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How Does One Learn that They are Outside of the Truth?

Phil 325: Professor Piety

If a person were outside of the truth, would he need God's help to know that? In the following paper, I will present a summary of Søren Kierkegaard's discussion of the truth presented in his *Philosophical Crumbs* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

Kierkegaard, writing pseudonymously under the name Johannes Climacus, begins *Philosophical Crumbs* by posing the ancient question "To what extent can the truth be taught?" (Kierkegaard, 88). The difficulty that lies at the base of this question is that it appears just as impossible for a person to seek what he knows as it is for him to seek what he does not know "because what he knows he cannot seek, because he knows it, and what he does not know he cannot seek, because he does not know what he should seek" (Kierkegaard, 88). Socrates sought to avoid this apparent problem by claiming that the learner does not need to seek the truth at all, since the truth is already within him; the learner simply needs a teacher to remind him of this fact. While Climacus appreciates the Socratic answer, he hopes to provide a non-Socratic answer to the question posed. The alternative answer Climacus proposes centers around the claim that the learner does *not* already have the truth within him. This claim has great implications regarding the learner's relation to the truth, the importance of the moment that he learns the truth, and the significance of the teacher who leads him to the truth.

On the Socratic account, the learner is essentially sufficient unto himself. Because the truth is already within him and he has simply forgotten this fact, the moment the learner remembers that he already knows the truth will be nothing more than incidentally important to him. Additionally, the cause of the learner's remembering, whether it be an ordinary school teacher or the great Socrates himself, could be nothing more than incidentally interesting to him (Kierkegaard, 91). Since in principle anyone could cause the learner to remember the truth, the Socratic account essentially annuls any significance a teacher could have. Similarly, it annuls the

possibility that any moment in time could be decisively important for the learner's knowing the truth since the learner was always, even if not consciously, in contact with it.

The central difference between the Socratic answer and Climacus' non-Socratic answer is that for Climacus, no learner is sufficient unto himself. Rather than it being the case that the learner was in contact with the truth all along, Climacus claims that the learner is outside of the truth. The learner, lacking the truth, is thus in a state of error. The learner's being in a state of error implies more than just his being unable to recognize the truth *as* the truth, it implies that the learner is ignorant of the very fact that he is outside of the truth.

In order for the learner to learn the truth, he first needs to be made aware that he does not yet know it. Only after the learner becomes aware of this fact will he be receptive to learning about the truth itself. The learner can discover that he is in error by himself. The reason why the learner is capable of knowing that he is in error on his own is that this knowledge is nothing more than guilt-consciousness, which is just the learner's realization that he does not always act in ways he knows he ought to act. After the learner becomes aware of the fact that he is in error, then the job of a teacher on this non-Socratic account is to teach the learner what the truth is. The task for the teacher here is immense; the teacher's job is to transform the learner qualitatively by transforming him from someone who is in error to a person who has the truth. The learner could not transform himself in this way; in fact, as Climacus notes, "no human being can [transform another person]. If it is to happen, then it must be done by [God] himself" (Kierkegaard, 93).

God transforms the learner by showing the learner just how far he has strayed from the truth. God provides this revelation to the learner in the form of sin-consciousness. When the learner becomes conscious of his sin, he not only realizes that he is in error, but that he could never be anything else by his own efforts. Now, conscious of being outside of the truth, the

learner realizes that he must be taught the truth, and becomes receptive to God's teaching. Although *logically* the learner becomes conscious of his sin prior to God's teaching him the truth, *temporally* the learner receives sin-consciousness and learns the truth in the same moment.

According to Climacus, at the moment when God teaches the learner the truth a transformation takes place in him; this transformation is not a *physical* one, but a *psychological* one (Kierkegaard, 96). Before, when the learner was in error, he may have felt a deep sense of dissatisfaction with himself, he may have felt inadequate or unlovable, but now, upon learning the truth a weight has been lifted from his shoulders. The learner no longer feels dissatisfied with himself because he knows the truth, which is that God loves us all unconditionally no matter how imperfect we are. Knowledge of the truth provides the learner with an eternal happiness that fundamentally transforms his attitude towards his own life.

Whereas the Socratic account of the relation of the individual to the truth annulled the importance of the moment and the teacher by claiming that the truth has always resided within the learner, Climacus' account provides the moment and the teacher with decisive importance by claiming that the learner does not yet have the truth and hence undergoes an important transformation upon learning the truth, which can occur only with the help of God.

After outlining how the learner comes to know the truth in the *Crumbs*, Kierkegaard, again writing under the pseudonym Johannes Climacus, expands upon the learner's relation to the truth in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Here it becomes clear that the kind of truth that concerns Climacus is not objective truth, such as mathematical or scientific truth, but subjective truth, which is the most important truth for the learner because it concerns himself as a particular individual.

Climacus emphasizes the fact that every learner is a unique, individual human being, so in asking about subjective truth – what it is and how one comes to know it – the learner is asking questions that are relevant to his existence as an individual. Questions that concern the existence of the learner in this way are subjective questions. The more concerned with subjective questions the learner becomes, the more he will focus inward on questions concerning his existence, such as if his actions are consistent with his beliefs.

Subjectivity, and so one's relation to subjective truth, admits of degree. The more concerned the learner becomes with subjective questions, questions that involve his life and personal existence, the closer the learner nears subjective truth. Climacus calls the highest form of subjective truth *essential* truth because this is the most important type of subjective truth for the learner who is highly concerned with his life as a particular individual. Ultimately, it is the *essential* form of subjective truth that Climacus is the most concerned with, and Climacus believes that only the most subjective individuals will be capable of learning the essential truth. This is because Climacus believes that essential truth is the answer to the most subjective question the learner could ask of himself, "What is the source of my eternal happiness"?

Climacus describes two types of individuals as subjective, where the first type of subjective individual is less subjective than the second type. The first type of subjective individual is the ethical individual. The ethical stage of subjectivity marks the beginning of the learner's becoming subjective, and is a necessary precursor to the second, higher stage of subjectivity. The second stage of subjectivity is called the ethical-religious stage by Climacus. Climacus believes that the ethical-religious individuals are more subjective than the simply ethical individuals because they are concerned with the most subjective question of all, the question of their eternal happiness. Only after the learner has progressed past the ethical stage of

development will he have become subjective enough to be concerned with the question of his eternal happiness, which is the question to which essential truth is the answer.

While Climacus appears to believe that most people are born with an innate knowledge of right and wrong, it is the subjective, ethical individual that takes this knowledge to heart. The ethical individual understands right and wrong as *obligating* him to do or refrain from doing certain things, and he strives to match his deeds to meet those obligations. Inevitably the ethical individual will become aware that he is unable to fulfill all his ethical obligations since humans are weak, and there will be times when immediate pleasures tempt him, and he will choose to pursue those pleasures rather than act in accordance with his ethical obligations. Aware that he is unable to live up to his obligations, the ethical individual develops guilt-consciousness and becomes aware that he is in error, although he does not yet know *why* he cannot seem to live up to his ethical obligations.

The guilt-consciousness of the ethical individual is a sign of his increased subjectivity, and so is a sign that he is closer to subjective truth. However, the ethical individual's guilt-consciousness is not the product of a subjectivity as intense as the sin-consciousness of ethical-religious individuals. As Climacus has shown in *Philosophical Crumbs*, only God can give the learner sin-consciousness, and this happens only after the learner has progressed past the simply ethical stage of development and has become subjective enough to be concerned with the question of his eternal happiness. Unlike the simply ethical individuals, ethical-religious individuals are aware that the reason they are unable to live up to all of their obligations is because of their sin. The moment the learner receives sin-consciousness he also learns the answer to the question of his eternal happiness, the essential truth, which is that God loves us all unconditionally despite our flaws.

Now that I have introduced the background elements of my argument, I will combine both the definition of “the truth” that I have described and the method for learning the truth that appears in *Philosophical Crumbs* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* in order to argue that without God’s help, no one could know that they are properly outside of the truth, because without God’s help they would not even know what *the* truth is.

I believe confusion has arisen surrounding the question of whether a person can know they are outside of the truth without God’s help because Climacus does not directly differentiate the *essential* truth, a unique element of subjective truth, from the broader category of subjective truth. Since Climacus is most concerned with *essential* truth, it is this essential truth that I take to be *the* truth. As we have seen, essential truth is the result of the learner becoming an ethical-religious individual, which is to say concerned with the source of his eternal happiness.

Climacus believes that the truth of Christianity, that God loves us all unconditionally despite our imperfections, is the only source of eternal happiness for people. In the *Crumbs* Climacus explains that the learner can know this truth only after God has given him sin-consciousness and made him aware that the reason he is in error is because of his sin. Because sin-consciousness is the condition that allows the learner to know the truth, it is only after God has made the learner aware that his failings are the result of sin that the learner knows *exactly* what *the* truth is.

However, before the learner knows this essential, ethical-religious truth, he can only understand his faults as being the result of his human nature. The learner’s realization that his human nature prevents him from fulfilling his ethical obligations is a realization that the learner can come to on his own, and it is a realization that results in guilt-consciousness. To have guilt-consciousness is to have a general awareness of being in error; however, this guilt-consciousness

is never more than a general sense of wrong-doing and should not be equated with the specific knowledge of sin that arises from sin-consciousness. When the learner has guilt-consciousness the most he can be aware of is that he fails to live up to all of his obligations although he does not know exactly *why*; by contrast, when the learner has sin-consciousness he knows that the reason he fails to live up to his obligations is because he is a sinner.

The learner having guilt-consciousness is like the person who has contracted an illness and is aware that his body is failing to function properly, although he does not yet know specifically *why* his body is failing to function properly. Until the ill person receives a diagnosis from a doctor identifying the illness he has contracted, the person will never have anything more than a general awareness that something is not right. In the same way, until the learner has received sin-consciousness from God and has learned the essential truth, the learner will never have anything more than a general awareness that he is in error. It is only after the learner gains sin-consciousness and so learns the essential truth that he will be aware that he has been outside of *the* truth the whole time. But until the learner knows what *the* truth *is*, knowledge the learner can only have after receiving sin-consciousness from God, the learner could never understand his being in error as being outside of the truth, since it would be impossible for him to locate *the* truth and his position relative to it. For this reason, I believe the learner must have God's help in order to know that he is outside of *the* truth, and is so because of his own sin.

In conclusion, I believe disagreement has arisen surrounding the question of whether a person can know they are outside of the truth without God's help because Climacus seems to equate the broad category of subjective truth as being *the* truth when in fact I believe he understands the more specific *essential* truth, the highest form of subjective truth, to be *the* truth. Because I believe Climacus is ultimately concerned with *essential* truth as the highest form of



subjectivity, it is this truth that I refer to when answering the question. While the learner might be able to know that he is in error without God's help, I believe the learner would be unable to know that he is outside of the truth without the help of God. Without knowing specifically what *the* truth is, I do not believe the learner would have knowledge specific enough to be able to say that he is outside of it. And since the learner can only know *the* truth once God has given him sin-consciousness, it is only with the help of God that the learner could realize he is outside of it.