

# THE OBJECTIVITY OF FAITH: KIERKEGAARD'S CRITIQUE OF FIDEISM

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**Abstract:** Perhaps Kierkegaard's most notorious—though pseudonymous—claim is that truth is subjectivity. This claim is commonly elaborated to mean that faith is a “how” (an attitude or practice of believing) and not a “what” (a certain objective content). I show through a discussion of examples taken from throughout Kierkegaard's writings that Kierkegaard accepts a basic insight of Kant's philosophy: each experience implicitly includes an underlying unity—the object—that does not itself appear. Both Kant and Kierkegaard emphasize the importance of a “continuity of impressions,” which gives experience its unified structure beyond changing superficial appearances. I show that Kierkegaardian faith requires an object in just this Kantian sense: the object of faith (the Incarnation) does not directly appear but is implicitly present in all experience. For Kant, this type of object is not “beyond” experience but is posited by reason as the unity of experience as a whole. In this respect at least, Kierkegaard's account of faith shows similarities not just with Kant's practical philosophy (as suggested by C. Stephen Evans) but with his metaphysics as well.

Perhaps Søren Kierkegaard's most notorious—though pseudonymous—claim is that truth is subjectivity (see *CUP1* 189–251).<sup>1</sup> This claim is commonly elaborated to mean that Kierkegaard exhorts the individual toward a pragmatic “how,” not a descriptive “what.”<sup>2</sup> Faith, for example, is more importantly a matter of the believer's attitude and practice than of understanding a particular content or object. I will show, however, that Kierkegaard accepts a basic insight of Immanuel Kant's German Idealism: the subjectivity of faith is inseparable from objectivity in the sense of apprehending a unity of appearances that belongs to the object itself. While several readers of Kierkegaard have emphasized the importance of the object

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<sup>1</sup>References to *CUP1* are to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, vol. 1 (Kierkegaard 1992).

<sup>2</sup>In addition to the views discussed below, see McLane (1977), Wood (1998), and Stokes (2010b, 308), though my reading supports Stokes's overall thesis (see footnote 8).

of faith in Kierkegaard's writings,<sup>3</sup> I will defend a slightly stronger claim: far from concluding that "truth is subjectivity," Kierkegaard's writings are an extended critique of subjectivity severed from objectivity. This type of critique suggests new similarities with Kant—not just the practical philosophy but with Kant's metaphysics as well.<sup>4</sup>

To counterbalance claims Kierkegaard does make about the importance of subjective appropriation, I will bring forward examples from throughout Kierkegaard's authorship where there is some failure to have truth, and where the problem lies primarily with the object that is experienced. While these examples do not all require faith in the strict sense, they do serve as analogies for what Kierkegaard means by religious faith. I will show overall that faith for Kierkegaard means recognizing continuity among appearances when the ground of the continuity never directly appears.

## 1 Kant on Objects and Objective Validity

Kant uses the term "object" to mean something that is a unity of various sensible impressions or intuitions; that is, an object is a combination of form (the concept "through which an object is thought at all") and content (the intuition "through which it is given") (*CPR* B 146).<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that for Kant an object is not outside of experience, even though it is also never strictly given as a representation; instead, an object is represented through its various appearances (A 109). So there is no need for a subject to go "beyond" experience—and certainly not beyond reason—to cognize an object in and through its appearances. On the other hand, apprehension of an object does point beyond its particular appearances to some unifying ground that is not itself numbered among the object's representations. Kant calls this unity of appearances "synthesis of apprehension," and it is the basis for all empirical (particular) perceptions of objects of experience (B 160). While all such unities ultimately depend on the unity of apprehension in the subject herself (such that she recognizes all her experiences as belonging to her) (A 113–114), the possibility of such synthetic unity nevertheless does establish that concepts belong objectively—not merely subjectively or arbitrarily (A 104)—to the objects experienced. Kant explains the difference between subjective and objective validity by distinguishing judgments of perception from judgments of experience. In a judgment of perception ("If I carry a body, I feel a pressure of weight"), the judgment is based only on

<sup>3</sup>Examples include Westphal (1996, 2008), who argues that the "object" of faith in Kierkegaard is the person of Christ, Davenport (2008), and Jacoby (2002), who provides a helpful overview of the debate concerning faith and objectivity in Kierkegaard.

<sup>4</sup>Most comparisons between Kant and Kierkegaard compare their ethics, and several draw implications for the relationship between faith and reason. See especially Fremstedal (2012a,b). See also Green (1992, 2011).

<sup>5</sup>References to *CPR* are to the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1998) and identify the A or B version followed by the original pagination.

repeated experiences; a judgment of experience (“It, the body, is heavy”), however, makes a claim about the object. This latter judgment, Kant explains, “would be to say that these two representations are combined in the object, i.e., regardless of any difference in the condition of the subject, and are not merely found together in perception (however often as they might be repeated)” (B 142). Kant calls this synthesis objective rather than subjective even though—like all experience—it ultimately depends on the transcendental unity of self-consciousness in the subject herself (B 133).

I will suggest that Kierkegaard takes up this idea of a synthesis of apprehension from Kant and puts it to use in his own account of faith. For Kierkegaard, the right attitude of the subject correlates to a unity in the object that endures through many incidental variations of impressions, just as for Kant an object of experience persists through a variety of different representations. If the similarities between Kant and Kierkegaard extend all the way back to the First Critique, then Kant’s metaphysics can shed light on what Kierkegaard could mean by the essential role of objectivity in faith.

## 2 Kant and Kierkegaard on Objective Uncertainty

It is not difficult to find passages in Kierkegaard’s writings that emphasize the subjectivity of faith and that suggest Kierkegaard is reacting to—not appropriating—Kant’s concern for objective validity. In contrast with Kant’s assurances that practical reason must posit God as the fulfillment of the moral law, Kierkegaard insists that we are 70,000 fathoms out in a leaky boat (*CUP1* 140, 204; *BA* 108).<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Kant himself famously claims that belief in God is subjective. Hardly less notorious than Kierkegaard’s “truth is subjectivity” is Kant’s proposal to “deny knowledge in order to make room for faith” (*CPR* B xxx). Kant scholars are quick to point out, however, that God’s existence is not therefore uncertain for Kant. Although God’s existence is a moral certainty rather than a logical certainty (A 829 / B 857), R.Z. Friedman observes that “moral certainty is not a lesser degree of certainty than that afforded by theoretical inquiry” (Friedman 1986, 9). Kant reserves the term “knowledge” for an object of cognition—i.e., an experience that includes some direct intuition. Since God never appears as an object of experience in any ordinary sense, no one should claim to have knowledge of God’s existence. Yet Kant’s efforts do amount to what Friedman calls a “non-cognitive demonstration”: though God does not appear within experience, we do have rational (i.e., moral) certainty that God exists.

Friedman takes the question of certainty to be a distinguishing mark between Kant and Kierkegaard. “There are no 70,000 fathoms of water in Kant’s analysis; rather, there is a bridge of reasoning which offers certainty”

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<sup>6</sup>References to *BA* are to *The Book on Adler* (Kierkegaard 1998a).

(1986, 9). Since for Kant a rational person takes the moral law as her maxim, a rational person does believe in the existence of God and a future life: “The end here is inescapably fixed, and according to all my insight there is possible only a single condition under which this end is consistent with all ends together and thereby has practical validity, namely, that there be a God and a future world” (A 828 / B 856). Friedman argues that for Kierkegaard, by contrast, it is essential that God’s existence is not just unknown in the strict Kantian sense but also uncertain (i.e., “subjective” in a wider sense that could demand passion rather than pure reason). Friedman insists that Kierkegaardian faith is not for this reason irrational: “Faith does not deny reason; it transcends it” (1986, 20). But clearly, according to Friedman, Kierkegaard would disagree with Kant’s claim that belief in God is required by reason.

It is important to note that for Kant reliance on practical rather than theoretical reason does make faith “subjective” in the sense of conditional, since not all rational beings necessarily share human moral dispositions (CPR A 829 / B 857). Yet in another sense, practical reason makes faith genuinely “objective” for the first time. That is, practical reason gives the will its end (the highest good), which is to say that it gives the will its true object as the “idea of the whole of all ends”—a world in which all those worthy to be happy are happy (Kant OCS 8:280n).<sup>7</sup> While Kierkegaard certainly rejects pure speculation and abstract calculation as the basis of faith, perhaps he does so, like Kant, in order to give faith its proper object, as I elaborate below. If so, then Kierkegaard’s critique of objectivity continues Kant’s project of defending objective validity by clarifying what it means to be an object of this kind.

Kierkegaard’s version of Kant’s highest good would be the incarnation as a synthesis of ideality and actuality—the ideal made actual. Kierkegaard’s insistence that a believer must relate to the paradox of the incarnation subjectively changes its tone when read in relation to Kant’s account of subjectivity and objectivity. For Kant, both knowledge of objects (objectively sufficient) and moral belief (subjectively sufficient but objectively insufficient) (CPR A 822 / B 850) reflect a rational supposition of unity in a manifold that remains “objective” in a different sense: in the case of knowledge, understanding recognizes various appearances as belonging to one object; in the case of moral belief, reason recognizes unity among a multitude of ends brought together in a single object, the highest good. So while belief in God’s existence for Kant is not objective in the sense of absolutely universal (since there may be beings without moral dispositions, as mentioned above) (A 829 / B 857), it remains objective in two other senses: (1) God’s existence is rationally necessary *if* one is oriented toward

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<sup>7</sup>References to OCS are to “On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, But It Is of No Use in Practice” (Kant 1996) and identify the article number followed by the original pagination.

the highest good as an end, and (2) it is rationally necessary to give the concepts of reason their object as an end, since a pure possibility cannot serve as the basis for action in the present. Kant explains that the highest good does not work as an incentive for the will to act; instead, “only in that ideal of pure reason does it also get an *object*” (OCS 8:279).

Like Kierkegaard, Kant clarifies the distinction between subjective belief and objective knowledge by saying that belief is a personal orientation: “The word ‘belief,’ however, concerns only the direction that an idea gives me and the subjective influence on the advancement of my actions of reason that holds me fast to it, even though I am not in a position to give an account of it from a speculative point of view” (CPR A 827 / B 855). Someone taking the highest good as an object (an end) must posit God’s existence as the only conceivable condition for the realization of that end in actuality, which is the only rational justification for action in the present. This object (the highest good) is not directly represented in the action that is directed toward it. On the other hand, not appearing directly in experience does not preclude the highest good from being a genuine “object” in the sense of a rational ground of unity underlying many appearances. Just as an object of experience gives various appearances their unity as representations of a single object (as discussed above), the highest good gives an individual’s actions in the present their unifying directedness toward one practical end.

I will show that faith for Kierkegaard similarly unifies a manifold of impressions and in this sense functions as an object in Kant’s philosophy. I will first present the more standard reading of Kierkegaard that elaborates faith primarily in terms of subjective appropriation. (I will call this the Performative View.) I then discuss examples of different types of perceptual recognition in Kierkegaard (we may also say “synthesis of apprehension” or “apperception” [A 116]) that require a fuller account of objectivity.<sup>8</sup> While Kierkegaard may agree with Kant that faith is essentially subjective, belief for both Kierkegaard and Kant occurs in the context of a more basic demand of reason to make sense of experience as a unified whole (i.e., in relation to an object that unifies appearances). The examples I discuss support the view that Kierkegaard, like Kant, is engaged in a general critique of subjectivity severed from objectivity.

### 3 Truth is Subjectivity: Performative Views of Kierkegaardian Faith

I call an account of Kierkegaardian faith a Performative View if it elucidates faith primarily in terms of a practical role, attitude, or virtue of the subject who has or enacts faith. At the extreme end, James Conant has argued that

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<sup>8</sup>Though I cannot here develop this connection fully, the interpretation of Kierkegaardian faith as Kantian apperception supports Patrick Stokes’s thesis that selfhood in Kierkegaard means pre-reflective self-consciousness of oneself in all one’s actions and experiences, especially perceptions. See especially Stokes (2007, 2010a).

the only meaningful “content” of faith is an act or attitude of the subject. Conant goes so far as to claim there is nothing to see in Kierkegaard’s writing other than oneself, and Kierkegaard’s primary project is to show the “ludicrousness” of claims to ineffable truth. Conant writes: “My suggestion is that the work as a whole represents an elaborate *reductio ad absurdum* of the philosophical project of clarifying and propounding what it is to be a Christian” (Conant 1993, 207). *Either/Or* in particular is a mirror in which the reader recognizes her own confusions, where the author withdraws and leaves the reader to confront herself (202–204).

A second way of privileging the subjective side of faith is to elaborate faith as a moral practice (rather than a logical conclusion as in the case of a *reductio*) that the reader undertakes. Mark C. Taylor, for example, argues that Kierkegaard creates a *Bildungsroman* over the course of his authorship in which the reader is the protagonist (Taylor 2000, 79). Like Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Kierkegaard’s writing does not merely expose or illuminate a problem in society but is itself the solution to what is wrong (229). Taylor writes, “We have seen that Kierkegaard, like Hegel, attempts to provide a cure for spiritlessness by developing a therapeutic aesthetic education that will lead the reader from inauthentic to authentic selfhood” (79). According to Taylor, the meaning of Kierkegaard’s works (especially the pseudonymous writings) only emerges once we recognize their performative function.<sup>9</sup>

A third way of emphasizing the subjective character of Kierkegaardian faith aims to incorporate some objective orientation into the subjective attitude itself, even while the subjective attitude remains of primary importance. This is C. Stephen Evans’s more subtle approach. Evans aims to keep the subjective and objective poles of faith essentially related by defining religious truth subjectively as “what makes a person’s life true” while maintaining that what makes a person’s life true will involve objective beliefs about “what is the case” (C. S. Evans 2000, 14, 21). Evans’s approach remains a Performative View for two reasons: (1) he continually falls back on the claim that the offense of faith is primarily ethical or practical, and (2) he insists that practice takes the believer beyond the limits of theoretical reason. Evans writes, “The incarnation thus itself provides the condition for coming to understand human sinfulness and the ways in which that sinfulness has damaged our human reason.” Even the discussion of the object of faith (the incarnation) reverts to a description of its effect on the subject, such that faith is primarily elucidated as acceptance of one’s own limitations: “When I encounter God in Christ it becomes possible for me

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<sup>9</sup>John Whitmire similarly locates the meaning of Kierkegaard’s work in its enactment, but for Whitmire the works are most importantly Kierkegaard’s enactment of his vocation as a writer. He locates Kierkegaard’s religiousness (i.e., faith) in that performance of writing as well, reading Kierkegaard’s authorship as a “performative autobiography” and arguing that both Derrida and Kierkegaard are engaged in “a telling of the truth of their selves.” See Whitmire (2006, 418–419).

to become aware of both of these dimensions of my sinfulness. I can see in Jesus a perfect model of both humility and love, and I can thus begin to recognize the lack of those qualities in myself" (C. S. Evans 2008, 324).

I will discuss Evans's view in detail because Evans takes himself to be uncovering a similarity between Kant and Kierkegaard, at least when Kant's philosophy is understood "as an enterprise that is closely linked to practical reason" (2000, 9). Kant and Kierkegaard, according to Evans, share an emphasis on practice over abstract theory. Evans tends to place these in tension, so that practical certainty increases with theoretical uncertainty (2000, 18–19). Evans's overall emphasis on practice and objective uncertainty leads him to characterize Kierkegaard as a "responsible fideist," where fideism entails recognizing the limits of reason (2008).<sup>10</sup> The Absolute Paradox is a reminder that what humans take to be reasonable is shaped in part by our moral disposition—that is, by either humble acceptance or pride. Evans writes,

There are two dimensions of human sin that are its dominant characteristics: pride and selfishness. These are precisely the characteristics that make it difficult for sinful human beings to believe in God's incarnation, for such faith requires the acceptance of what I cannot myself understand, and thus requires humility, the antidote to pride. It also requires belief in the possibility of self-giving love that I myself am not capable of, and thus in my selfishness I find the incarnation unfathomable. (2008, 323–324)

According to Evans, the paradox of the Christian incarnation is a conflict between what is to be believed and what the subject is morally willing to accept as true. The Absolute Paradox as the object of faith is most importantly the kind of thing that is likely to produce resistance in an individual whose beliefs and disbeliefs are motivated by pride.

In the next section, I discuss examples from Kierkegaard where an object fails to be recognized, and the failure would not have been prevented by a different subjective attitude or by acknowledging the limits of reason. Instead, the object described is one that unifies experience in a distinctively Kantian way, and the examples clarify this deeper kind of unity an object can have. In the examples below, different individuals fail to recognize (1) a pair of legs as one's own, (2) a wig-wearing robber, and (3) in the case of Adler, a subjective experience *as* merely subjective. An account of faith that takes the "how" of faith as its defining characteristic will misdiagnose these kinds of cases. In the first two cases, an individual fails to recognize some kind of objective content (a "what"). In the case of Adler, which I discuss

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<sup>10</sup>See also J. Evans (2008). Evans argues that for Kierkegaard—as well as for Unamuno—objective truth must be appropriated passionately. Jan Evans helpfully distinguishes between the claims that "truth is subjectivity" and "truth is subjective" (415). I have not addressed "subjectivism" in this paper.

in the following section, I will confirm Kierkegaard's diagnosis that Adler suffers from an inability to distinguish subjective activity from objective content and relies entirely on the subjective.

#### 4 Faith as Recognition: Two Studies in Failure

Anti-Climacus tells a story in *Sickness unto Death* of a peasant who takes his clothing to constitute his own identity:

There is a story about a peasant who went barefooted to town with enough money to buy himself a pair of stockings and shoes and to get drunk, and in trying to find his way home in his drunken state, he fell asleep in the middle of the road. A carriage came along, and the driver shouted to him to move or he would drive over his legs. The drunken peasant woke up, looked at his legs and, not recognizing them because of the shoes and stockings, said: "Go ahead, they are not my legs." (SUD 53)<sup>11</sup>

Anti-Climacus interprets this tale as a case of mistaking "externalities" for the true identity of a self. He writes: "The man of immediacy does not know himself, he quite literally identifies himself only by the clothes he wears, he identifies having a self by externalities . . ." (SUD 53). When these externalities change, he fears he has lost himself completely. Patrick Stokes provides insightful commentary on this passage in *Kierkegaard's Mirrors*, arguing that the peasant fails to recognize his own legs as related to him in the right way, which shows his lack of a developed self (Stokes 2010a, 74).<sup>12</sup>

Anti-Climacus goes on to claim that reflection is an improvement over this kind of immediacy (SUD 54). Immediacy here again means treating superficial appearances as amounting to a thing's identity. Far from advocating passion or subjective appropriation at the expense of objectivity, in these examples Kierkegaard is at least as concerned with failures to have *enough* critical distance to recognize the bigger picture. As additional support for this interpretation, we can think of the youth in *The Concept of Anxiety* who lacks "contemplation," who when asked if he knows where raisins come from, replies, "We get ours from the professor on Cross Street" (CA 134).<sup>13</sup> In this case, recognizing the truth of his situation does not demand stronger interest or passion but most importantly the ability to abstract himself from his immediate location in order to see the whole.

Climacus tells a similar story in "An Understanding with the Reader" in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. In this story, a traveler has been the

<sup>11</sup>References to SUD are to *The Sickness unto Death* (Kierkegaard 1983).

<sup>12</sup>I am grateful to Stokes for bringing this passage to my attention in a seminar he gave at St. Olaf College, MN, in August 2007.

<sup>13</sup>References to CA are to *The Concept of Anxiety* (Kierkegaard 1980).

victim of a robbery. When faced with an innocent person wearing a wig the real robber had worn, the traveler swears in court that the wig-wearer is the robber. Later, when the real robber puts on the wig, the traveler realizes his mistake, but it is too late: he has already sworn an oath in court based on the accidental, external fact of the wig (CUP1 615–616). The problem here is most importantly a failure (a) to recognize the sameness in essentials (the real robber, who is in the court room all along but without the accidental feature of the wig) and (b) to discern a difference despite apparent similarity (in the wig).

Two observations are particularly relevant in Climacus's telling of this affair. First, as we might expect on a standard performative interpretation, Climacus considers this to be a case where the perceiver (here, the victim of the robbery) was distracted by a "what" and failed to have the right "how":

He [the real robber] puts on the wig, grabs the traveler by the throat, and says: Your wallet—and the traveler recognizes the robber and offers to swear to it—but the trouble is that he already has sworn an oath. So it goes with everyone who in one way or another has a "what" and pays no attention to "how": he swears, he takes an oath, he runs errands, he risks his life and blood, he is executed—all for the wig. (CUP1 616)

The strange thing about Climacus's comments is that this seems rather to be a case of the right "how" (swearing passionately) but the wrong "what" (not the real robber). It would be better to say that the "how" (passion) does not correlate well with the "what" (a mere external appearance). If Climacus's own interpretation is too superficial for even a playful example like this one, we should likewise be careful of taking his claims about Christianity at face value. For example, Climacus states: "Being a Christian is defined not by the 'what' of Christianity but by the 'how' of the Christian" (CUP1 610). What happens if we extend the more sophisticated interpretation of Climacus's example above (which requires rejecting his stated conclusion about it) to the claim about Christianity? The problem of faith would then be that it does not have the right object, just as the victim of robbery accused the wrong man. True faith would mean correctly perceiving a deeper identity through changing superficial appearances and distinguishing appearances from the object itself. The witness fails because he mistakes the appearance (the wig) for the robber himself.

The second important observation concerning this case is Climacus's closing comment in the last paragraph of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, before "An Understanding with the Reader." Climacus writes, "If my memory does not fail me, I have already told this story once before in this book; yet I wish to end the whole book with it. I do not think that anyone will in truth be able to accuse me ironically of having varied it in such a

way that it has not remained the same” (CUP1 616). Climacus did tell the same story earlier, in abbreviated form, in “An Expression of Gratitude” (CUP1 69). There Climacus muses on Lessing’s ability to speak in such a way as to keep a secret from those who do not already understand what he is trying to talk about. Lessing writes in such a way that many are misled by externals—by the “form and clothing” (CUP1 68) of what he is saying—such that they are unable to recognize the same truth in a different form. Here again the problem is with both the subjective and objective poles:

It was a misuse of his dialectical skill that he must necessarily occasion them to swear falsely (since they necessarily had to swear), both when they swore that what he said now was the same as what he had said before because the form and clothing were the same, and also when they swore that what he said now was not the same because the form and the clothing had changed. . . . (CUP1 68–69)

The subjective problem is that the crowd is convinced they must swear to something; the objective problem is that Lessing does not provide them with a situation in which they can swear. They are looking only at the “form and clothing” of what Lessing communicates, and there is no object there to support the weight of their act of swearing. The crowd mistakes superficial appearances for the object itself, struggling (and failing) to give the full weight of objective reality to its mere “form and clothing.” As in the re-telling, there is a failing in the subject, but it is a failure to recognize an object—or lack of an object—in what is experienced. Understood in this context, the story of the robber is not a straightforward exhortation toward subjectivity but rather a clarification of the type of object a religious person has to deal with.

At the end of the *Postscript*, Climacus associates the “form” of an act with its “how,” which in turn implicates the “how” as belonging to mere appearance. But he goes on to say that the “how” of certain complex acts (e.g., erotic love) cannot be neatly separated from their content. The “how” of erotic love is instead essentially defined by its object:

With regard to loving (to illustrate the same thing again), it holds true that a person cannot say what or whom he loves by defining his “how.” All lovers have the “how” of erotic love in common, and now the particular individual must add the name of his beloved. But with regard to having faith (*sensu strictissimo*), it holds true that this “how” fits only one object. If anyone says, “Yes, but then one can in turn learn the “how” of faith by rote and recite it,” the answer to that must be: That cannot be done, because the person who states it directly contradicts himself, because

the substance of the statement must be continually reduplicated in the form, and the isolation in the definition must reduplicate itself in the form. (CUP1 613–614n)

We can readily find the standard repudiation of objectivity here: a “loved object” (beloved) could not exist as loved apart from some subject loving it, and there is no abstract content (“loved object”) that has any meaning apart from a subject’s activity of loving. The reality of the “loved object” must always include (be “reduplicated in”) the subject herself. Yet conversely, the reminder that the form is “reduplicated” rather than simply performed by the subject confirms that the form—the “how”—is there in the object as loved, though not in such a way that it can be isolated from the subjective act of loving.

In the discussion above, the distinction between the “how” and the “what” of faith turns out to be different from the distinction between subjective appropriation and abstract, objective content. Instead, both the “how” and the “what” of faith are on the side of the object in a broader sense: how the object appears (its “form” as loved) and the object that appears as loved are “reduplicated” in the subject but belong equally to the object. Climacus’s discussion here supports my view that Kierkegaard, like Kant, “critiques” objectivity in the sense of correcting misunderstandings of the object of faith. While he does reject objective certainty as a substitute for faith (as does Kant), a richer kind of objectivity remains essential. The case of Adler, I will show below, demonstrates the danger of overlooking the essential objective character of faith.

## 5 The Strange Case of Adler (and Its Stranger Diagnosis)

*The Book on Adler* is rarely discussed in the epistemology of religious belief, even though it is a work in which Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Petrus Minor, must determine whether a particular statement (put forward by Adler) is a divine revelation—much as Abraham had to do in *Fear and Trembling*. There is certainly some evidence to confirm the view that faith is subjectivity in *The Book on Adler*. First, Petrus Minor insists that the fact that something is a revelation is more important than what the revelation says (BA 62). Moreover, according to Minor, Adler’s relationship to the truth is the degree of (subjective) authority with which he speaks, not the (objective) content of the revelation. He asserts, “Authority is a specific quality that enters from somewhere else and qualitatively asserts itself precisely when the content of the statement or the act is made a matter of indifference aesthetically” (WA 98; BA 179).<sup>14</sup>

Yet the review of Adler is primarily an analysis of what goes wrong when subjective attitudes and objective content are confused. Minor concludes that Adler’s “case” (he refers to Adler as a textbook case of a widespread

<sup>14</sup>References to WA are to *Without Authority* (Kierkegaard 1997).

disease) exemplifies a lack of distinction between subject and object. The issue is not whether Adler has indeed been “moved” (a subjective question) but whether the occasion or cause of his being moved is a revelation (an objective question). And yet, all the evidence Adler presents support the premise that he has indeed been moved rather than answering the essential question of whether he was moved in response to God or something else. Petrus offers an analogy to Archimedes running down the street naked: the validity of his excuse for doing so depends on his having actually made a great discovery. His running down the street naked is not in itself evidence for his having made a discovery (BA 112), though it confirms that he thinks he has. Similarly, it is the objective event that matters here, not Adler’s subjective relation to it.

Minor’s approach runs counter to the way in which deconstructive critics, as more extreme representatives of the Performative View, have interpreted Kierkegaard’s works. In particular, Joakim Garff and Joseph Westfall have argued that Kierkegaard’s works lack a unified viewpoint but serve rather as raw material from which the reader can produce her own, new kind of object.<sup>15</sup> Joseph Westfall calls this subjective activity “poetization.”<sup>16</sup> But in the case of Petrus Minor, discussed above, it is clear that in his role as critic he cannot creatively produce a unity in the work that is not already there. If Adler’s work turns out to lack a unifying idea, Minor cannot supply it. The reader can at best be a “ministering critic”:

A critic is, ought to be, a ministering spirit; he is and ought to be, in the sense of ideality, the author’s best friend, because he loves the author in his idea. As soon as the author gives a hint from the region in which he is or wants to be, the critic immediately makes a survey, then changes his clothes according to the region and the sphere, serving *e concessis* [on the basis of the other’s premises], and from now on is the author’s trusty friend—in the sense of ideality, because the critic is no family friend; he does not love the author’s flesh and blood; he is not *Busenfreund* [bosom friend] who is satisfied with everything just because it is by the author. (BA 18)

While the critic certainly does not accept the author’s words at face value, the emphasis in this passage is on the content of what Petrus Minor calls the “revelation fact,” not on the author’s *or* the critic’s activities. This revelation fact is objective in the sense that it may be known better by the critic than the author. The “ministering critic” is one who hangs onto the idea that unifies the author’s work even when the author has lost sight of it: “Yet the ministering critic, the faithful lover, must not relinquish that fact,

<sup>15</sup>See Garff (2006) and Westfall (2006). For a full discussion of this issue, see Helms (2010).

<sup>16</sup>The claim is that Kierkegaard can “poetize” a life-view for Andersen when Andersen does not have one of his own. See Westfall (2006, 41, 49).

not even if the author becomes unfaithful to himself" (BA 20). A critic like Minor receives what the author sets in the work and orients himself with respect to what he finds. The critic must be charitable and faithful to the author's idea.

In this case the critic's confidence turns out to be misplaced. Minor begins by assuming that Adler has indeed had a revelation, but this beginning only leads to confusion, since Adler does not consistently describe his experience in terms of the revelation (BA 88). Instead, Adler continually fails to distinguish the objective fact of revelation from his subjective experience of understanding it. In a surprising diagnosis, Minor argues that while Adler may have indeed been subjectively moved, his subjective reaction is too general a description. In other words, because it is *subjective* it is *not particular* enough; it applies equally to many different kinds of religious experiences, not all of which would qualify (from the Christian perspective) as genuine revelations. This criticism fits well with the discussion of erotic love in *Postscript* set forward above: the "how" of erotic love must be particularized by the name of the beloved. Minor similarly views Adler's (subjective) emotional reaction as too universal and (objective) concepts as the missing essential particularity that would mark Adler's experience as a genuine revelation. He writes:

But Adler's excellence was that he was deeply moved, shaken in his inmost being, that accordingly his inwardness came into existence, or he came into existence in accordance with his inwardness. But to be deeply moved in this way is a very vague expression for something as concrete as a Christian awakening, and yet more may not be said about Magister Adler. To be shaken (somewhat in the sense in which one speaks of shaking someone in order to awaken him) is the more universal basis of all religiousness; being shaken, being deeply moved, and subjectivity's coming into existence in the inwardness of emotion are shared by the pious pagan and the pious Jew in common with a Christian. On the common ground of the more universal deep emotion, the qualitative difference must be erected and must manifest itself, because the more universal deep emotion refers only to something abstract: to be deeply moved by something higher, something eternal, an idea. . . . In other words, emotion that is Christian is controlled by conceptual definitions, and when deep emotion is transformed into or expressed in words in order to be communicated, this transformation must continually take place within the conceptual definitions. (BA 112–113)

Minor's comments here challenge the standard view that associates subjectivity with becoming a concrete individual and objectivity with universality

and the anonymous crowd. Since Minor measures the authenticity of Adler's experience by its objective content, it challenges the performative interpretation of Kierkegaard, where faith is primarily an attitude or passion of the subject. But it is consistent with Climacus's discussion in the *Postscript*, where true subjectivity depends on objective content, and it fits neatly with my claim that Kierkegaard is as much a critic of pure subjectivity—that is, of subjectivity severed from its object—as he is of objectivity.

Elsewhere, Minor confirms that a genuine revelation is not a personal epiphany but *what* one is saved into—that is, a certain objective content (BA 66). Adler's experience fails to qualify as a revelation because it is purely subjective: when pressed with further questions, he can only further emphasize the “how”—that is, the way in which he experienced his (supposed) revelation (BA 73). Minor's diagnosis is that people are trying to have religiousness without any “what” or “how” (BA 107). While we could debate which of these is more important, it makes the most sense of all the examples discussed above to say that we cannot have one without the other. But for this kind of conclusion to be meaningful, we need to say more about how the “what” and the “how” of faith can be essentially related in an object such that this relation can be reduplicated in a believing subject.

## 6 Subjectivity and Objectivity: An Essential Correlation

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Haufniensis clearly thinks of the essential continuity of faith in terms of an object *and* the relating activity of the subject. One of the main themes of *The Concept of Anxiety* is that a person is both an individual and a member of a race that spans time and constitutes that individual's history (which is at the same time the general history of the race). So Haufniensis is occupied throughout *The Concept of Anxiety* with the relationship between the universal (humanity) and a concrete individual. He is analyzing the “effect of the negative self-relation” in which an individual is wrongly related to history (the universal). In the demonic, inclosed state, the self does not relate to others as a member of a common race but instead “closes itself off more and more from communication” (CA 130).

Haufniensis notes that it seems strange to think of inclosing reserve as lacking continuity, because the inclosed self has purified itself from the idle distractions of the crowd and adopted an authentic view of life that may be internally consistent and utterly coherent. By keeping out the changing impressions of the crowd, the inclosed self creates a tidy inner world. Yet that inner consistency is nothing more than superficial sameness. Haufniensis compares inclosing reserve to “the dizziness a spinning top must have, which constantly resolves upon its own pivot” (CA 130).

It might appear that Haufniensis's critique has to do with the individual's subjective attitude, not with anything external to the individual. Haufniensis seems to confirm the standard emphasis on subjectivity, for example, when he observes: "An adherent of the most rigid orthodoxy may be demonic. He knows it all. . . . He knows everything, like the man who can prove a mathematical proposition when the letters are ABC, but not when the letters are DEF. So he becomes anxious whenever he hears something that is not literally the same" (CA 139–140). The problem here seems to be with "rigid orthodoxy," which surely means insistence on some specific dogmatic content at the expense of subjective appropriation—just as a performative interpretation of Kierkegaard would lead us to expect. But in *The Concept of Anxiety*, just as in *The Book on Adler*, Kierkegaard shows that the distinction between subject and object is ambiguous. "Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down" (CA 61). Here the claim that the dizziness is "just as much" in the subject as in the object points both ways: dizziness is in one sense in the mind (it is I who am dizzy) and in another sense in the thing (I am dizzy because I looked down).

Here objectivity takes on a new role—though one we saw already in Kant and in the examples discussed above. A self must be related not just to a concept or any particular content but to a *continuity of content*—that is, a certain formal relation among representations. Objectivity, as an antidote to a subject inclosed in herself, means the ability to recognize what is the same for me and for others because it is the same in itself through many accidental changes. Inclosing reserve can only be overcome by directedness toward the right kind of object—one that remains itself even when it is not "literally the same" at every moment (CA 140). What is called for in the subject is the ability to recognize that object in its deeper continuity.

As I mentioned at the outset, other scholars have recently begun to pay more attention to the relationship between the "how" and the "what" of faith in Kierkegaard. For example, John Davenport has similarly argued that Kierkegaard's philosophy does not support the standard distinction between the "how" and the "what" of belief. He writes, "For *what* the promise reveals is distorted if it is just speculatively entertained. . . . Unless it is appropriated this way, the content of the promise will seem absurd. For promises are not purely factual statements: *how* we respond to a promise partly determines *what* it means to us" (2008, 217; see also CUP1 613–614n, cited above). I think Davenport is right here, but the phrasing of his conclusion shows just how difficult it is to shift our attention as readers to the object: Davenport cannot help qualifying the turn toward "*what* it means" with a very subjective "to us." I think the reason that Kierkegaard does not have these reservations is that he accepts the basic insight from Kantian German Idealism that an object is always essentially

related to some subject; taken for granted in this way, the subject does not need to be mentioned at every turn. On the other hand, within this wider context of subjectivity, some judgments have objective validity while others do not (B 142, discussed above). Likewise for Kierkegaard, a “continuity of impressions” must be recognized by a subject, but—at least in the cases that most interest Kierkegaard—it is the object itself that has the continuity.

## 7 The Importance of Objective Continuity: Analogy to Literary Works

While Kierkegaard does not describe any instance of faith directly, he does describe a case of objective unity as a continuity of impressions in a novel. In *Two Ages: A Literary Review*, Kierkegaard plays the role of literary critic, like Minor reading Adler’s report. This time, reading Thomasine Gyllembourg’s *Two Ages: A Story of Everyday Life*, his confidence is rewarded. The author of *A Story of Everyday Life* has managed to successfully represent the right kind of continuity through appearances in her novel, even though it was written in several installments. According to Kierkegaard, “The mastery of the books consists in the fact that the peace in which the story ends is nowhere expressly stated but is constantly taking place, taking shape, in the transparency of event and personality” (TA 15).<sup>17</sup> The completeness of the story is implicitly present throughout the work in the way its ending belongs to every preceding moment of the story.

Kierkegaard extends his insights about *A Story of Everyday Life* to the human situation in general. *Two Ages: A Literary Review* contains some of his most vehement repudiations of “the crowd.” One might expect, following the standard performative view, that Kierkegaard would fault the crowd for their lack of individuality or subjectivity. Instead, Kierkegaard claims that the crowd lacks a “continuity of impressions.”<sup>18</sup> Their main failing is their inability to recognize identity when they encounter it, which prevents them from sustaining an idea long enough to act on it. The symptoms of the failure appear subjectively in their lack of action, but the source of the problem is found objectively in the lack of continuity among their impressions—that is, in the *content* of their experiences.

While the unity the novel achieves does not extend beyond the limits of the work, Kierkegaard attests that there is nevertheless something religious about the unity of this particular novel. In *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, he writes that *Two Ages: A Literary Review* “has a whole religious background in its understanding of the present” (PV 31n). In

<sup>17</sup>References to TA are to *Two Ages* (Kierkegaard 2009).

<sup>18</sup>He writes that the crowd lacks a capacity for “idealization” that would enable them to weather contingent changes and hold onto a stable identity over time. The crowd cannot maintain “impressions” through a manifold of appearances (PV 59). References to PV are to *The Point of View* (Kierkegaard 1998b).

what sense can a novel exemplify religiousness? Kierkegaard's claim is that this literary "object"—the novel—is a successful synthesis of form and content. This synthesis is not something the reader or critic subjectively enacts; instead, it is something accomplished on the side of the novel, which achieves a certain kind of unity in its own right.

Haufniensis observes that the novel "beautifully reveals that it is just as we learn in the stories, yes, is even better, that not only does everything gradually get to be good again but that it was and remained good" (TA 13). Gyllembourg accomplishes what Andersen failed to do: she presents each particular event as a part of a complete whole that is never given in any particular event—and yet, just for that reason, is given at every moment. The novel's conclusion is "nowhere expressly stated" but still belongs to the novel as a literary object; it is "constantly taking place, taking shape" in the novel as a whole (TA 15). The unity and continuity of the story are not directly represented—that is, they are not a simple sensible content or object of knowledge; but they are nevertheless part of the complete object—that is, the form together with content.

In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard names Shakespeare as someone who can produce works where irony is "everywhere present," just as one idea pervades and unifies Gyllembourg's novel. Shakespeare distributes the subjective (ironic) virtuosity of his own literary power evenly in such a way as to create a unity that is no longer vulnerable even to the arbitrary whims of the author himself. In a sense, Shakespeare releases his own subjectivity into the object he creates. Kierkegaard writes:

Shakespeare has frequently been eulogized as the grand master of irony, and there can be no doubt that there is justification for that. But by no means does Shakespeare allow the substantive worth to evaporate into an ever more fugitive sublimate, and as for the occasional culmination of his lyrics in madness, there is an extraordinary degree of objectivity in the madness. When Shakespeare is related ironically to what he writes, it is precisely in order to let the objective dominate. Irony is now everywhere present; it sanctions every single line so that there will be neither too much nor too little, in order that everything can have its due, in order that the true balance may be achieved in the miniature world of the poem, whereby the poem has the center of gravity in itself. . . . Therefore, irony is not present at some particular point of the poem but is omnipresent in it, so that the irony visible in the poem is in turn ironically controlled. (CI 324)<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>References to CI are to *The Concept of Irony* (Kierkegaard 1989).

Kierkegaard views the ability to allow one's own subjectivity to permeate an object as part of Shakespeare's genius. His creative powers enable him to create an object with enough of its own unity and objective being that it limits even his own subjectivity.

## 8 Conclusion: Against Fideism

What do Kierkegaard's conclusions about the limits of subjectivity mean for faith? Throughout his authorship—in his early admiration for Shakespeare, his appreciation for Gyllembourg's novel, and his reply to Adler in the voice of a critic—Kierkegaard turns to works of literature as objects that can exemplify the “continuity of impressions” necessary for faith. In contrast, *Either/Or* shows the ways in which subjectivity on its own—when it is not allowed to be evenly distributed in an object—is arbitrary and unintelligible. (Recall for example the efforts of the aesthete to combat his own boredom by attending just the middle third of a play [EO1 299].<sup>20</sup>) This distinction echoes Kant's claim that establishing objectivity precludes “our cognitions being determined at pleasure or arbitrarily rather than being determined *a priori*, since insofar as they are to relate to an object our cognitions must also necessarily agree with each other in relation to it, i.e., they must have that unity that constitutes the concept of an object” (CPR A 104). Far from claiming that “truth is subjectivity,” Kierkegaard's authorship as a whole—like Kant's philosophy, I have argued—offers an extended critique of the dominance of subjectivity. The examples above show that the main task of the subject in faith is to discern unity in a single object through a manifold of appearances. This kind of unity among appearances is central to Kant's own view of what it means to be an object.

By contrast, C. S. Evans points out similarities between Kant and Kierkegaard in support of the more standard view that Kierkegaardian faith is primarily performative and that practice must go beyond theory. To Evans, the Kantian antinomies show that reason has “misfired” in some way, which is “a clue we have reached some kind of boundary or limit” (2008, 314). To the extent that faith for Evans is a relation between subject and object, it is primarily the recognition in the subject that the object of faith is beyond her. This realization could come about through an unusual experience. Evans offers an analogy to meeting a musical genius such as Mozart: “If I met such a person the encounter would certainly make me more aware of the limitations of my own musical intelligence” (2008, 315–316).

But the examples discussed above suggest that faith for Kierkegaard is not primarily an acknowledgement of the subject's finitude or of the limitations of reason. Instead, faith means recognizing unity in the object of faith when that unity does not directly appear—which on Kant's view,

<sup>20</sup>References to EO1 are to *Either/Or*, Part I (Kierkegaard 1987).

as I have emphasized, is just the definition of an object. Remarkably, Evans mentions this type of unity in Kierkegaard but views it as essentially subjective, perhaps because he does not relate the insight back to Kant:

Johannes Climacus does not think of God merely as a set of subjective possibilities. He sees God as in fact present in or behind the natural world. However, God's presence cannot be discerned *directly* through 'objective reflection' or 'objective data' but can only be grasped through spiritual inwardness. Climacus says that nature is God's work, but God is not directly present in nature. Nevertheless, 'when the individual turns to his inner self . . . in the inwardness of self-activity, does he have his attention aroused, and is enabled to see God everywhere.' (2000, 17 quoting CUP1 246–247)

Yet rather than elaborating faith as a kind of recognition enabling the believer to "see God everywhere" (perhaps developed philosophically as a sophisticated form of evidentialism), Evans continues to emphasize the subject's moral development: "The person who 'ignores' God's presence is simply the person who fails to develop those moral and religious capacities that are the ground of the awareness of God" (2000, 17). Evans then elaborates these moral and religious capacities as the ability to humbly accept the limitations of reason, as discussed above.

Evans views Kant's systematic thinking as his greatest difference from Kierkegaard, seeing their main similarity as a shared emphasis on practice (2000, 7). He refers to Kant's antinomies as a point in common to the extent that reason "misfires" and makes way for practice. But if Kierkegaard shares Kant's concern in his "systematic" philosophy for unity and wholeness, as I have argued, we may find in Kierkegaard not only Kant's warnings but his simultaneous discovery that every experience presupposes an objective whole that is never itself given (*Proleg.* sec. 40, 328).<sup>21</sup> Kant prevents reason from treating all its ideas as objects of possible experience, but this very restriction frees reason (distinguished from understanding) in its proper use as what unifies experience as a whole. Kant writes, "Although an absolute whole of experience is impossible, the idea of a whole of cognition according to principles in general must impart to our knowledge a peculiar kind of unity, that of a system, without which it is nothing but piece work and cannot be used for the highest purpose (which is always only the system of purposes); I do not here refer only to the practical, but also to the highest purpose of the speculative use of reason" (*Proleg.* sec. 56, 349–350). Kant does not propose to go beyond theoretical understanding through practice. Instead, practical action (with its end in the highest good) gives theoretical reason its "completion and satisfaction" (sec. 57, 354–355).

<sup>21</sup>References to *Proleg.* are to *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (Kant 1977) and identify the section number followed by the original pagination.

Understood in this context, Kant's antinomies do not delimit a point where reason cannot follow. Instead, the antinomies merely distinguish what is directly given in experience from its unifying ground that never directly appears. Kant's antinomies open a space for ideas of reason that permeate experience as a whole rather than appear directly in it. The transcendental ideas fall "outside" experience only in the sense of being implicit in every part of it, since every appearance is implicitly thought *by reason* to belong to experience as a whole. Reason—not faith—first demands a completeness that never directly appears.<sup>22</sup> When the ideas of reason (as the unity and completeness of the objects of knowledge that do appear) are considered practically as a guide for action, they also gain their proper object in the highest good as the end toward which a good will acts. "For without some end there can be no will," Kant writes. The end required here, as referenced above, is "a final end assigned by pure reason and comprehending the whole of all ends under one principle (a world as the highest good and possible through our cooperation)" (OCS 8:280n). The Kantian subject, though herself finite, does not take practice beyond theory, nor does she encounter any limitation of reason in experience (as in the Mozart analogy). Instead, she gains a guarantee that every experience points to new experiences. Through reason—beyond any particular experience—she recognizes all future experiences as belonging to the same whole. This is how she knows in advance all future experiences (i.e., all future knowledge) will be guided by the same *a priori* laws (*Proleg.* sec. 28, 311 and 292).

If Kierkegaard follows Kant here, as I have argued, then faith is the opposite of what Evans claims. Kierkegaardian faith, like reason for Kant, is what unifies a believer's experience objectively; that is, Kierkegaard discovers a fundamental unity in the object of faith that is recognized by a believer. This recognition occurs not when the individual adopts a certain moral attitude or humbly accepts the limitations of reason but instead takes place in the individual who does not give up demanding completeness. In Kant's terms, the Kierkegaardian believer is the one who demands an object of faith—a single whole underlying the many appearances. This task is a difficult one, as Haufniensis observes: "There are many men who well understand how to view the particular, but who at the same time are unable to keep the totality *in mente* [in mind]" (CA 76). Drawing on Kant to illuminate Kierkegaard, it is clear that the Kierkegaardian individual will not encounter some point where practice leaves reason behind. Neither Kant nor Kierkegaard separates having the right kind of subjectivity from the right kind of objectivity. If Kierkegaard follows Kant here, then limiting knowledge (objective certainty) does not amount either to favoring practice

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<sup>22</sup>"Appearances require to be explained only insofar as their conditions of explanation are given in perception, but everything that can ever be given in it, taken together in an absolute whole, is not itself any perception. But it is really this whole for which an explanation is being demanded in the transcendental problems of reason" (CPR A 483–484 / B 511–512). See also *Proleg.* sec. 40, 328). On appearances and wholes, see also sec. 13, 286.

or to limiting reason more generally. For both philosophers, faith is instead the certainty that on this side of experience there will always be more to know.

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