Kierkegaard, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. J. Thompson (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1972) 368.

[3]G. Price, *The Narrow Pass* (London: Hutchinson, 1963) 113. Others who advance this interpretation are K. Nordentoft, *Kierkegaard's Psychology*, trans. B. Kirmmse (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1978) 334-39; J. Gill, "Kant, Kierkegaard, and Religious Knowledge," in *Essays on Kierkegaard* (Minneapolis: Burgess Pub. Co., 1969) 66-67; A. Hannay, *Kierkegaard: The Arguments of the Philosophers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982) 153.

On the other hand, most of the above authors do recognize that Kierkegaard admits the possibility of, and stresses the need for, self-knowledge. Yet, not all realize the full ramification this admission has on his alleged skepticism. Furthermore, while granting that Kierkegaard believes that truths about one's self are obtainable, some limit such truths just to one's own individual reality[4]—a position that I will critique later. Of course, almost every interpreter agrees that Kierkegaard believes that an individual person aided by God's grace and revelation can attain a number of truths about reality, whether or not such truths can be fully comprehended.

Various reasons have been offered in support of labeling Kierkegaard a skeptic. In this paper, however, I will address only one of them, namely, Climacus's repeated assertions in the *Postscript* that all empirical knowledge of reality is only "approximation." Some interpret this to mean that such knowledge can, at best, approach but never achieve truth about empirical reality.[5] It will become clear in the course of this paper that I do not agree with that interpretation.

In what follows, I will first set forth the views of Johannes Climacus on this issue and, then, seek to determine the extent to which Kierkegaard accepts Climacus's position. I will use the following criteria to determine which *Postscript* positions are in fact Kierkegaard's own.

1. Any position stated both by Climacus and by Kierkegaard in works published under his own name will be considered to be Kierkegaard's.
2. Any position presented in those works published under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus (*Sickness Unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity*) will be considered Kierkegaard's. This is because this later pseudonym was used not because Kierkegaard disagreed with, or dissociated himself from, the content of these

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[4]Price, *The Narrow Pass*, 113-21; Nordentoft, *Kierkegaard's Psychology*, 339-40; Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, 152-53; A. Shmueli, *Kierkegaard and Consciousness*, trans. N. Handelman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) 43-45.

[5]For a discussion of other reasons why Kierkegaard is considered to be a skeptic, see my article "The Extent of Kierkegaard's Skepticism," *Man and World* 27 (1994): 271-89.

works, but because he did not want to imply that he was living Christianity at the level of perfection presented in them.[6]

3. Finally, passages in his *Journals* where Kierkegaard clearly states his acceptance of a position of a pseudonymous author will be considered his own, as, of course, will entries which correspond to positions taken in the above mentioned works.

Section I
Empirical Knowledge as Approximation

Climacus's Position

In the *Postscript*, Climacus offers a number of reasons for his apparent skepticism about empirical knowledge, or, more precisely, for designating such knowledge as "approximation." Let us investigate his comments carefully to see just what he means by the use of that term.

1. In the first place all empirical beings, including human knowers, are in the process of becoming. This means, Climacus writes, that "truth itself is in the process of becoming and is [only] by way of anticipation the agreement between thinking and being" (CUP, 1:190, translation modified). The point apparently is that truth, meaning the (fixed?) conformity or correspondence of thought and being is unattainable because of the continual change of both knower and known. Climacus refers to such truth as a *desideratum*, a goal which would be achieved only if becoming reached its end and ceased. The best we can obtain, he says, is "approximation" to this goal.

2. A second reason Climacus offers for calling empirical knowledge "approximation" is a typical anti-foundationalist one. He points out that the "beginning [of empirical knowledge] cannot be established absolutely" by thought itself but is in a sense arbitrary. One reason it is arbitrary is because it is the knower who *decides* the "limits" of his or her investigation of any empirical data. Thus, for example, since all the members of a certain group cannot be studied, generalizations about the entire group rest on

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[6]JP 6:6433, 6446, 6461. See also the translators' introduction to SUD, xx-xxii.

the selection of a limited sample. Such generalizations are, therefore, inevitably approximations (CUP, 1:149-50). Furthermore, any existing human being's knowledge takes place from one of many limited perspectives or points of view. No individual can attain an unlimited, absolute, God's eye view of reality. Now neither the selection of a particular perspective nor the selection of the data to be investigated are themselves guaranteed by a presuppositionless, indubitable, intellectually intuitive, self-evident foundation. The selections rest ultimately on will, that is, on free choice. I take it this is what Climacus means when he says "every beginning [of empirical knowledge]...does not occur by virtue of immanental thinking but is made by virtue of a resolution, essentially by virtue of faith" (CUP, 1:189).

3. A third reason why Climacus designates empirical knowledge as only approximation is because its object, empirical being, is contingent. The *Philosophical Fragments* explains this in more detail than does *Postscript*. Accepting Leibniz's distinction between necessary truths of reason and contingent truths of fact, Climacus places all empirical knowledge in the latter category, arguing that such knowledge always lacks certitude or necessity, precisely because the beings it seeks to know lack necessity.[7]

In summary, since empirical reality is in constant change, since all empirical knowledge is perspectival and begins in choice, since empirical beings are thoroughly contingent, human knowledge of empirical reality is only approximation. Climacus himself states that conclusion, "objectively there is no truth for existing beings, but only approximations . . . " (CUP, 1:218, 224).

Yet in spite of such assertions, I am not convinced that Climacus, the detached humorist, personally agrees with all the positions he presents nor do I believe that the views that he sets forth are as thoroughly skeptical as many make them out to be. I say this for a number of reasons. In the first place, a thoroughgoing skepticism about the truth of all knowledge of empirical reality would be incompatible with other positions Climacus clearly holds. Moreover, such a skepticism has internal difficulties that Climacus is well aware of. Finally, and this has been over-

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[7]See the Interlude in PF, 72-88, and pp. 23, 30, and 81.

looked by many, when Climacus labels empirical knowledge an approximation, he very often does not mean that such knowledge cannot achieve truth, but only that it cannot achieve intellectual *certitude* or *necessity*. Let me elaborate.

For one thing, the claim that true knowledge of empirical reality is unobtainable involves internal difficulties common to all forms of skepticism, and Climacus is well aware of this. He recognizes, for example, that there is a "basic certainty" (CUP 1:335ftn) contained within all skepticism. Specifically, to argue that, because both the knower and the object of knowledge are changing, no true empirical knowledge is possible, presupposes that we do in fact possess true knowledge of empirical beings, at least in general, namely, that they are concrete, particular things that change. Speaking of change, if one defines empirical truth, and Climacus does, as the conformity or agreement of thought with being, then, unless one considers reality to be a radical Heraclition flux, and Climacus clearly does not, the mere fact that things change, and are contingent, does not preclude true knowledge of them *in their relatively stable features*. Climacus surely understands this for he expresses his agreement with Aristotle on this point (CUP, 1:312-13). He does, after all, give the empirical statement "the earth is round" as an example of an objective truth (CUP, 1:194-95)—and one could think of countless other statements about empirical reality which he would accept as true (e.g., Copenhagen is in Denmark). In fact, as we shall see in the next section, he claims to have a great deal of true knowledge about one kind of changing, contingent being, the human self.

Furthermore, if Climacus actually believes that empirical knowledge cannot attain truth, this would render unintelligible his statements that such knowledge consists of approximations. If empirical reality is unable to be truly known, it would be impossible to know whether any attempted explanation of it was close to the truth or not, nor would one have any objective basis for choosing among differing explanations. Yet Climacus never suggests that he believes that every interpretation of reality is equally arbitrary or has an equal claim to truth. Need I point out that he obviously considers his own explanation of the general character of empirical reality, and of the human self, to be, if not absolutely true, more true than those offered by idealism, romanti-

cism, rationalism, paganism, or Christendom. This has to mean that he is not totally skeptical about the human ability to grasp some truths about empirical beings.

In fact, much of the skepticism about empirical knowledge which is found in the *Postscript* rests upon a very rationalistic and/or idealistic understanding of the nature of truth.[8] This becomes clear when one notes that the term approximation is often used, not to mean approximation to truth, but approximation to certitude about an eternal, finished, absolute system of knowledge. In this light, let us look at each of the three reasons set forth above which he gives for challenging the truth of empirical knowledge.

1. In spite of the fact that in the *Postscript* he defines empirical truth as the conformity of thought and being, a definition which, as I indicated, does not of itself preclude true knowledge of changing beings, immediately after giving that definition Climacus proceeds to limit such truth or conformity to the realm of the totally eternal and unchanging. Speaking like an idealist who identifies truth only with the completed, and, therefore, unchanging, system, he states that in the empirical realm truth is a goal which can only be approximated or anticipated because "the empirical object is not finished" and the knower is coming to be (CUP, 1:189-90). In other words, empirical knowledge is called approximation in comparison to an *eternal finished* (idealist) system. Note, however, this does not mean that such knowledge cannot be in conformity with presently existing empirical beings, and, therefore, true in that sense.

2. Climacus's statements about the arbitrary character of the beginnings of empirical knowledge also have a rationalistic/idealistic ring to them. On the one hand, some statements seem to assume, with idealism, that truth lies only in the whole, in an absolute and total grasp of reality. Otherwise, the mere fact that human knowledge is always from finite perspectives would not of itself mean that it is an approximation. All that necessarily follows from the perspectival character of human knowledge is that no individual

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[8]Thus, I agree with Robert Perkins that it is Hegelian idealism and not empirical realism that Kierkegaard is against in CUP. See his "Kierkegaard's Epistemological Preferences," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4 (1973): 198-200, 214.

can reach an absolute, unlimited, point of view from which to grasp the truth about the whole of reality. The fact that human knowledge is perspectival does not of itself mean that an individual cannot grasp any truth about reality, nor that his or her grasp of reality is illusory or inaccurate, nor that he or she colors or structures or creates the features of that which he or she knows. Climacus himself draws none of these conclusions from the perspectival character of human knowledge. On the contrary he states that "all knowledge and all apprehension has nothing to give from itself" to the object known (PF, 80, translation modified). Moreover, the fact that knowledge is perspectival does not of itself preclude the possibility of one perspective allowing a more complete or deeper grasp of the real than another, a position Climacus certainly holds about his own views. To repeat, only if truth is identified with a nonlimited (hence nonperspectival) absolute realm of knowledge can human knowledge be considered to be just an approximation because it involves a limited point of view.

I might add that the fact that empirical knowledge does not begin with presuppositionless, indubitable, intuitively self-evident principles also does not render it unable to truly grasp reality—unless one assumes with classical rationalism that only necessary truths, those whose opposite is impossible, can furnish a proper foundation for knowledge. True knowledge is simply that which corresponds to reality, as Climacus himself recognizes; no more, no less.

3. Finally, to call empirical knowledge an approximation because generalizations about empirical data are in principle falsifiable by new data does not mean that empirical knowledge cannot be true but only that it cannot be absolutely certain or necessary. Of course, the more data that supports an inductive generalization, the more it approaches or approximates certitude. But not all empirical knowledge involves induction from incomplete data, and even generalizations that do may in fact be true, that is, be in conformity with reality, even though they are in principle falsifiable. To repeat, Climacus's use of the term approximation here means, not approximation to truth (whatever that could mean), but approximation to *certitude*. Similarly, for Climacus to designate all empirical knowledge as approximate because its object is contingent or nonnecessary, is to say, as he does, that empirical knowl-

edge is not certain in the sense of logically necessary. The opposite of any statement about empirical reality is logically possible. This is not, however, to say that empirical knowledge cannot be true, that is, be in agreement with reality. Thus, when Climacus states that all historical knowledge, and in fact all knowledge of contingent beings, is only "approximation knowledge," he is claiming that the best it can do is approach, but never become, *certain* knowledge, *necessary* knowledge, that whose opposite is impossible. He is not saying, however, that such knowledge can never be in conformity with reality.[9]

Thus, we see that the skepticism about empirical knowledge set forth by Climacus, specifically his claim that all such knowledge is only approximation, is not nearly as radical as some believe. It rests on a highly rationalistic/idealistic conception of true knowledge, one which identifies true with necessary, logically certain, absolute, eternal, complete.[10] Given such a conception, to say that knowledge of empirical reality is approximate simply means it is never necessary, logically certain, absolute, eternal, or complete. Whether Kierkegaard actually intends to portray Climacus as one who himself accepts this grand idealistic conception of truth, or whether, as I suspect, he uses his pseudonym to show his rationalistic/idealistic contemporaries that their conception of truth renders it unattainable for existing subjects, is not clear to me. In any case, the fact remains that if the author of the *Postscript* simply sticks with the classical definition of truth as the correspondence of thought with reality, a definition he himself offers, there is no need for him to deny that humans can achieve true knowledge of empirical beings. Indeed, Climacus does assert that knowledge, even certain knowledge, is possible of at least one empirical being, namely, one's self. That assertion buttresses my interpretation of

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[9]In my opinion the Interlude of PF makes it clear that knowledge of contingencies is uncertain, but not necessarily untrue. Likewise see CUP, 1:23-24, 30, 81, 152-53.

[10]Perkins, "Kierkegaard's Epistemological Preferences," makes a helpful distinction between the Hegelian idealism which Kierkegaard (or Climacus) opposes and a Socratic humanistic idealism which he accepts. For the source of truth in the latter see nn. 21-24 below.

his statements about empirical knowledge as approximation and I will pursue this point in section II.

Let us turn now to Kierkegaard and attempt to determine what he himself holds about the truth claims of empirical knowledge.

Kierkegaard's Position

In works published under his own name or that of Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard's main concerns are religious. Only infrequently does he utter statements directly pertaining to epistemology, and even then the context is not philosophical but theological. Although they often discuss the relation between faith and knowledge, these works, unlike Climacus', set forth no general theory of knowledge. Thus, it is not possible to determine whether every single conclusion or argument presented by Climacus is accepted by Kierkegaard; all we can do is attempt to discover whether the basic position or positions of the *Postscript* about empirical knowledge are Kierkegaard's own.

I find little or no indication that Kierkegaard himself is skeptical about the human ability to attain true knowledge of empirical reality. For one thing, he certainly expresses his disagreement with the rationalistic/idealistic definitions of truth (as necessary, logically certain, absolute, eternal, complete) which was the foil of Climacus's remarks about empirical knowledge as approximation. Furthermore, in his religious writings, when he does speak of human knowledge of empirical reality, such as history or natural science, Kierkegaard does not say that such knowledge cannot attain truth; in fact, he is sometimes willing to grant that it can.[11] The question that concerns him is, rather, even if history or natural science possesses true knowledge, is this truth important or relevant to an understanding of spirit and to the subjective task of becoming Christian? He usually concludes that it is not, and it may even be "dangerous" for it may "distract" one

[11]At PC, 27, for example, Kierkegaard speaks of history "proving" particular truths. Also, in CD he states that objective thought can be "true and profound" (CD, 207).

from his or her ethical task, the task of being spirit.[12] In one passage he puts it this way:

> The main objection, the whole objection, to the natural sciences can be expressed formally, simply, and unconditionally in this way: It is incredible that a human being who has infinitely reflected about himself as spirit could then think of choosing the natural sciences (with empirical material) as the task for his striving. (JP, 3:2820)

Indeed, natural science "becomes especially dangerous and corruptive when it wants to enter into the realm of the spirit" (JP 3:2809), for it can only deal with the physical. It is also worth mentioning that Climacus's favorite word, approximation, almost never occurs in works Kierkegaard wrote under his own name or the pseudonym Anti-Climacus, and when it does it is almost exclusively used in an ethicoreligious, not an epistemological, context.[13] There are a few *Journal* entries, and they probably express Kierkegaard's own view, which refer to the fallibility of human knowledge of empirical reality since inductive generalizations are "merely statistical" (JP 1:1072) and "an approximation process" (JP 3:2809). However, as I argued above, the most one could infer from such statements is that empirical knowledge is not certain or necessary; they do not assert that such knowledge cannot be true.

It is the case that Kierkegaard, like Climacus, stresses the perspectival character of human knowledge. In an early *Upbuilding Discourse*, for example, he writes, "what one sees depends on how one sees ...how the observer himself is constituted is indeed decisive" (EUD, 59). In later works, he repeatedly contrasts the radically different interpretations the so-called natural man and the Christian have of things like guilt, suffering, love, natural inclinations, even of Christianity itself. He emphasizes that ultimately

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[12]PC, 31; EUD, 134-35. For Kierkegaard's comments on natural science see JP, 3:2809-24.

[13]Except for JFY, 208-209, the word approximation does not even appear in the various indexes compiled by Hong and Lowrie to works Kierkegaard published under his own name or as Anti-Climacus. In *Journal* entries such as 2:2809, 2813, and 4:4267, where he refers to natural science as approximation, the term seems to mean that such science can attain no real knowledge about spirit or the ethical and religious. Hence it is "qualitatively irrelevant" (JP 3:2809).

each individual must freely choose (with God's grace) to accept or not accept the Christian perspective. In the same vein, *Works of Love* states that "every event, every word, every act, in short, everything can be explained in many ways," and adds that variations in explanation are possible because of free choice (WL, 291). For example, one can choose to love another and then his or her explanation of the other's behavior will be significantly different from that offered from the viewpoint of a nonlover. Such statements by Kierkegaard indicate that Climacus's view is his, namely, human knowledge does not ultimately rest on indubitable, intellectually intuited, self-evident principles, but on freely chosen starting points, based on light-hearted or serious intent. Accordingly, Kierkegaard's own position appears to be: "That by which a beginning [of "science and scholarship"] is made is a resolution" (JP, 2:2292).

Still, as I explained above, there is no contradiction in holding that human knowledge is perspectival and rooted in freely chosen starting points, and at the same time claiming that it can be in conformity with reality, that is, true. I will not repeat my arguments but simply remark that Kierkegaard himself expresses little doubt about the truth of *his* explanations of reality nor about their superiority, and the superiority of *his* perspective, over rival ones.

Thus, as far as empirical knowledge is concerned, I am extremely reluctant to attribute the alleged skepticism of the *Postscript*, that humans cannot attain truth about empirical reality, to Kierkegaard himself. As I indicated above, I have serious doubts that it should even be attributed to Climacus once one understands that his statements about empirical knowledge as approximation are directed against rationalistic/idealistic conceptions of truth. Of course, one cannot prove the negative, but at least I can argue that in the absence of any clear evidence in his own writings that he believes that empirical knowledge is unable to attain truth, it seems gratuitous to saddle Kierkegaard with such a skepticism, especially if one considers the implicit realism behind all his thought.

Let me conclude this section on this point, for it seems clear that Kierkegaard and Climacus do both implicitly accept the basic views of classical realism. Granted, realism as an epistemological theory is never explicitly defended in detail by either of them, yet is it not obvious in every one of his works that Kierkegaard and

all his pseudonymous authors acknowledge the existence of particular beings independent of the knower, and believe that these beings can be known to some degree?[14] One can also point to Kierkegaard's and Climacus's repudiation of Hegelian Idealism or pure thought precisely because it identifies reality with that which is only in the realm of thought. Kierkegaard's and Climacus's complaint that such identification leaves out actual reality, namely, concrete individual temporal beings, is further confirmation of their realism. Moreover, in the *Postscript* itself, while admitting that Kant's skepticism about the ability of thought to know reality cannot be overcome by thought itself, since that very power is called into question, the author nevertheless categorically rejects such skepticism. What one must do with it, he says, is just "break" with it, and dismiss as a "temptation" any question about the reality of a thing-in-itself eluding thought. Such questions, he states, arise only when thought becomes too self-reflexive and selfishly seeks to think itself (its own content), thereby refusing to do its job of thinking *other things*.[15]

Since I cannot imagine that anyone would seriously deny that Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous author implicitly, at least, adopt this basic position of epistemological realism, I will dwell on this no further but turn instead to the most clear case where Climacus and Kierkegaard do allow true and certain knowledge of one kind of empirical reality, namely, knowledge of the human self. As we shall see, the extent of such knowledge is much wider than is realized by many who label Kierkegaard and Climacus skeptics.

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[14]In other words, I agree with Mackey that the basic assumptions of classical realism are in the background of Kierkegaard's writings as "beliefs-which-it-is-not-necessary-to-call-into-question," 270, of "The Loss of the World in Kierkegaard's Ethics," in *Kierkegaard*, ed. Thompson. If I understand him correctly, Robert Perkins also considers Kierkegaard to hold an empirical, realist metaphysics and epistemology, in "Always Himself: A Survey of Recent Kierkegaard Literature," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* (Winter 1974): 543. In *Passionate Reason* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) 138, C. S. Evans says Kierkegaard is a realist like Plato and Aristotle.

[15]CUP, 1:328, 335.

Section II
Knowledge of the Self

Climacus's Position

One of the major themes of part two, section II of the *Postscript* is that every individual should be a subjective thinker not a detached objective one. That means, Climacus says, that "in all his thinking [the individual] has to include the thought that he himself is an existing person" (CUP, 1:351). The subjective thinker should continually strive to understand himself; indeed, such self-knowledge is the only certain knowledge an individual can attain. In his exposition, Climacus, in fact, sets forth quite a large number of items that each individual can and should come to know about the self.[16] (1) A person can understand that the greatest ethical task he or she has is to become a self or subject in the fullest sense; (2) A person can come to see that this demands passionate interest in one's self and repeated free decisions to (3) appropriate or live what he or she knows from self-reflection he or she should be, and this involves (4) knowing and unifying into a concrete harmony his or her human faculties of imagination, feeling, passion, and thought.[17] More generally, a person can understand that becoming a self means (5) "to become a whole human being" (CUP, 1:346), that is, to express in his or her individual existence "the essentially human" (CUP 1:356). The latter statements presuppose, of course, that one knows, or can know, what is essentially human. This point is extremely important for it shows that Climacus believes that subjective reflection gives one not just an understanding of his or her unique individual self but also knowledge of the general nature or essence of the human self. This should not surprise us since the statements about the human self which Climacus makes throughout the *Postscript* are set forth not just as descriptions of one individual self, Johannes Climacus, but as true and applicable to every human self as such.

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[16]See the whole discussion in CUP, 1, part II, sec. II, chap. I, "Becoming Subjective."

[17]CUP, 1, part II, sec. II, chap. III, @4.

However, some who consider him a skeptic about the powers of human understanding claim that Climacus believes that true knowledge of the self can be gained only through Divine Revelation.[18] It is true that Climacus states that from the Christian point of view non-Christians are wrong in thinking that they have within themselves the power to grasp the truth about themselves, for the non-Christian does not realize how radically human beings are gripped by sin and how sin renders them unable to understand themselves. Since the remedy for sin can only be supplied by God, only God can furnish the condition which enables us to grasp truth.[19] Now Climacus does say all this, yet he also presents Socrates, the personification of philosophy, as able to know many things about the self.[20] He also states that many such truths are grasped in religion A, the religion of immanence, which is the religion which "has only universal human nature as its presupposition" (CUP, 1:559) and "can be present in paganism" (CUP, 1:557). True knowledge about the self is explicitly said to be attained by the self's reflection on itself, a kind of Platonic "recollection" (PF, 87),[21] and it is sharply distinguished from the revealed truths of Christianity (for example, original sin, forgiveness, Christ, the God-man, etc.) which "did not arise in any human heart" (PF, 109). It seems evident, then, that Climacus believes that a great deal of knowledge about the self can be attained by a human being.

Let me explicitly draw out the implications of all this on my earlier interpretation of Climacus's alleged skepticism about empirical knowledge, specifically his designation of it as approximation. As we saw above, a close reading of the texts showed that Climacus so labels it for three reasons: (1) all empirical objects change; (2) all such knowledge is perspectival and rests on choice not on intuitively self-evident principles; and (3) empirical beings

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[18]See the authors cited in nn. 3 and 4 above.

[19]PF, 13, 51, 62-65.

[20]CUP, 1:204-206; PF, 11-13, 20, 31, 87.

[21]For Climacus's discussion of religion A and its source of knowledge see CUP, 1:204-13, 555-61. See also the texts cited in the previous footnote. On this point I agree with L. Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity* (University AL: University of Alabama Press, 1984) chap. 3, and C. S. Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript* (Atlantic Highlands NJ: Humanities Press, 1983) chap. 8.

are contingent. But to say this is to say that such knowledge is never necessary, logically certain, absolute, eternal or complete; that is, it is not true in a rationalistic/idealistic sense. It is not to say that empirical knowledge cannot be true, meaning be in conformity with reality. The fact that Climacus holds that humans can have true knowledge of the self verifies this. After all, the self changes continually and is contingent. Knowledge of it is not based on necessary self-evident first principles and it is surely perspectival (e.g., a self can be grasped from an aesthetic or an ethical or a religious perspective). Since Climacus asserts that knowledge of the self can be certain, that must mean that designating empirical knowledge as approximation is not to be taken as skeptical about the possibility of true knowledge of (at least one) empirical reality. What, then, about Kierkegaard?

Kierkegaard's Position

Anyone acquainted with Kierkegaard's religious writings knows that throughout them he stresses the need for each individual to achieve an understanding of him or herself if he or she is to become a true Christian. Like Climacus, he repeatedly contrasts impersonal objective knowledge with knowledge that concentrates on the self and insists on the need for the latter. In *Judge For Yourself*, for example, he distinguishes between a type of knowledge or understanding that simply knows, and one that understands one's self inwardly and in the direction of concrete action.[22] Also, like Climacus, Kierkegaard believes that reflection on one's self yields not just an understanding of one's unique individual self, but an understanding of the essential nature of the self. This is evident if one notes that in his religious writings Kierkegaard is not simply engaged in his personal autobiography when he stresses the need for self-reflection and self-understanding. He continually makes general statements about the nature of the self and its path (the stages) to faith, statements obviously meant to apply to *all* selves.

Furthermore, again like Climacus, Kierkegaard holds that some knowledge of the self is attainable by human understanding; it need not come only through Divine Revelation. *The Sickness unto*

[22]JFY, 35-45. Also see CD, 154-55, 207-208, and PC, 48-49, 205-206, 233-34.

Death makes this clear for in it, as he sets forth the human progression in self-knowledge, he indicates that some (partial) knowledge of the self is possible this side of Christian revelation. For example, he describes individuals who, though not believers, are somewhat "conscious of being despair and therefore conscious ... of having a self in which there is something eternal" (SUD, 47). Now to say that one is aware of having a self with something eternal is to say that he or she is aware, to a some degree, of the nature of that self. Furthermore, Kierkegaard describes and ranks various types of despair in terms of their increased insight into the nature of the self as spirit, and many of these forms of despair are explicitly said to be present in non-Christians.[23] Thus, at the end of his descriptions he states that these "gradation[s] in the consciousness of the self," are "within the category of the human self, or the self whose criterion is man" (SUD, 79).

Accordingly, whether or not they agree on every detail, it is clear that Kierkegaard holds Climacus's position that we can, in spite of our radical sinfulness, arrive at a number of truths about the nature of the self by our own powers. A number of *Journal* entries make it plausible to assume that, like Climacus, he believes that knowledge of the self's nature is available by recollection, that is, by reflection on the mind's inner content. In one he states that Plato's view that "all knowledge is recollection" is "beautiful," "profound," and "sound," and that "All philosophizing is a self-reflection of what already is given in consciousness" (JP, 2:2274).[24] Of course, Kierkegaard believes that ultimately only the Christian message brings the *fullness* of truth, as well as the power to accept it. Yet this hardly means that what the non-Christian knows about the self is completely false or unimportant. It seems necessary, then, to draw the same conclusion that we did in Climacus's case. Kierkegaard is not thoroughly skeptical about the possibility of human knowledge of empirical beings, at least not when it comes to knowledge of the human self.[25] We can be even stronger. Not

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[23]SUD, 29-31, 47-74.

[24]Also see, JP, 1:649; 3:3085 and 3606.

[25]The possibility of human knowledge of empirical beings other than the self has special difficulties of its own which I have treated at length in "The extent of Kierkegaard's skepticism."

only is such knowledge possible, it is absolutely necessary for an individual to attain some understanding of his or her self, especially of his/her freedom and limitations, his/her obligation to be a self, his/her need for the eternal, his/her weakness and guilt, prior to any revelation. For only if one gains such knowledge will they ever become receptive to God's revelation of their sins and Christ's atonement and forgiveness.

However, to insist on the necessity of such knowledge of the self raises problems of its own if one takes seriously the *Postscript's* strong statements about the inverse relation between objective truth (including, presumably, objective truths about the nature of the self) and subjective truth (i.e., the subjective appropriation of truths). But that is an issue for another paper.