

Kierkegaard's Renewed Christian Account: Approaching Faith by Grappling with Inequality

Søren Kierkegaard sought to save Christianity from modern Christendom. In his nineteenth-century context, his task proved difficult; how could he demonstrate to an entire people that their philosophy and religion had misled and deceived them? In *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard—through the pseudonym Johannes Climacus—sets out on a ‘poetical venture’ to demonstrate how to enter the process of ‘becoming’ a Christian. The structure of his ‘venture’ reflects Kierkegaard’s fascination with the classical world. Climacus’ project reckons with the fundamental division between Christianity and the Classics—namely, how one accesses the truth.¹ While the Classics and Socratics believe every individual possesses the truth and that individuals need help retrieving it,² most Christians locate truth only within god and, therefore, maintain that humans require divine intervention to bring them out of untruth.

Although Kierkegaard generally subscribes to the Christian account of truth, in *Philosophical Fragments* he embarks on a renewed analysis of the account. By carefully examining the development and resolution of two forms of inequality introduced by the Christian account, Climacus concludes that god descends to earth as an ‘absolute paradox’ out of love for every individual. By reacting to this ‘absolute paradox’ in a leap of faith, the human starts ‘becoming’ a Christian. Lastly, paralleling Augustine’s *Confessions* to Climacus’ analysis increases the appeal of faith to the modern individual.

Climacus’ Analysis of the Christian Account

In his renewed analysis of the Christian account, Climacus explores the consequences of locating truth within god and not humans. First, the claim introduces two forms of inequality—

¹ Jacob Howland, *Kierkegaard and Socrates: A Study in Philosophy and Faith* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 28.

² *Ibid.*, 30.

referred to in this paper as the essential and epistemic inequalities. Second, the claim necessitates a divine instead of a human teacher. Third, the motivating factor behind the teaching shifts from need to love. Fourth, an ascent of the learner inadequately preserves god's love. Fifth, Climacus concludes that only the descent of god provides the opportunity for the individual's faith.

I. Introduction of essential and epistemic inequality

Within the Christian account, the truth rests only with god. As such, the account introduces "an infinite, radical, qualitative difference between God and man."³ This 'infinite difference' manifests in two distinct forms of inequality. First, *essential inequality*; god and human are unequal in essence as god is truth and humans are untruth. Second, *epistemic inequality*; god and human are epistemically unequal in that god possesses the knowledge of the essential inequality, while the human does not. Climacus describes how "[god] alone...understands the misunderstanding."⁴ Within the context of the Christian account, how are these inequalities addressed?

II. God as teacher

Climacus argues that as the holder of truth, god must bring the truth to the untruthful individual. Within the Socratic account, a figure like Socrates takes the role of 'teacher' because his elenctic questioning guides the 'learner' towards accessing their truth.⁵ Even though Socrates may claim not to know anything, truth is discovered through human-to-human dialogue. However, within the Christian account, truth must be brought from the divine to the human realm since truth rests only within god. The human teacher (the Socratic figure) is substituted with a

³ Søren Kierkegaard, Howard V. Hong, Edna H. Hong, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 2nd ed. (Charlottesville, VA: InteLex, 1997), §1383.

⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, Edna H. Hong, and Howard V. Hong, *Kierkegaard's Writings, VII, Volume 7: Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 26.

⁵ Howland, 43.

god-teacher because no human could teach the truth. Climacus asserts how the truth *must* come from a human-divine interaction: “Only god could teach it—if he wanted to be teacher. But this he did indeed want to be.”⁶

III. God's love

In the Socratic teacher-learner account, Socrates teaches because he “needs others...to understand himself.”⁷ However, in the Christian account the teacher holds all truth and therefore could not possibly need anything from sinful learner. With need removed from the equation, what could motivate god to bring truth to the human? Climacus states that only love could explain god's desire to teach: “if [god] moves himself and is not moved by need, what moves him then but love, for love does not have the satisfaction of need outside itself but within.”⁸ Ulrika Carlsson, a scholar of Plato and Kierkegaard, describes the unique qualities of love in this context: “loving a person, unlike loving things or properties or ideas, contains a wish to be loved in return by that person.”⁹ So, while god might not *need* anything from the learner within the Christian account, god still longs for the learner to love him absolutely. But, for god to be loved absolutely and in his entirety, the learner must understand god's essential and epistemic advantages.

Crucially, the learner's *understanding* of these two inequalities affects their status as inequalities in profoundly different ways. In the case of the essential inequality, the learner can understand that he is untruth, and that god is truth without changing the existence of that inequality. However, when the learner understands the epistemic inequality—when he

⁶ Kierkegaard, *Fragments*, 47.

⁷ Howland, 79.

⁸ Kierkegaard, *Fragments*, 24.

⁹ Ulrika Carlsson, ‘Love as a Problem of Knowledge in Kierkegaard's Either/Or and Plato's *Symposium*,’ *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 53 (2010): 57.

understands that god has more information than him regarding their *essential* status—the epistemic inequality dissolves. In this case, since god and the learner would no longer differ in their knowledge of the “misunderstanding,”¹⁰ the epistemic knowledge resolves itself with the learner’s understanding. Therefore, in knowing that the learner’s absolute understanding of god manifests in an equalization of the epistemic inequality and *not* in the equalization of the essential inequality, god should bring the truth in a way that resolves the epistemic inequality. In the words of Climacus: “god’s concern is to bring about equality. If this cannot be brought about, the love becomes unhappy.”¹¹ With the conclusion that god must act to preserve his love, Climacus evaluates two options for how god should bring understanding to the learner and, in turn, reciprocal love to himself.

IV. The ascent of the learner

The first option is for the learner to ascend to god and, therefore, the truth. Here, the Christian god would “draw the learner up toward himself” and “let the learner forget the misunderstanding in his tumult of joy.”¹² In the context of the two types of inequality presented above, this ascent would resolve the first type—the essential inequality. God would bring the learner into god’s truth, meaning the essential difference—that god is truth and learner is untruth—dissolves. However, in bringing the learner into truth and thereby disclosing himself as truth, god also changes the form of his beloved.¹³ The object of god’s love is the learner in their state of untruth—in their state of sin. In bringing the learner into god’s truth and therefore eliminating the ‘infinite difference’ between the human and divine, god essentially destroys the

¹⁰ Kierkegaard, *Fragments*, 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹² *Ibid.*, 29.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 27.

object of his love. In Climacus' words, god's disclosure becomes "the death of the beloved."¹⁴ Herein lies god's dilemma: "the learner is in untruth...and yet he is the object of...god's love."¹⁵ Problematically, the essential inequality—maintained by the learner's untruth—is the foundation of god's love and, thus, cannot be dissolved. Or, at the very least, to preserve god's love, the essential inequality cannot be dissolved *in this way*.

As described above, to inspire the learner's love, god should aim to equalize the epistemic inequality. Not only does the ascent threaten god's love by equalizing the essential inequality, but it also regrettably preserves the epistemic inequality. When the learner ascends to god and learns the truth, only god will know that the ascent resolves the essential inequality. Climacus explains how the learner "remain[s] ignorant [of the fact] that the whole understanding between [god and the learner] was a delusion."¹⁶ In conclusion, the ascent of the learner—presented as option "A"¹⁷ in Climacus' account—wrongfully dissolves the essential inequality and fails to resolve the epistemic inequality. The ascent proves unsuccessful in bringing the condition for understanding the truth to the learner.

V. The descent of god

Climacus presents the descent of god from the heavenly realm to earth as god's option "B."¹⁸ Here, god becomes "as the equal of the lowliest of persons," therefore appearing "in the form of a *servant*."¹⁹ The servant becomes god's "true form," for in his "boundlessness of love," god "wills to be the equal of the beloved."²⁰ Recall that god must primarily aim to resolve the epistemic inequality—the *understanding* of their 'infinite difference.'

¹⁴ Ibid., 30.

¹⁵ Ibid., 28.

¹⁶ Ibid., 33.

¹⁷ Ibid., 29.

¹⁸ Ibid., 30.

¹⁹ Ibid., 31.

²⁰ Ibid., 32.

Although obscured, god's descent does appear to equalize the epistemic inequality. As Kierkegaard scholar Jacob Howland explains, "the descent of...god introduces doubleness, and therewith irony."²¹ Through the incarnation, god is both fully divine and fully human. This doubleness presents itself as an "absolute paradox."²² Howland clarifies: "god is then nothing other than the absolutely paradoxical unity of absolute difference and absolute equality."²³ When the learner faces this paradox—which any individual at any time during or after the lifetime of Jesus can face²⁴—the learner can react in two distinct ways.

First, the learner could take "offense at the notion of incarnation" because god's existence as a lowly servant surpasses understanding.²⁵ Upon recognizing that the paradox is not "comprehensible to reason,"²⁶ the learner frames the paradox as "foolishness."²⁷ In reacting to the paradox with offense, the essential and epistemic inequalities remain. The learner will remain sinful (essential inequality) and ignorant of this relative sinfulness (epistemic inequality).

However, the second reaction provides the opportunity for epistemic equality. This is the reaction of faith, where the learner's understanding understands that it cannot understand the absolute paradox.²⁸ Before the learner's 'leap' to faith, god had an epistemic advantage in knowing their essential inequality. However, following the learner's understanding of their inability to understand the paradox, the learner equalizes that epistemic advantage; the learner and god are now equal regarding the knowledge that god is truth and the learner untruth.

²¹ Howland, 95.

²² Ibid., 96.

²³ Ibid., 30-1.

²⁴ Kierkegaard, *Fragments*, 58.

²⁵ Howland, 96.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Kierkegaard, *Fragments*, 52.

²⁸ Sylvia Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 45.

Through god's descent to earth in the form of the 'absolute paradox,' and through the learner's 'leap of faith,' the equalization of the epistemic inequality puts the learner on a path toward absolute understanding of god and, therefore, the ability to reciprocate god's love. Although absolute understanding would also require equalizing the essential inequality, the path of faith puts the learner on the path toward resolving all inequality.

VI. Augustine on uncertainty and godlikeness

In grappling with the fear and suffering of remaining faithful on one's path towards truth, Kierkegaard gains from a comparison to Augustine's reflections in *Confessions*.²⁹ Augustine asks god: "Can nothing then be the truth, for it is not spread abroad either in the finite or infinite regions of space?"³⁰ Augustine continues: "and [god] called from far off, 'Truly I am who I am.' And I heard you as one hears in one's heart, and from that moment there was no room for doubt."³¹ Augustine discovers "that [he is] far away from [god], in a place of unlikeliness" and commits to his faith that god tells and is truth. Furthermore, Augustine asserts his natural inclination towards god: "My weight is my love: by that am I carried,"³² and this love is directed towards "the house of the Lord."³³ In embracing both uncertainty and increasing godlikeness, the Augustinian account highlights the human *potential* to become like god, and that *love* is the driving force of that potentiality.

Within the Kierkegaardian context, Augustine's question and god's response represent the 'absolute paradox' of the incarnation, while discovering one's unlikeness mirrors the learner's

²⁹ Lee C. Barrett, *Eros and Self-Emptying: The Intersections of Augustine and Kierkegaard* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 66, ProQuest Ebook Central.

³⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, Translated by William Watts, vol 1, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 329.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Augustine, *Confessions*, Translated by William Watts, vol 2, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 391.

³³ Ibid., 393.

leap of faith. In recognizing that there is *potentiality* to learn the truth—and therefore to equalize the essential inequality and to love god absolutely—the comparison ultimately strengthens Kierkegaard's argument for enduring faith on the path towards 'becoming.'

Conclusion

In *Philosophical Fragments*, Climacus sets out on the treacherous exploration of the Christian account of truth. In doing so, he discovers that god must descend to earth as an 'absolute paradox.' Only then will the learner understand the limits of their understanding and embark on a love-fueled path of faith toward god and the truth. By culminating in faith, he distances himself from speculative, ethical, and reason-driven philosophers like Hegel. However, by championing the Christian account of truth, he reaffirms his belief in Christianity. Finally, in echoing the claims of Augustine, Kierkegaard positions love at the center. While this love draws us passionately towards god, the relationship between our understanding and the 'absolute paradox' keeps us grounded. As such, Kierkegaard leans into the absurdity and uncertainty of the space between philosophy and faith.