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Kierkegaard‘s Philosophical Fragments

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Kierkegaard, like Plato, though using different methods and conclusions, sought to ground knowledge in the ineffability of subjectivity. For Plato, knowledge comes subjectively (internally); for Kierkegaard, it comes by God's grace through faith. Socrates becomes the facilitator for the slave in the Meno, as does God for the man of faith. Again, Kierkegaard is also concerned with passion. "...the paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion; a mediocre fellow" (p. 37). The paradox is necessitated by the metaphysical nature of the inquiry. Only knowledge through faith can approach the paradox since it is by definition beyond our knowledge. Passion must accompany the leap of faith, since knowledge acquisition for the man of faith is guided by God. Philosophical Fragments reflects Kierkegaard's intense interest in epistemology and Plato's theory of recollection, as well as his distaste for apologetics. It would seem to be a work close to his heart since he lists himself as editor, and had listed himself as author in earlier drafts.

Under the subtitle of the work—a Fragment of Philosophy—there is a sub-subtitle: "Can a historical point of departure be given for an eternal consciousness; how can such a point of departure be of more than historical interest; can an eternal happiness be built on historical knowledge?" This directs the entire study, in that it is practical as well as theoretical. In the preface Kierkegaard calls this work a pamphlet "without any claim to being a part of the scientific-scholarly endeavor in which one acquires legitimacy..." (p. 5). This is evident in the title. Smuler means fragments or scraps. Kierkegaard is not endeavoring to write anything like a treatise, much less form a system like Hegel. This is understandable because he simply presupposes several of his points.

Chapter one is a Propositio, under which it says, "The question is asked by one who in his ignorance does not even know what provided the occasion for his questioning in this way." Kierkegaard will argue below that deity provides the occasion necessary for knowledge acquisition. Perhaps the pseudonym Johannes is saying that he himself is unaware of the mysterious workings of the teacher he is about to describe. Kierkegaard is concerned with how we acquire knowledge, that is, how we learn. He addresses the Platonic dilemma of epistemology. In Plato's Protagoras Protagoras claims that virtue can be taught, that he in fact is a great teacher of virtue. In contrast, Socrates denies that virtue can be taught and asserts that wrongdoing is done only through ignorance. Related to this Socratic viewpoint is that he found it inconceivable for someone to know what is just and then fail to perform it. Related to this issue is the Platonic theory of recollection as put forth in the Meno, Philebus and Phaedo. In the Meno, Socrates guides a slave through geometric proofs, illustrating that the slave already possessed the knowledge; hence "learning" is not acquisition but recollection. Plato maintains that the slave is simply recalling knowledge learned in a former incarnation. Though Plato used recollection to help prove the immortality of the soul in the Phaedo, his solution does not solve the problem since the knowledge was learned at some point, in some incarnation—but this is no matter here.

Kierkegaard is not anxious to dispute Plato. Rather, Greek thought is a springboard from which Kierkegaard can address the epistemological question as it relates to subjectivity. He summarizes Plato's theory of recollection.

...a person cannot possibly seek what he knows, and, just as impossibly, he cannot seek what he does not know, for what he knows he cannot seek, since he knows it, and what he does not know he cannot seek because, after all, he does not even know what he is supposed to seek (p. 9).

Concerning Socratic questioning, Kierkegaard says,

...for the ultimate idea in all questioning is that the person asked must himself possess the truth and acquire it by himself. The temporal point of departure is a nothing, because in the same moment I discover that I have known the truth from eternity without knowing it, in the same instant that moment is hidden in the eternal, assimilated into it in such a way that I, so to speak, still cannot find it even if I were to look for it... (p. 13).

This leads Kierkegaard to consider three things: the preceding state, the teacher and the follower. These will guide the rest of the chapter. The preceding state of the learner is ignorance, but he is not a proselyte because he does not come to the truth. In his ignorance he goes away from the truth, because he needs the teacher to retrieve it as the slave boy did in the Meno. But his ignorance is such that he is not aware of his ignorance. Kierkegaard says the learner "is, then, untruth" (p. 13). It would appear that if the teacher wishes to remind the learner of his ignorance, all he can do is inform the learner of his ignorance. By this the learner is thrust away. His new state is worse than the first.

To this act of consciousness, the Socratic principle applies: the teacher is only an occasion, whoever he may be, even if he is a god, because I can discover my own untruth only by myself, because only when I discover it is it discovered, not before, even though the whole world knew it....

Now, if the learner is to obtain the truth, the teacher must bring it to him, but not only that. Along with it, he must provide the condition for understanding it, for if the learner were himself the condition for understanding the truth, then he merely needs to recollect....

But the one who not only gives the learner the truth but provides the condition is not a teacher. Ultimately, all instruction depends upon the presence of the condition; if it is lacking, then a teacher is capable of nothing, because in the second case, the teacher, before beginning to teach, must transform, not reform, the learner. But no human being is capable of doing this; if it is to take place, it must be done by the god himself (p. 14f.).

This is a departure from the Platonic view. Though Plato points the way by making the knowledge inwardly situated, Kierkegaard goes beyond him and questions the mode of extracting this knowledge. For Plato, each man knows everything and the teacher draws it out. For Kierkegaard, the problem is that each man must find the teacher who provides the means to come to know.

Socrates spoke of "the god" [ho theos] or "the divinity" [to daimonion]. Though some have ably argued that Plato was laying the groundwork for monotheism (see the Timaeus), the Greek term "the god" does not mean the one and only god, but merely the particular god in question, perhaps Apollo, or perhaps a deity of his own acquaintance. Sometimes Socrates called this god a divinity. Divinities are described by Socrates in The Symposium (202e) as performing intermediary functions. Kierkegaard maintains the use of the term "the god" so as to keep the work grounded in the Socratic issue, and since he has a specific god in mind: the Christian God. H. and E. Hong maintain the definite article in their translation, and also lower case "g". The Danish word for god is gud. The article is en, and is attached as a suffix when definite, but appears separately before the noun when indefinite: thus en gud means "a god" and guden means "the god". H. Hong comments on this usage.

The Danish text here and throughout Fragments (with few exceptions) has Guden, a noun with the definite article. This unusual form emphasizes the Socratic-Platonic context of the hypothesis and its development in the entire work.... In the entire Kierkegaard authorship, Guden is very rarely found except in Fragments (p. 278).

Kierkegaard assumes that the learner originally possessed the condition for learning. God gave him the condition, otherwise he would be merely animal; but he has lost it. He has not lost it by accident, for, Kierkegaard asks, how can something inferior "vanquish something superior"? Nor is it due to an act of the god, for this would be a contradiction, since he originally imparted it. He concludes that the learner, "who is untruth" is not only outside of the truth "but is polemical against the truth" (p. 15). The argument continues its shift from the strictly philosophical to the philosophical-theological.

The teacher, then, is the god himself who, acting as the occasion, prompts the learner to be reminded that he is untruth and is that through his own fault. But this state—to be untruth and to be through one's own fault—what can we call it? Let us call it sin (p. 15).

The Socratic view lacks a concept of sin. All wrongdoing is from ignorance. If a man knows what is right, he will do it. No one can endure such a contradiction of will at variance with knowledge. Kierkegaard expands on this view, and grounds the learner in ignorance, but ignorance due to his own act. But Kierkegaard asks whether the learner, who has lost the truth by an act and has become "untruth", can re-acquire the truth by a volitive act. He answers in the negative. He asks what we should call such a teacher, and with his answer thereby enters into the religious: the teacher is a savior, deliverer, reconciler, and judge. Thus, the learner needs to be converted.

Kierkegaard finally addresses the third element of the chapter's construction: the follower. When the follower follows the teacher into truth, there is a "conversion", and the follower becomes a "new person".

II: The God as Teacher and Savior (A Poetical Venture)

Kierkegaard continues by considering Plato's Socrates. Socrates has always appealed to Christians because he claimed that actual justice is to be preferred over the appearance of justice (see The Republic). There are similarities between Socrates and Christ. They both taught free of charge and had disciples. They told stories to illustrate their ideas. They both used the maieutic approach (from the Greek maieutikos, meaning "giving birth"), that is, eliciting the truth by asking questions. Indeed Socrates compared himself to a midwife who assists with the birth of knowledge in the individual. They both asked questions as if they already had the answers. Whereas Christ spoke of the Father who sent him, Socrates said that a god (or the divinity) spoke to him often from his youth, dissuading him from certain activities: "A certain voice comes, which whenever it comes, always turns me away from whatever I was about to do, but never turns me toward something" (Apology 31d). Kierkegaard's concern is how the god teaches.

As is well known Socrates, as opposed to the sophists, did not accept pay for his teaching. Kierkegaard explains that this was because he considered himself a learner as well.

Between one human being and another, this is the highest: the pupil is the occasion for the teacher to understand himself; the teacher is the occasion for the pupil to understand himself.... But the god needs no pupil in order to understand himself, and no occasion can act upon him in such a way that there is just as much in the occasion as in the resolution (p. 24).

Another way in which the Socratic and Kierkegaardian teachers differ is that in the latter view, love is the motivating force. There are two broad ways for the god to deal with the learner. The first way is for the learner to make an ascent. Kierkegaard likens the teacher (god) relationship to a king who loved a lowly maiden (p. 26ff). The king loves the maiden and wants to reveal his love for her. If the king reveals himself in full in all his hidden sorrow, he would debase his love or frighten the beloved. Thus, he cannot fully disclose himself. The god wants to be the teacher, "and the god's concern is to bring about equality" (p. 28). There is no actual equality between man and the god, and the god has no need of the learner. But love changes the relationship. Kierkegaard then invites the poet—and he often considered himself to be one—to find a solution. First, he might appear to him and bring him into the realms of joy. Kierkegaard recalls the God of the Old Testament, whose sight meant instant death (Exodus 33.20).

Who grasps the contradiction of this sorrow: not to disclose itself is the death of love; to disclose itself is the death of the beloved (p. 30).

The second way that the teacher can reveal himself is to make a descent, in the form of a servant.

Between one human being and another, to be of assistance is supreme, but to beget is reserved for the god, whose love is procreative, but not that procreative love of which Socrates knew how to speak so beautifully on a festive occasion [see The Symposium]. Such a love does not mark the relation of a teacher to the pupil but the relation of the autodidact to the beautiful as he, ignoring dispersed beauty, envisions beauty-in-and-by-itself and now gives birth to many beautiful and glorious discourses and thought.... He has the condition, therefore, within himself, and the bringing forth (the birth) is only an appearing of what was present, and that is why here again in this birth the moment is instantly swallowed by recollection (p. 31).

Oh, to sustain heaven and earth by an omnipotent "Let there be," and then, if this were to be absent for one fraction of a second, to have everything collapse—how easy this would be compared with bearing the possibility of the offense of the human race when out of love one becomes its savior!

But the form of the servant was not something put on. Therefore then god must suffer all things.... The suffering of death is not his suffering, but his whole life is a story of suffering, and it is love that suffers, love that gives all and is itself destitute. What wonderful self-denial to ask in concern, even though the learner is the lowliest of persons: Do you really love me? For he himself knows where the danger threatens, and yet he knows that for him any easier way would be a deception, even though the learner would not understand it.

For love, any other revelation would be a deception, because either it would first have had to accomplish a change in the learner (love, however, does not change the beloved but changes itself) and conceal from him that this was needed, or in superficiality it would have had to remain ignorant that the whole understanding between them was a delusion (this is the untruth of paganism). For the god's love, any other revelation would be a deception....

Yet it has to be this way, and it is love that gives rise to all this suffering, precisely because the god is not zealous for himself but in love wants to be the equal of the most lowly of the lowly (p. 32ff.).

Kierkegaard employs two different concepts in this chapter: the occasion, the condition. The occasion is the point in time in which the learner relies on the teacher in his cognitive task. The condition can only be provided by the teacher, and is the means whereby the learner can learn. The condition is provided at the god's discretion. More on this below.

Kierkegaard's main concern was with knowledge of God through faith. Faith is the individual's reaction to the inherent paradox of Christianity. Since essential truth is far beyond our comprehension to the extent that we cannot approach it objectively, it appears to us in the form of a paradox. A paradox is a tension of sorts between at least two focal points. In terms of religious paradox, we may refer to the Christian doctrine of Jesus as fully divine and fully human. No one can comprehend how such a thing could be. However, it is not a flat contradiction. A logical contradiction posits two mutually exclusive premises, such as "James is a man and is not a man", where the word "man" means the same thing on both sides of the statement. This point is frequently misunderstood. Kierkegaard would not have us believe, or come into relation with, the impossible or the contradictory, but rather with the inconceivable. Furthermore, any attempt to remove the paradoxical is either an attempt to objectify what we cannot know objectively, because we are in the process of becoming, or, to dismiss the role of faith as silliness, which, again, implies that we can understand to a degree that we dismiss something absolutely as if we dwelled outside of the system (or the universe)—as if from an objective standpoint. To us, who are in the process of becoming, some truths are perceived as impenetrable paradoxes. Thinking and being are too remote from each other for us to see them as anything else. The paradoxical incites offense in the non-believer. This offense is a necessary reaction to Christianity. Kierkegaard next addresses the unknown thing which is the paradox.

Next, we must posit the leap, and in doing this we must shun a mere amassing of arguments, arrayed in a logical chain. Kierkegaard seems to have acquired the idea of the leap from Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-81), who in ways was groping toward some of his conclusions. He was a noted German esthetician, dramatist, and critic. His drama abandoned neo-classical forms and assumed more personal and ideal themes. Kierkegaard's leap is a qualitative leap of faith. This is not a blind leap as is often thought. Kierkegaard's concern was that faith is never easy or probable. Faith in God is an agonistic and often fearful struggle to cast one's entire person into relation to God. There is no gradual accumulation of sensory data or rational proofs for God's existence or for the resurrection of Christ, etc. One performs a willed act of faith despite fear, doubt and sin. The leap is not out of thoughtlessness, but out of volition. The leap is sheer and unmediated, and is not made by quantitative movements, stages, or changes. It cannot be mediated by proofs or reason. It is a sheer leap from doubt, or more specifically, from the doubt that exists by virtue of the paradoxical (the absurd), or in reaction to the offense of Christ, by faith to God. The amassing of proofs, known as a sorites, (Greek soreites from soros, meaning heap or quantity), is a series of arguments whereby one is led gradually from self-evident truth to other related premises. This chain of arguments is represented by the ladder (Greek klimax, see introduction above), and is utterly countermanded by Kierkegaard's leap.

Perhaps Descartes' method most aptly illustrates the use of the sorites. He began his Meditations by seeking to remove all presuppositions, except that which is unassailably self-evident. Unlike Descartes, Kierkegaard was anxious to ground philosophical truth in something more concrete than human consciousness. One can explain the effect of a phenomenon, if one cannot explain the phenomenon itself. Immediacy, which he later defines as "reality", is that which the thing is in and of itself without the mediation of language, which he calls ideality (see  [Johannes Climacus](http://sorenkierkegaard.org/johannes-climacus.html) ). Utter reality cannot be absolutely determined in itself. Language's description of it is ideal, and not the thing itself. Moreover, to finite consciousness all immediacy (reality) is true or untrue equally until it is mediated. In other words, unmediated reality is opaque to us. In Johannes Climacus Kierkegaard says,

Immediacy is reality; language is ideality; consciousness is contradiction. The moment I make a statement about reality, contradiction is present, for what I say is ideality (p. 168).

Contradiction appears in the expression (through language) of reality (immediacy, that is, that which is not mediated by something). The contradictory nature of consciousness is Kierkegaard's answer to the various interpretations of things and to our ability to express them. In other words, thinking and being cannot be unified in human consciousness. As a result of these prescriptions Kierkegaard says that the existence of God must be presupposed if we are to have meaningful discourse about deity. Again, this measure does not in any way pass for a proof. This is because God is the "unknown". Influenced by Kierkegaard's work, Karl Barth, the neo-orthodox theologian, would later use the term "wholly other" about God. On the incarnation Kierkegaard says,

This human being is also the god. How do I know that? Well, I cannot know it, for in that case I would have to know the god and the difference [everything that is not the god], and I do not know the difference, inasmuch as the understanding has made it like unto that from which it differs (p. 45f.).

Readers of Kierkegaard have often detected what is called negative theology, that due to human limitations we can only say what God is not, rather than what he is. While that view may prove helpful, literally speaking, Kierkegaard would say that a statement about a negative (what God is not) is still an act of positive cognition. If I should say that God is not finite, I am still asserting something positive about him. "Not finite" is actually a positive term to which one need only substitute a more obviously positive term, such as "infinite". We can be distracted by the word "not", or other negative affixes; yet the positive assertion of a negative remains a positive assertion. The ultimate negative statement, "There are no absolutes", is itself a contradiction in that it is an absolute (positive) statement. Moreover, the person who utters it tacitly claims to have had direct contact with all knowable constituents before having determined that no absolute exists among them.

Next, Kierkegaard steps beyond the epistemological dilemma of the division of thinking and being by positing sin.

What then is the difference? Indeed, what else but sin, since the difference, the absolute difference, must have been caused by the individual himself.... Thus the paradox becomes even more terrible, or the same paradox has the duplexity by which it manifests itself as the absolute—negatively, by bringing into prominence the absolute difference of sin and, positively, by wanting to annul this absolute difference in the absolute equality [the incarnation] (p. 47).

Thus, the epistemological problem is also an existential and dogmatic issue, which returns us to the subjective issue of cognition, which Plato approached with his theory of recollection, wherein all knowledge is already at hand and simply needs a (human) teacher to extract it. Kierkegaard substitutes the god-teacher for the human teacher. But sin interferes with the teaching process. The Socratic process excluded volition. The answer to ignorance was knowledge, which resides in each man, needing only the prompting of the teacher. The Christian process includes a limited volition. The answer to ignorance is for the god to remove the sin. Four days after Philosophical Fragments appeared, Kierkegaard published  [The Concept of Anxiety](http://sorenkierkegaard.org/concept-of-anxiety.html) , where he would further explore the dogmatic issue of sin from a psychological standpoint.

The epistemological paradox is so profound that volition becomes misconstrued, and brings about its own demise.

But is a paradox such as this conceivable?... The understanding certainly cannot think it, cannot hit upon it on its own, and if it is proclaimed, the understanding cannot understand it and merely detects that it will likely be its downfall. To that extent, the understanding has strong objections to it; and yet, on the other hand, in its paradoxical passion the understanding does indeed will its own downfall. But the paradox, too, wills this downfall of the understanding, and thus the two have a mutual understanding, but this understanding is present only in the moment of passion (p. 47).

The Socratic view of ignorance discounted the role of volition. If a man knows the truth, he will do it. If a man does wrong, it is because of ignorance. Kierkegaard extends this ignorance to include the function of will and the concept of sin. Our sin actually brings about the downfall of our understanding, so that we, like our counterparts under the Platonic system, are truly ignorant—until the teacher comes. But Kierkegaard introduces the theme of passion, which he addresses in other places, most notably in  [Two Ages]. Passion is the full activity of the self engaged in the cognitive process. It is not passive or self-referential, but is energized toward God. In Philosophical Fragments Kierkegaard likens this passion to erotic love when it is motivated by self-love: it wills its own downfall.

Kierkegaard begins by presenting two theories of the discovery of Truth. First is  [Socrates](https://www.gradesaver.com/philosophical-fragments/study-guide/character-list#socrates) ' adherence to the doctrine of recollection. For Kierkegaard this limited pursuit of truth does not accurately reflect his own eagerness to uncover Eternal Truth. In his pursuit Kierkegaard contradicts Enlightenment sentiment that  [God](https://www.gradesaver.com/philosophical-fragments/study-guide/character-list#god)  is a universal concept which can be discovered anywhere and instead proposes divine revelation upon which a person's consequence as a thinker depends. Essentially he is presenting this discussion of the nature and acquisition of truth through traditionally known religious terms. He advocates for Christianity for personal reasons, arguing that no one is helped by sitting on the fence and that religious belief is simply a choice, one which he has arrived at as a result of his own scientific education.

Moving onto an essay upon the nature of thought, Kierkegaard begins by establishing the service of thought in the healing and growth of the individual. He identifies an inherent paradox in the nature of thought  a person cannot find what he already knows because he knows it already and he cannot determine what to learn because he does not yet know it. Relating this state of paradox back to religion, Kierkegaard attributes the uncertainty of thought to human sin, which he describes as a corruption, a kind of willful ignorance of truths which were apparent from birth but became murky or were rejected later. Rejecting personal reliance, Kierkegaard believes the first step toward genuine growth is to acknowledge one's own entire dependence upon the "Teacher," in this case God. This is repentance. After this moment a person becomes consequential and their thoughts relevant to the collective search for Truth.

Next Kierkegaard examines how a person transitions from learner to teacher. He identifies God as the ultimate Teacher and explores why this would be. Motivated by love, God desires to be understood by people, so he speaks into the individual knowledge of the spiritual realm. There is an inherent frustration in this exchange, however, because the Teacher's instruction is so foreign that it may not be able to be understood by a mere person. In response, Kierkegaard outlines three theories of how God could bridge the gap between instruction and learning: elevate man to His own status, reveal Himself to man, or become man. The third option leads to Kierkegaard's exploration of the ultimate paradox: how can God be understood as a man if He does not sin like a man? Kierkegaard believes that Reason clashes with the individual's ability to know God because He is spirit and consequently foreign to man, but man can overcome this dilemma by releasing his control and finding peace in the unknown.

Finally, Kierkegaard leans into religious belief as a foundation for knowledge. He believes that, even were a person alive at the time of Christ's birth, that person could only hear secondhand and consequently would need to apply some degree of belief to the event. While this witness may be a source of historical information, he cannot dispel disbelief anymore than a person of a century later. For Kierkegaard this decision to believe transfers a person from non-being into being, sleeping to wakefulness. They become open to a new realm of possibilities which offer freedom because this person has willingly chosen to enter into this new condition. Further refining the argument, Kierkegaard says that Faith is the necessary tool to awaken a person because the transforming medium is not visible or essentially knowable.