

Kierkegaard: The Subjective Truth

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Pages 189–193 in the Hong translation.

What follows is the famous and difficult “truth is subjectivity” passage from Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

Original

Hvad enten man mere empirisk bestemmer Sandhed som Tænkens Overeensstemmelse med Væren, eller mere idealistisk som Værens Overeensstemmelse med Tænken, saa gjælder det i ethvert Tilfælde om, at man nøie passer paa, hvad der forstaaes ved Væren, og at man tillige passer paa, om ikke den vidende menneskelige Aand narres ud i det Ubestemte, phantastisk bliver noget Saadant, som intet eksisterende Menneske nogensinde har været eller kan være, et Phantom, hvormed den Enkelte sysler efter Leilighed, uden dog nogensinde ved dialektiske Mellembestemmelser at tydeliggjøre sig, hvorledes han kommer ud i dette Phantastiske, hvilken Betydning det har for ham at være der, om ikke den hele Stræben derude opløser sig i en Tautologie indenfor et phantastisk dumdrigt Vovet.

Dersom der ved Væren i de tvende angivne Bestemmelser forstaaes den empiriske Væren, saa er Sandheden selv forvandlet til et Desideratur og Altsat i Vorden, fordi den empiriske Gjenstand ikke er færdig, og den eksisterende erkjendende Aand jo selv er i Vorden, og saaledes Sandheden en Approximeren, hvis Begyndelse ikke kan absolut sættes, netop fordi der ingen Slutning er, hvilket har tilbagevirkende Kraft; hvorimod enhver Begyndelse (hvis den ikke, ved ikke at være sig dette bevidst, er en Vilkaarlighed), naar den gjøres, ikke skeer i Kraft af den immanente Tænkning, men gjøres i Kraft af en Beslutning, væsentligen i Kraft af Tro. At den erkjendende Aand er en eksisterende, og at ethvert Menneske er et saadant for sig Eksisterende, kan jeg ikke ofte nok gjentage; thi at man phantastisk har overseet dette, er Skyld i megen Forvirring. Ingen misforstaae mig. Jeg er nu saaledes en stakkels eksisterende Aand ligesom alle andre Mennesker, men hvis jeg paa en lovlig og redelig Maade kunde hjælpes til at blive noget Overordentligt, det rene Jeg-Jeg, saa er jeg altid villig til at takke for Skjenken og Velgjerningen. Kan det derimod kun skee paa den omtalte Maade ved at sige ein, zwei, drei kokolorum, eller ved at binde et Baand om den lille Finger og naar det er Fuldmaane kaste det hen paa et afsides Sted: saa bliver jeg hellere hvad jeg er, et stakkels eksisterende enkelt Menneske.

Væren maa da i hine Definitioner fattes meget mere abstrakt, som den abstrakte Gjengivelse af, eller det abstrakte Forbillede paa hvad Væren in concreto er som empirisk Væren. Saaledes forstaaet er der Intet til Hinder for, at Sandheden abstrakt bestemmes abstrakt som et Færdigt; thi Overeensstemmelsen mellem Tænken og Væren er abstrakt seet altid færdig, da Vordens Begyndelse netop ligger i Concretionen, fra hvilken Abstraktionen

abstrakt seer bort.

Men forstaaes Væren saaledes, saa er Formelen en Tautologie, det vil sige, Tænken og Væren betyder Eet og det Samme, og den Overensstemmelse, om hvilken der tales, er blot den abstrakte Identitet med sig selv. Ingen af Formlerne siger derfor mere end at Sandheden er, naar dette forstaaes saaledes at Copulaet accentueres, Sandheden er, dvs. Sandheden er en Fordoblelse, Sandheden er det Første, men Sandhedens Andet, at den er, er det Samme som det Første, denne dens Væren er Sandhedens abstrakte Form. Paa denne Maade er der udtrykt, at Sandheden ikke er noget Enkelt, men aldeles abstrakt en Fordoblelse, der dog i samme Øieblik er hævet.

English

Whether truth is defined more empirically as the agreement of thinking with being or more idealistically as the agreement of being with thinking, the point in each case is to pay scrupulous attention to what is understood by being and also to pay attention to whether the knowing human spirit might not be lured out into the indefinite and fantastically become something such as no existing human being has ever been or can be, a phantom with which the individual busies himself on occasion, yet without ever making it explicit to himself by means of dialectical middle terms how he gets out into this fantastical realm, what meaning it has for him to be there, whether the entire endeavor out there might not dissolve into a tautology within a rash, fantastical venture.

If, in the two definitions given, being [Væren] is understood as empirical being, then truth itself is transformed into a *desideratum* [something wanted] and everything is placed in the process of becoming [Vorden], because the empirical object is not finished, and the existing knowing spirit is itself in the process of becoming. Thus truth is an approximating whose beginning cannot be established absolutely, because there is no conclusion that has retroactive power. On the other hand, every beginning, when it is made (if it is not arbitrariness by not being conscious of this), does not occur by virtue of immanent thinking but is made by virtue of a resolution, essentially by virtue of faith. That the knowing spirit is an existing spirit, and that every human being is such a spirit existing for himself, I cannot repeat often enough, because the fantastical disregard of this has been the cause of much confusion. May no one misunderstand me. I am indeed a poor existing spirit like all other human beings, but if in a legitimate and honest way I could be assisted in becoming something extraordinary, the pure I-I, I would always be willing to give thanks for the gift and the good deed. If, however, it can occur only in the way mentioned earlier, by saying eins, zwei, drei, kokolorum or by tying a ribbon around the little finger and throwing it away in some remote place when the moon is full — then I would rather remain what I am, a poor existing individual human being.

The term “being” in those definitions must, then, be understood much more abstractly as the abstract rendition or the abstract prototype of what being in concreto is as empirical being. If it is understood in this way, nothing stands in the way of abstractly defining truth as something finished, because, viewed abstractly, the agreement between thinking and being is

always finished, inasmuch as the beginning of the process of becoming lies precisely in the concretion that abstraction abstractly disregards.

But if being is understood in this way, the formula is a tautology; that is, thinking and being signify one and the same, and the agreement spoken of is only an abstract identity with itself. Therefore, none of the formulas says more than that truth is, if this is understood in such a way that the copula is accentuated-truth is-that is, truth is a redoubling [Fordoblelse]. Truth is the first, but truth's other, that it is, is the same as the first; this, its being, is the abstract form of truth. In this way it is expressed that truth is not something simple but in an entirely abstract sense a redoubling, which is nevertheless canceled at the very same moment.

Notes

1. Commentators are sharply divided over what Kierkegaard is saying here.
 - (a) He's a skeptic or solipsist
 - (b) He's developing an innovative adverbial notion of truth (Daniel Watts)
2. The modest thesis: *Truth* does *not* occur in an objective (naturalistic, descriptive, third-person) account of reality.
 - (a) Is this something that Kierkegaard actually says? Or am I reading Putnam back into him?
 - i. "The notion of the truth as identity of thought and being is a chimera of abstraction." (p 176)
 - ii. "There is objectively no truth for existing beings, but only approximations." (p 195)
 - iii. "The abstract answer has significance only for the abstraction into which an existing spirit is transformed when he abstracts from himself *qua* existing individual." (p 195)
 - iv. "objectively there is no truth for existing individuals" (p 201)
 - v. "Here again we are reminded of my thesis that subjectivity is truth; for an objective truth is like the eternity of abstract thought, extraneous to the movement of existence." (p 278)
 - (b) What is Kierkegaard's argument for this claim?

"Being" can either be taken in a concrete (empirical) sense, or an abstract sense. Having it both ways would be Hegel's sought-after identity of subject and object

 - i. If "being" is understood empirically, then ... It's impossible (practically? theoretically?) for existing (i.e. temporally conditioned) beings to get the truth. We only ever achieve *approximations*.

A. Is K presupposing a Leibnizian metaphysical thesis, i.e. that reality is conceptually inexhaustible?

“... there are two media: the medium of abstract thought,
and the medium of reality.” (p 278)
“What reality is cannot be expressed in the language of
abstraction.” (p 279)