THE LOGIC OF THE ABSURD (IN KIERKEGAARD'S
CONCLUDING UNSCIENTIFIC POSTSCRIPT)

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ABSTRACT

An attempt to argue that the introduction of the category of the absurd into Kierkegaard's discussion of truth as subjectivity in the Postscript is an altogether rigorous and logical move.
The Logic of the Absurd (in Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript)\(^1\)

I aim with this paper to show that the introduction of the absurd into the discussion of truth in a famous section of Kierkegaard's Postscript\(^2\) has a certain logic to it; in fact, that it follows directly from his concept of truth. If it can be shown that the category of the absurd is not introduced for the sake of absurdity alone, then I believe this suggests that it has not slipped into contemporary philosophy, as one might think, while reason's back was turned. Rather than logic barring the door to the absurd, we may find it was reason itself who first let it in.

I am going to attempt to sketch an argument, then, which will lead us through Kierkegaard's discussion of truth as subjectivity and right up to his introduction of the category of the absurd into that discussion. And although I should make it clear from the start that I am not claiming the exact argument to be Kierkegaard's, I do think that something of the sort can be gleaned from a careful conside-

\(^1\)This paper has benefited from its discussion at a faculty colloquium at the University of Kansas as well as from interrogation by participants in discussions following its presentation at the University of California, Santa Barbara and Santa Cruz campuses. To those who contributed, it should be evident.

\(^2\)I am, of course, here referring to Book II, Part II, Chapter II, and more specifically to pages 173-189 of the Swenson and Lowrie translation of Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments, Princeton, 1941. I might mention in this connection that the problem of the relation of Kierkegaard to his pseudonyms will not be raised in this work. I will speak of the positions offered throughout as Kierkegaard's although they might be more cautiously referred to as Johannes Climacus' in so far as this latter, as a humorist (who is able to describe a commitment he is unable to make) is credited with authorship. If the reader prefers, he may simply substitute Climacus' name for Kierkegaard's wherever appropriate, although I do not mean this to imply the two are interchangeable. It is rather that whose name we attach to the positions inspected is of no importance to my argument.
ration of the passages which are at issue. The argument should demonstrate that the appeal to the absurd in that discussion is an altogether rigorous and logical move. I am not attempting by means of it, however, to defend Kierkegaard or to convince anyone of the soundness of his contentions. My argument is really something more like an instrument of exegesis designed as a tool for digging out and giving a more easily accessible order to some very difficult and, at times, convoluted concepts.

The section of the Postscript which claims that truth is subjectivity begins with a consideration of the traditional notion of objective truth; as if, in so giving objectivity the first word, it should not deserve to have the last. As early as 1835, in a journal entry, Kierkegaard had already suggested an important contrast between objective truth and the sort of truth he was seeking:

The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes me to do; the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die. What would be the use of discovering so-called objective truth, of working through all the systems of philosophy and being able, if required, to review them all and show up the inconsistencies within each system;--what good would it do me to be able to develop a theory of the state and combine all the details into a single whole, and so construct a world in which I did not live, but only held up to the view of others;--what good would it do me to be able to explain the meaning of Christianity if it had no deeper significance for me and for my life...4

In this passage the young Kierkegaard, in his early twenties, opposes objective truth to the truth which he demands: "a truth which is true for me." The meaning of this "for me" can be unclear, however, since it may not be immediately evident what is intended by the implied claim that objective

3 Whether or not Kierkegaard would have thought of himself as giving an "argument" seems a moot point. What is significant is that he did think he had been able, in the Postscript, "... to make the necessity of the paradox evident ..." (p. 191); that, in effect, he had been able to show that at some point the introduction of the category of the absurd becomes necessary.

truth is not true for me. If 2+2 = 4 is objectively true, it would seem that it is no less true for me than for anybody else. For an objective truth is true for all and, therefore, eo ipso true for me. But careful attention to the direction of the inference here may reveal a critical point. Objective truth is true for me because it is true for anybody, and for no other reason. Its being true for me hinges only and exactly upon its being true for anybody and, consequently, is quite independent of me. In effect, the extent to which it is true for me is the extent to which it has nothing essentially to do with me. We might put the matter this way: in so far as an objective truth is true for anybody and therefore true for me, it follows that it is not true for me in that I am me, but only in that I am anybody. It is not certain, then, what significance should be attached to an assertion which emphasizes that an objective truth is true for me, unless, of course, it is meant to signify nothing more than that it is objectively true (true for anybody). In this sense, objective truth is fundamentally anonymous.

What is really happening here is that an essential feature of objectivity is being exhibited: its independence of and indifference to the individual subject. The claim of such truth, what we sometimes refer to as its universal validity, is that it is true for anyone so long as he can think correctly. In this way what is objectively true is utterly indifferent to me as a subject; and yet, this is just the sense of the "for me" in which Kierkegaard is interested. He is after a truth which concerns me, which involves me; which not only makes a difference to me, but which I make a difference to. When S.K. speaks of "a truth which is true for me" he means this to signify a truth which is true for the subject in its subjectivity. This, of course, is precisely what objective truth is indifferent to, and it is no mere coincidence. Objective truth is necessarily, that is, essentially independent of an indifferent to the subjectivity of the subject who thinks it, and it must remain so as long as it is to attain the sort of universal validity that is demanded of it.

In bringing to light this essential character of objectivity, it becomes obvious that if we are concerned to find the truth which is true for the subject in its subjectivity ("for me"), we must look elsewhere. By what means the subject is to become involved in truth is not at all evident. What has emerged, however, is that those ideas which enjoy objective validity are unlikely candidates for doing the job. Indeed, we might go so far as to say that to the extent to which an idea is objectively certain it loses its efficacy for serving as the sort of idea which can have subjective
import. Following this line of thinking it could be claimed, and is in the Postscript, that the character of objective uncertainty may be a useful criterion for separating out those ideas which can serve to enhance subjectivity from those which have nothing essentially to do with the subject. We may have to dig a bit to see what this is all about.

In the same paragraph in which the indifference of objective truth is discussed, it is twice mentioned that "decisiveness is rooted in subjectivity." In the first instance, this seems clear: that an individual be decisive, requires that I commit myself. If an idea is objectively uncertain, then my commitment must be grounded in something other than its objective validity. To this extent it is the objectively uncertain idea which would have priority among ideas for fostering subjectivity in so far as it demands my commitment, and so we can see how it is that this criterion is introduced. What we may not be able to see is whether it is correct to say that the ground for committing myself to an idea is something other than its objective validity. For there seems, at first sight, to be a rather obvious objection to this. It does not appear at all correct to say that the subject, in being decisive, commits himself to ideas which are objectively uncertain. In fact, in the sort of committing which we ordinarily take believing to be, it seems we do so rather on the basis of objective certainty. For we are always told that rational beliefs are those that adhere to ideas which have achieved the highest degree of objective validity. We might go so far as to say that the more objective plausibility an idea enjoys, the greater the degree of rationality involved in holding it as a belief. And this would seem to very well describe even if not the way people ordinarily make decisions, at least the manner in which they ordinarily ought to.

Although the above may be a factual description of the most rational manner of committing oneself to beliefs, it does not in any way touch the sort of conceptual discovery Kierkegaard has made concerning the essential nature of belief. For while objective certainty may, as a matter of fact, be a constituent in the acquisition of particular beliefs, I will now attempt to show that objective uncertainty is more fundamentally related to the concept of belief; related in such an essential way that without uncertainty, it makes no sense to speak of believing at all.

In the Postscript, Kierkegaard holds a quite specific view concerning the relation of knowing and believing. I

\[5\text{Postscript, p. 173.}\]
think we might fairly put his position in the following manner: if I know (am objectively certain about) X, then this precludes the possibility that I believe X, in the relevant sense, that is, where 'believe' signifies my decisively committing myself. Rather, it only becomes appropriate to introduce categories of believing, committing, deciding, when the idea about which we are speaking is objectively uncertain. Imagine someone trying to urge excitedly that he believed that $2+2=4$; that he has committed himself decisively to this belief and will stand by it. Here, it seems to me, we cannot be at all sure what it is the person means to be urging upon us. It is like someone saying with pride: "I can draw a square with four sides." Of course we must agree that a square has four sides and that if anyone draws one then he draws it with four sides, but we may not be able to see what force there is to saying that one can do such a thing. Likewise in the $2+2=4$ case. If a person said he believed (had decisively committed himself to the claim) that $2+2=4$, we would have to inquire whether instead he did not know it; and if he agreed that he certainly did also know it, it would seem quite proper for us to remind him that insofar as this latter is the case he is to that extent not in a position to have to decide in connection with the matter. In fact, to be able to be in a situation in which it becomes relevant to say that I have committed myself, that I have decided for my part and for myself in the matter, what is at issue cannot be objectively certain. For if it is certain, there is simply no room left for me to make any decision in relationship to it. It is as if the objective uncertainty of an idea constitutes a gap which I must fill with my commitment when I assert my belief in that idea.

To repeat: if it is to be appropriate for me to assert a commitment to something; that is, if an assertion of belief is to be in order, then what is at issue cannot be objectively certain. This claim, which is fundamental to the concept of belief, is in no way in conflict with the factual matter that once given an idea is objectively uncertain, and therefore the suitable object for believing, we tend (as rational beings) to base our beliefs on the degree of certainty the idea in question enjoys. The essential relationship of believing to objective uncertainty, which I have been attempting to develop, can be presented in as straightforward a manner as the following: if the character of objective uncertainty disappears entirely from an idea (if that idea becomes objectively certain), then the appropriateness of believing also disappears; while if the objective certainty of an idea entirely disappears (if an idea becomes wholly uncertain objectively), then it is still appropriate to speak of believing. As we shall see, this latter case of belief is of a unique sort, and one in which Kierkegaard is specifically interested.
I trust we have been successful in isolating and illumina-
ting certain claims made in the Postscript concerning the
structure of belief, as well as exposing the basis for em-
ploying objective uncertainty as a criterion of those ideas
which can engender subjectivity. For if, as has been claimed,
the sort of decisiveness which is involved in believing is
connected up with the subjectivity of the subject, then the
criterion of objective uncertainty would seem to be rigor-
ously applicable for distinguishing those ideas which will
involve the power of the subject to decide; indeed, ideas
which will not only concern the subject but will also draw
his subjectivity into action.

We are now adequately prepared to confront something like
a definition of truth which is offered in the section of the
Postscript we have been considering. At this point it might
act as a convenient way of drawing together much of what we
have been discussing. The definition is given in a single
line:

The truth is precisely the venture which chooses an
objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite. 6

We should notice certain interrelated concepts which accrue
to this notion of truth. Subjective truth essentially in-
volves risk; it is a "venture," which is, of course, directly
related to the character of "objective uncertainty." There
must be danger involved in so far as one has staked oneself
upon an idea which is uncertain. At the same time, this
very uncertainty is the condition which makes it possible
for one to "choose," to be decisive in the matter. In com-
mitting oneself to an objectively uncertain idea, one chances
the danger; and the whole-heartedness with which this pre-
carious uncertainty is embraced gains expression in the de-
mand that one be committed "with the passion of the infinite;"
that is, that one's decisiveness be unconditional. In this
situation, in which the individual subject has committed
himself unconditionally to an objective uncertainty, sub-
jectivity is not only brought into action, but is itself
intensified unconditionally.

At present it may look rather perverse to find one claim-
ing that truth involves holding fast to an idea which is
objectively uncertain with unconditional passion. In fact,
it may look as if truth reduces to little more than infinite
stubbornness while subjectivity signifies the obsessive self-
assertion of the subject's own opinions (beliefs). This, in
turn, may simply confirm the already popular suspicion that

6 Postscript, p. 182.
Existentialism encourages this sort of subjective obstinacy and in so doing relinquishes any claim to truth. I believe we can take a step toward meeting this objection by making a critical distinction which will serve to further qualify the sort of idea which is the proper object for such unconditional commitment.

To be decisive with respect to an idea which is contingently uncertain is an altogether different matter than to be decisive with respect to an idea which is necessarily and essentially uncertain. There are any number of ways to display this difference of which I will try just one. Let us return to an issue already alluded to in our discussion of the relation of knowing and believing. Although the condition for the appropriateness of belief-categories lies in objective uncertainty, ordinarily, we said, the basis for any rational belief lies in the degree of objective certainty an idea enjoys. To this extent my willingness to commit myself to an idea is often based in something very much like an approximation with regard to objective plausibility. What I am saying is that in the case of an idea which is in principle verifiable my commitment to believing it is usually an approximating commitment to the plausibility of the claim that if the idea in question were verified, it would be confirmed as objectively true. In actuality, then, I base my decision upon the objective certainty of the idea; upon the claim that it could be shown to be objectively certain were it verified. But this sort of appeal to approximate objectivity cannot be in any way involved in the case of an idea which is in principle not subject to confirmation. For while it certainly makes sense to assert that if X were verified, it would be verified as objectively true; it is strictly senseless to assert that if X were verifiable, it would be verified as objectively true. And this latter claim is precisely the one that would need to be made were objectivity in any way to enter into the decision for my believing X in the case in which X is in principle unverifiable. For in this case we simply have no idea what it would be like for it to be verified if it is in principle the sort of idea which cannot be verified (is unverifiable).

The point of all this is rather direct. When we are speaking of an idea which is uncertain but in principle verifiable, it makes sense to introduce objective considerations into the determination of my belief; in effect, to base my belief in the claim that there is some degree of plausibility that if the idea were verified it would be verified as objectively true. In the case of an idea which is in principle unverifiable, however, it is quite improper to speak of the objective verifiability of the matter at all. Here, if the subject is to hold fast to
the matter at issue in commitment, it must be wholly without
the benefit of objective considerations. The category of
belief is certainly emminently applicable, for objective un-
certainty is present in full force; but all reference to ob-
jective verifiability or certainty is strictly excluded. It
is a special sort of commitment which is demanded in this
case, and yet if we consider the conditions already delimited
for the appropriateness of belief claims, it would seem that
what we are faced with here is, so to speak, believing in its
purest form. In the Postscript, this unique variety of belief
is called "faith."  

With the introduction of this category of ideas which are
in principle unverifiable, we have come to a critical junc-
ture, and certain developments are occurring we must take
pains not to obscure. For the claims we have been most
recently making seem naturally enough to incite the question
of whether any plausible sense can be made of the suggestion
that some ideas are necessarily uncertain objectively. We
must, therefore, attempt to unfold this class of ideas with
an eye to a certain sort of idea which plays the central role
in Kierkegaard's thinking: the idea of paradox. Now, when
Kierkegaard speaks of a paradox, he seems to mean a self-
contradictory idea, that is, an idea whose elements confute
one another, which reason cannot reject even though this
disparity of elements cannot be resolved. And, at this point,
it becomes essential to show that paradoxical ideas belong in
the class of ideas which are, to use our terms, in principle
unverifiable. For it may appear at first sight as if they
belong in the class of ideas which are in principle verifiable,
and have already been verified as false. If components of an
idea confute one another, indeed, if an idea is admittedly
self-contradictory, then it might seem straightforward enough
to conclude that such ideas are simply nonsensical, that is,
necessarily false.

In order to see our way around this convenient but mis-
guided suggestion, we need only heed Kierkegaard's warning
and not "succumb to such haste as to fail in making the

Wittgenstein attempts to exhibit a similar sense of
"believe" in his lectures on religious belief: "There are
instances where you have faith - where you say "I believe" -
and on the other hand this belief does not rest on the fact
on which our ordinary everyday beliefs normally rest ... the
point is that if there were evidence, this would in fact
destroy the whole business. Anything I normally call evi-
dence wouldn't in the slightest influence me." (Lectures
and Conversations, Berkeley, 1967, p. 54-56.) In all, Witt-
genstein's view of the religious sense of "belief" seems
thoroughly saturated in Kierkegaard.
necessary distinctions." For it is at the heart of S.K.'s view that a distinction is to be made within the class of contradictory ideas between nonsense and paradox. This difference seems to be implied by the fact that there is such a concept as paradox in our language. A paradox, by the very meaning of the word, is an idea which has all the marks of an ordinary contradiction and yet claims to be a distinct category. There is a unique feature to certain contradictions such that their contradictory character is not sufficient for dismissing the idea in question as nonsense. Given there is, we might say, a prima facie distinction between nonsense and the paradoxical ideas which are formally akin to those more ordinary contradictions, it would follow that we cannot straightaway treat paradoxes as we would nonsensical contradictions or else we have failed to heed this distinction. We may see the situation to be as simple as this, although this may not be as simple as it seems: reason either discerns or does not discern the difference between paradox and nonsense. If it does discern this distinction, then it understands that it will not do to treat paradoxes as ordinary contradictions, to dismiss them as necessarily false, since there is a difference to be reckoned with. On the other hand, if reason does not discern this distinction, it is no wonder if it should treat paradox as nonsense and judge it necessarily false. But then we need to know whether this in fact demonstrates anything more than reason's inability to treat the matter of paradox and face its paradoxical character. One can certainly understand the tendency to parse paradoxes as ordinary contradictions since the very concept of a paradox is that of an admittedly self-contradictory idea. Nevertheless, this concept also includes within it the claim to a distinctive character which separates paradox from other contradictions. It could, then, be that the continued refusal to recognize a distinction here simply signals a failure to have come to grips with a difficult and subtle matter: that of paradox.

What we need to know is whether reason can or cannot discern this distinction between the paradoxical ideas and ordinary contradiction; whether, even amid contradiction, reason retains the ability to draw a distinction, namely, between paradox and nonsense. And this is not a simple question to answer, although Kierkegaard does provide us with some assistance, for his position in the matter is clear. In a note written in 1850, he speaks explicitly of his aim in the Postscript:

This is what I have developed (for example, in Concluding Postscript) - that not every absurdity

Postscript, p. 185.
is the absurd or the paradox. The activity of reason is to distinguish the paradox negatively—but no more. The absurd, the paradox, is composed in such a way that reason has no power at all to dissolve it in nonsense; no, it is a symbol, a riddle, a compound riddle about which reason must say: I cannot solve it, it cannot be understood, but it does not follow thereby that it is nonsense.

When S.K. says that "not every absurdity is the absurd," I take it he means what we have put by saying that not every contradiction is a paradox. We should be clear, however, that when he declares the paradox is not nonsense, he does not mean it is not contradictory. Its contradictory character has been admitted in the claim that "it cannot be understood." Rather, precisely what he is getting at is that despite this contradictory character, it cannot be dismissed as if it were nonsense. Reason, he is maintaining, has no "power" over the paradox, is somehow not in a position to judge it to be nonsense, simply to dismiss it as necessarily false. Once the paradoxical character of a paradox is discerned, reason admits the distinction between paradox and nonsense, and in so doing accepts that it can neither understand the matter, since it is formally contradictory, nor solve it (resolve the contradiction), but nonetheless admits that "it does not follow thereby that it is nonsense." For it is not; it is paradox. Although this does not yet tell us how it is that reason, on what basis we might say, is able to make this distinction.

Still, it is clear Kierkegaard holds that reason can, indeed, must distinguish paradox from nonsense, that "the activity of reason is to distinguish the paradox negatively," to distinguish it from nonsense. If we can come to understand how it is he thinks reason may do this, we will be able to see in just what sense reason has no power over paradox, and finally be able more convincingly to make our point that paradoxes are to be grouped in the class of necessarily uncertain ideas rather than necessarily false ones. Everything hinges, I think, upon understanding exactly what it means for reason to distinguish the paradox negatively, and why this procedure is itself a necessity for reason. Again, we may be able to get some help from a note of Kierkegaard's, this one written in 1847:

... if human science refuses to understand that there is something it cannot understand, or better still,

that there is something about which it clearly understands that it cannot understand it - then all is confusion. For it is the duty of the human understanding to understand that there are things which it cannot understand and what those things are. Human understanding has vulgarly occupied itself with nothing but understanding, but if it would only take the trouble to understand itself at the same time it would simply have to posit the paradox.  

It is the final line which is so suggestive of a deep point Kierkegaard seems to be making, a point which claims an essential relation between reason and paradox by implying that in so far as reason reflects upon its own nature, it must posit the paradox; that, in effect, paradox is necessarily involved in reason's self-definition. If reason is to understand itself, it must understand its own limitations, understand that there are matters it cannot understand. And reason finds its limit in the paradox. In so delimiting its nature, human reason becomes aware of its own finitude; and a reason which has not come face to face with paradox cannot know itself, is a reason confounded by its finitude as it endlessly circles within its domain, but never tests the limits. Self-conscious reason, on the other hand, knows its boundaries by having come up against them, and this is exactly the way in which it can "distinguish the paradox negatively." The realm of paradox begins just where reason arrives at its end, and knows to have come to its limit in confronting its own demise; that is, reason distinguishes the paradox as that in the face of which it is halted. And Kierkegaard argues that this breakdown  

10 The Journals, p. 117-118. It should be evident from this passage that while S.K. appropriates the ordinary term "paradox," in so doing he supplies it with a strict signification, stricter even than the usual philosophical meaning of the term. Quine, for example, sticking close to the etymological sense of the word, seems to think of paradox as that which runs contrary to received opinion and consequently has an air of absurdity about it. There has recently been an attempt to align Quine's usage, specifically with regard to that class of paradoxes he terms "antinomies", with Kierkegaard's (see: B. Daise, "Kierkegaard and the Absolute Paradox," Journal of the History of Philosophy, Jan. 1976, p. 63-68). But antinomies for Quine are relative paradoxes which may be accommodated by a revision in our conceptual system. When "one man's antinomy is another man's falsidical paradox, give or take a couple of thousand years" (The Ways of Paradox, New York, 1966, p. 11), one can be assured that the absolute paradox remains unthought in all this. I would imagine, if any comparison is in order, it should not be with what Quine calls "antinomies," but with what Wittgenstein early on called "the mystical."
belongs to the nature of reason itself, is, as he calls it, "the supreme passion of reason." We may put the same point in a different way by saying that a finite reason seeking self-definition is bound to posit the paradox. Reason cannot define itself without the paradox, while paradox is in turn delimited through reason's "shipwreck." This indispensable relationship does not arise as a result of the dialectical, that is, empty conceptual requirement for otherness, but out of the concrete understanding of what it is for human reason to become conscious of its finitude. The moment reason posits the paradox and the moment of reason's self-definition are one and the same.

For paradox to be delimited negatively, then, depends upon the breakdown of reason while this coming up against its own limits is for reason a demand of its self-definition. This means that the positing of paradox does not occur through the dismissal of reason, but instead presupposes its rigorous application:

It is easy enough to leap away from the toilsome task of developing and sharpening the understanding, and so get a louder hurrah, and to defend oneself against every accusation by remarking that it is a higher understanding. So the believing Christian not only possesses but uses his understanding, respects the universal-human, does not put it down to a lack of understanding if somebody is not a Christian; but in relation to Christianity he believes against the understanding and in this case also uses understanding ... to make sure that he believes against the understanding. Nonsense therefore he cannot believe against the understanding, for precisely the understanding will discern that it is nonsense and will prevent him from believing it; but he makes so much use of the understanding that he becomes aware of the incomprehensible, and then holds to this, believing against the understanding.12

Only the relentless employment of reason can guarantee that its shipwreck is genuine, that is, occurs in the face of the incomprehensible, of that which cannot be understood, not simply in the face of that which we have not bothered to understand. Reason not only can but must distinguish paradox from nonsense, and its ability to do so is essential to

11Kierkegaard, S; Philosophical Fragments, Princeton, 1962, p. 46. See, actually, the whole of Chapter III of these fragments to which the work we are mainly considering is the postscript.

12Postscript, p. 504.
the point Kierkegaard is developing. Without this distinc-
tion, all formally contradictory ideas would be treated in
the same manner, and paradox thrown together with nonsense,
in which event nothing but confusion ensues.

It should be clear by now that Kierkegaard's aim has been
to delimit a class of ideas which is not subject to reason's
jurisdiction (except negatively, that is, with respect to de-
limiting the realm), and that this is precisely the domain of
ideas a finite reason is forced to concede upon reflection on
its own nature. Originally, we spoke of this as the class of
ideas which are in principle unverifiable, or not susceptible
to the procedures of objective confirmation. It has been
shown, I trust, that the idea of paradox as Kierkegaard un-
folds it, belongs in this domain. For reason is always
stopped from the start by paradox's formal constitution:
that it is a self-contradictory idea. It could not succeed
in its evasion of objectivity, however, were it possible for
reason to reject paradox as it does nonsense, for then it
would be subject to the procedures of rational confirmation
and judged necessarily false. Thus paradox must be so con-
stituted that while it is contradictory, reason nonetheless
lacks the power to judge it. If it could, reason would only
find itself losing the category by transforming the fecundity
of paradox into the vacuity of an ordinary contradiction.
But we have seen that such judgment is possible only when
reason is unaware of its own finitude. Self-conscious rea-
son exercises no judgment over paradox, recognizes that it
has no "power to dissolve it in nonsense," since in facing
paradox reason knows to have come to its own limit and looks
toward a sphere over which it enjoys no influence. Conse-
quently, we may conclude that paradox makes its home in a
domain of ideas outside reason's dominion.

Although I believe what I have said is grounded in the
concept of paradox, as Kierkegaard thinks it, quite irres-
pective of the content of any particular paradox, much of
what we have claimed could be illustrated by concrete example.
I should like to do this with an eye, first, to fleshing out
some of the conceptual discussion already offered and,
secondly, in order to draw a further distinction among para-
doxes which is crucial for completing our development of
Kierkegaard's way to truth.

The first sort of paradox which S.K. discusses in the sec-
tion of the Postscript we are considering he calls the Socratic
paradox, and it may be stated by means of the following claim:

The eternal truth can come to be related to an indi-
vidual existing in time.
Let it suffice to say that if some distinctions were made in this connection, for example, between the eternal and the everlasting, it could be shown that true eternity signifies being wholly without relation to time, in which case there is a prima facie contradiction in the claim that something wholly without relation to time is related to something existing in time. For our purposes we will simply assume that there is a contradiction involved here and that the claim that an eternal truth should come to be related to an individual existing in time expresses an objective impossibility.

It is Kierkegaard's position that the manner of relating ourselves to this paradox about eternal truth can be quite different from our manner of relating to ordinary contradictions. To be sure, there is a contradiction at the bottom of this paradox, and yet we might not dismiss it as nonsense in the way we would unhesitatingly reject, for example, the claim that the circle can be squared. In the latter case, once it has been shown that the circle cannot be squared we simply dismiss the possibility altogether. In the former case, however, in so far as we allow the contradiction to accede to the level of paradox, we are held in abeyance and cannot simply settle the matter by rejecting it as nonsense. In fact, according to Kierkegaard, Socrates had discovered a way of relating to this paradox as paradox: if truth is eternal, and human beings exist in time, then any manifestation of eternal truth in time must itself be paradoxical; and this constitutes the ground for Socratic ignorance.

Now, there is something to notice about this paradox which is important for a certain "advance" S.K. aims to make over the Socratic position. In the case of this paradox, the contradiction arises only as a result of our situation as existers. In so far as we exist wholly in time, eternal truth is closed off to us and can only manifest itself as paradox. But this does not mean that the eternal truth is itself a paradox. We might put this in the following way: in so far as we exist in time, eternal truth is unintelligible for us, but this does not mean that it cannot be understood in itself. We could (as Plato did) suppose our own access to eternal truth through a theory of recollection in which we posit the possibility of recollecting our way out of time in order to attain truth. But this very possibility is dependent upon the claim that the eternal truth is paradoxical for us, but not paradoxical in itself.

With this distinction, we have been brought face to face with our central matter of concern. In the Postscript, the absurd is the paradox which is paradoxical in itself. It is, if you will, the most intense form of paradox. For in the
case of the paradox which is paradoxical only for us, there exists the possibility of mediating the contradiction. With regard to the absurd, however, mediation is impossible. The paradox is not accidentally paradoxical (that is, only for us) but paradoxical in and through itself. In terms of our last example, the absurd would come into play only if the eternal truth were itself a paradox. Of course, in Kierkegaard's case, he has a quite specific example in mind here. On his view, Christianity posits a paradox in the person Christ. For in the event of God-man it is the eternal truth itself which enters into time; is born and dies. So the contradiction between time and eternity does not arise as the result of our situation, but is within the eternal truth itself when the eternal, infinite, necessary God becomes a temporal, finite, free man. This, in the strictest sense for Kierkegaard, is the absurd.

Socrates found a way of relating to the paradox of eternal truth through ignorance. Now the question stands: has Kierkegaard found a way of relating to the absurd? For the situation is different, and S.K. is quite aware of this:

When Socrates believed that there was a God, he held fast to the objective uncertainty with the whole passion of his inwardness, and it is precisely in this contradiction and in this risk, that faith is rooted. Now it is otherwise. Instead of the objective uncertainty, there is here a certainty, namely, that objectively it is absurd; and this absurdity held fast in the passion of inwardness is faith. The Socratic ignorance is as a witty jest in comparison with the earnestness of facing the absurd; and the Socratic existential inwardness is as Greek light-mindedness in comparison with the grave strenuosity of faith.13

When Socrates believed there was a God (eternal truth), he believed what was impossible for him to know because any relation to eternal truth for an existing individual is objectively excluded. Socrates was left in uncertainty. If, however, we recall our earlier analysis, we will remember that it is just this character of uncertainty which makes a matter suitable for belief. So Socrates decisively committed himself; he believed, and instituted the only sort of relationship possible to eternal truth for an existing individual: one of ignorance. In the Socratic view, however, there is nothing in itself impossible about there being an eternal truth; it is just that an individual existing in time could not know it (be certain of it), or be related to it except

13 Postscript, p. 188.
paradoxically (i.e., by means of the paradox that one relates to truth through ignorance). The individual remains necessarily in uncertainty objectively, and only through his own subjective decisiveness ("with the whole passion of his inward-ness") retains a relationship to an eternal truth which objectively cannot in principle be known.

The situation which S.K. describes, however, is somewhat different. In the example of God-man, the proffered matter for belief is itself impossible objectively, that is, it is objectively impossible that the eternal truth should itself come into time, be born and die. Here the intensity of the objective uncertainty is increased, and correspondingly so too is the subjective passion required in order to embrace the matter in commitment. For now, we are told, we do not have an uncertainty, but the certainty: that it is absurd. And what the Christian confronts, is called upon to be decisive with respect to, is the absurd; not that it is uncertain that there is a God, but that it is objectively impossible in so far as the concept itself involves a contradiction.

We must be careful however; for it may look as if the category of belief has been put out of play in the claim that the Christian has a certainty, rather than the uncertainty of the Socratic position. But this would be shortsighted, since what is claimed to be certain here is not the object of belief, nor could it be if our earlier analysis is correct. What is certain is the complex claim: "'Christ is God-man' is absurd," and this is not a matter of belief. Instead, the object of belief is expressed by the simple sentence contained within this complex statement, namely, "Christ is God-man." And yet notwithstanding this fact, that the "certainty" the Christian has is not and cannot be the object of belief, one may still be unclear just how it is that "Christ is God-man" remains uncertain if it is admittedly absurd. For in that case, one might be prone to say, it is certainly false, and consequently itself no possible object for belief. But now we have simply forgotten the entire analysis provided thus far. The "absurd," as Kierkegaard intends it in the above passage, is a paradox, a paradox which is paradoxical in itself. And it has already been argued that paradoxes cannot be parsed as ordinary nonsensical contradictions; that reason is not in a position to pass judgment upon them at all. We might say, if it may be so put, that reason is stunned by the absurd in a way in which it is not by any ordinary contradiction. In this condition, that is, in being so stunned, it is rendered incapable of judging the matter, least of all judging it certainly false. For in the face of the absurd, reason encounters its own bounds and thus looks toward a domain over which it can exercise no authority. The absurd, then, holds reason in abeyance and, in so doing, opens up the possibility of belief.
To say that reason is stunned, and as such left inopera-
tive, is not to say it is not repulsed by the absurd; in
fact, it is just another way of saying this very thing. For
this aversion reason has for the absurd is actually one of
the objective marks of paradox. While contradiction as such
may be thought to revulse reason, those which are nonsensical
do so only in a limited way since, in the end, reason has the
opportunity to demonstrate its superiority, dismissing them
as nonsense. Paradox, on the other hand, must be faced and
yet cannot be so dismissed, thus delivering reason over to a
sense of its own powerlessness. Reason, as Kierkegaard sees
it, is shattered by its halting collision with the absurd;
and it is only reasonable it should find this repugnant.
There is, however, still another distinguishing mark of the
absurd, the complement to the objective: paradox allows a
certain tension to arise between objective repulsion and
subjective attraction; we may be drawn to the paradox subjec-
tively even as we are repulsed objectively, and the greater
the degree of objective repulsion, the greater the demand for
subjectivity. This is true of the Socratic paradox as well,
but in the case of the absurd, the tension of this opposition
between the subjective and the objective is heightened to its
highest pitch. Here we find ourselves at the extreme. Socra-
tic ignorance, we are told, is like child's play compared to
the sort of act which would be required to initiate a rela-
tionship with the absurd. An objective relation to the para-
dox is impossible. If one is to relate to, for example, the
idea of God-man, it must be in the immediacy of subjectivity,
for the only relation one could maintain to the matter would
be by means of faith where this latter signifies the decisive
commitment of an individual subject to a belief which is in
principle unmediated by objective grounds; a situation in
which the tension between objective aversion and subjective
devotion has intensified passion to its extreme. The only
manner in which a human being can stand related to the absurd,
therefore, is through that unconditional commitment in which
a subject chooses for an idea that is necessarily uncertain.
But this manner of standing in relation to an idea defines
truth. It follows that, in the Postscript, truth is faith.

These interconnected concepts of truth, faith, and subjec-
tivity can now be aligned in their direct relation to the
absurd by recalling the stages of the argument as they have
unfolded for us. The discussion began by claiming that to
the extent to which Kierkegaard sought a truth which was true
for the subject in its subjectivity ("true for me"), objective
truth would by its very nature not be of interest to us. In

14 For Kierkegaard's full discussion of truth as a manner of
standing in relation to an idea, consult the Postscript, p. 178-182.
fact, the criterion of objective uncertainty was employed as a devise for determining those ideas which might serve to foster subjectivity. We found in this connection that objective uncertainty was (conceptually) related to belief, and the decisiveness of belief to the subjectivity of the subject. It then became clear that the best way of bringing the subject into the matter of truth was to demand the individual's decisive action with regard to an idea which is objectively uncertain. At that point, however, it was crucial to distinguish ideas which are contingently uncertain from those which are necessarily uncertain, after which it was possible to give greater precision to the previously stated formula for subjective truth: the unconditional commitment to an idea which is in principle objectively uncertain. It should now be evident that it would be a mistake to think that the object of unconditional commitment could be any one of our ordinary beliefs (i.e., any belief which is in principle verifiable) or that subjective truth consists in the obstinate assertion of such beliefs. For by means of the category of paradox, an idea which is in principle unverifiable has been isolated as the proper object of unconditional decisiveness, and as a result the matter becomes one of subjectivity alone. For in this unique case, we have no recourse to objective grounds in fashioning our belief. The commitment must be made wholly and solely in subjectivity. Such a subjective movement, from the point of view of objectivity, must necessarily appear as a groundless leap.

Paradox, then, not only guarantees objective uncertainty, and in so doing renders categories of belief and decision appropriate, but the conceptual force it exerts moves these matters to a sphere utterly unlike the one in which our ordinary belief claims are at home. For paradox is so constituted that while being rooted in contradiction, reason nevertheless is powerless either to reject or resolve it, thus assuring that it will remain necessarily uncertain objectively. As such, the occasion may arise for it to appeal purely to subjectivity: an individual can be drawn to the paradox subjectively even though thoroughly repulsed objectively. And through the distinction between paradox which is paradoxical only for us and paradox which is paradoxical in itself, we were introduced to the most extreme form of paradox: the absurd. In confronting the absurd, objective repulsion is amplified to its highest intensity and, fittingly, the sort of subjectivity which would have to be excited in order to

15 Again, to quote Wittgenstein: "Where what is said sounds a bit absurd I would say: 'Yes, in this case insufficient evidence.' If altogether absurd, then I wouldn't." (Lectures and Conversations, p. 60.)
maintain a relationship with the absurd must be completely unique. Absolutely unconditional commitment demands absolutely unconditional subjectivity; and it is the individual's penetration to this depth of decisiveness to which Kierkegaard is referring in the claim that "truth is subjectivity."

Finally, given the concise understanding we have achieved of the terms in question, it should be possible to draw what we have been arguing together into the following single claim: the absurd is the proper object of faith.\(^\text{16}\) This means the absurd alone, and in its own way, can exercise the influence required to incite the subject into the immediacy of faith. Faith, however, is just that relationship a subject has to a necessarily uncertain idea when the subject is in the truth; that is to say, when the subject has brought his subjectivity into action in unconditional decisiveness. Such subjectivity, then, is possible in virtue of the absurd, which alone can satisfy the unique conditions this concept of truth imposes. The introduction of the category of the absurd, therefore, into the discussion of truth as subjectivity in the Postscript is not capricious, but altogether necessary.

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\(^{16}\text{Postscript, p. 189.}\)