

“The Absolute Paradox”

from *Philosophical Fragments*, by Søren Kierkegaard

Introduction: Søren Kierkegaard was born in 1813 in Copenhagen, Denmark. His father was plagued by a sense of guilt for having cursed God, and Kierkegaard inherited his father’s anxiety-filled piety. He enrolled in the University of Copenhagen in 1830, first taking a wide variety of courses in the liberal arts and then concentrating on theology and philosophy. His father died in 1838, leaving him a fortune large enough to support his continued studies at the University and subsequently a life devoted to reflection and writing. Kierkegaard completed his degree in theology in 1840. Later that year he proposed marriage to a young woman named Regine Olsen. But he came to believe that his unique philosophical and religious vocation would be incompatible with marriage, and in 1841 he made the anguished decision to break the engagement. Kierkegaard then retreated to Berlin. Six months later he returned to Copenhagen, where he spent his remaining years reflecting on his Christian faith and exploring philosophical questions. He died in Copenhagen in 1855 at the age of forty-two.

Kierkegaard’s major works include *Either/Or* (1843), *Fear and Trembling* (1843), *Philosophical Fragments* (1844), *Stages on Life’s Way* (1845), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), *Works of Love* (1847), and *The Sickness unto Death* (1849).

Our selection is from Chapter 3 of *Philosophical Fragments*, “The Absolute Paradox.” Kierkegaard holds that paradox is “the passion of thought.” We want to discover something we cannot think, even though this will be the downfall of thinking. That which we cannot think is the unknown, and the unknown is God (“the god”). Kierkegaard thinks it foolish to try to prove that God exists, since the very attempt to do so presupposes that God exists: We would not try to construct a proof that something exists if we thought it might not exist. Kierkegaard argues that the existence of something is never the *conclusion* of a proof; rather, it is the *starting point*. For example, Napoleon’s existence cannot be the conclusion of an argument starting from his works, because “his” presupposes that there was a Napoleon who performed the works. Similarly, God’s existence cannot be the conclusion of an argument based on God’s works. To argue that the events in the world must derive from an all-good being assumes that the events are all ultimately good—and this assumption is based on the belief that there exists an all-good author of these works.

Kierkegaard describes the unknown (God) as “the absolutely different.” Thought cannot by itself come to know the absolutely different, since doing so would require thought to negate itself completely. Only God can enable us to know God, and God does so by making us aware of something in us that makes us absolutely different from God. This “something” cannot be anything we receive from God, because there is not an absolute difference between a giver and the gift. What makes us absolutely different is something originating in us: sin. The paradox of thought is that God enables us to know God by making us aware of sin. The Christian doctrine of the incarnation is even more paradoxical: To teach us the *difference* between God and human beings, God *shared* our human nature.

—Donald Abel

Chapter 3: The Absolute Paradox

... Paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion: a mediocre fellow. But the ultimate potentiation of every passion is always to will its own downfall, and so it is also the ultimate passion of the understanding to will the collision, although in one way or another the collision must become its downfall. This, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think. This passion of thought is fundamentally present everywhere in thought ...

But what is this unknown against which the understanding in its paradoxical passion collides and which even disturbs man and his self-knowledge? It is the unknown. But it is not a human being, insofar as he knows man, or anything else that he knows. Therefore, let us call this unknown *the god*.¹ It is only a name we give to it. It hardly occurs to the understanding to want to demonstrate that this unknown (the god) exists. If, namely, the god does not exist, then of course it is impossible to demonstrate it. But if he does exist, then it is foolishness to want to demonstrate it, since I, in the very moment the demonstration commences, would presuppose it not as doubtful—which a presupposition cannot be, inasmuch as it is a presupposition—but as decided, because otherwise I would not begin, easily perceiving that the whole thing would be impossible if he did not exist. If, however, I interpret the expression “to demonstrate the existence of the god” to mean that I want to demonstrate that the unknown, which exists, is the god, then I do not express myself very felicitously, for then I demonstrate nothing, least of all an existence, but I develop the definition of a concept. It is generally a difficult matter to want to demonstrate that something exists—worse still, for the brave souls who venture to do it, the difficulty is of such a kind that fame by no means awaits those who are preoccupied with it. The whole process of demonstration continually becomes something entirely different, becomes an expanded concluding development of what I conclude from having presupposed that the object of investigation exists. Therefore, whether I am moving in the world of sensate palpability or in the world of thought, I never reason in conclusion *to* existence, but I reason in conclusion *from* existence. For example, I do not demonstrate that a stone exists but that something which exists is a stone. The court of law does not demonstrate that a criminal exists but that the accused, who does indeed exist, is a criminal. Whether one wants to call existence an *accessorium* [addition] or the eternal *prius* [presupposition], it can never be demonstrated. We shall take our time; after all, there is no reason for us to rush as there is for those who, out of concern for themselves, or for the god, or for something else, must rush to get proof that something exists. In that case, there is good reason to make haste, especially if the one involved has in all honesty made an accounting of the danger that he himself or the object being investigated does not exist until he proves it and does not dishonestly harbor the secret thought that essentially it exists whether he demonstrates it or not.

If one wanted to demonstrate Napoleon’s existence from Napoleon’s works, would it not be most curious, since his existence certainly explains the works but

¹ In *Philosophical Fragments* Kierkegaard uses the expression “the god” instead of “God.” He seems to be following the language of Socrates, who, in Plato’s dialogues, speaks of “the god.” [D.C.A.]

the works do not demonstrate *his* existence unless I have already in advance interpreted the word “his” in such a way as to have assumed that he exists. But Napoleon is only an individual, and to that extent there is no absolute relation between him and his works—thus someone else could have done the same works. Perhaps that is why I cannot reason from the works to existence. If I call the works Napoleon’s works, then the demonstration is superfluous, since I have already mentioned his name. If I ignore this, I can never demonstrate from the works that they are Napoleon’s but demonstrate (purely ideally) that such works are the works of a great general, etc. However, between the god and his works there is an absolute relation. God is not a name but a concept, and perhaps because of that his *essentia involvit existentiam* [essence involves existence].

God’s works, therefore, only the god can do. Quite correct. But, then, what are the god’s works? The works from which I want to demonstrate his existence do not immediately and directly exist, not at all. Or are the wisdom in nature and the goodness or wisdom in Governance right in front of our noses? Do we not encounter the most terrible spiritual trials here, and is it ever possible to be finished with all these trials? But I still do not demonstrate God’s existence from such an order of things, and even if I began, I would never finish and also would be obliged continually to live *in suspensio*² lest something so terrible happen that my fragment of demonstration would be ruined. Therefore, from what works do I demonstrate it? From the works regarded ideally—that is, as they do not appear directly and immediately. But then I do not demonstrate it from the works, after all, but only develop the ideality I have presupposed; trusting in *that*, I even dare to defy all objections, even those that have not yet arisen. By beginning, then, I have presupposed the ideality, have presupposed that I will succeed in accomplishing it, but what else is that but presupposing that the god exists and actually beginning with trust in him?

And how does the existence of the god emerge from the demonstration? Does it happen straightway? Is it not here as it is with the Cartesian dolls?³ As soon as I let go of the doll, it stands on its head. As soon as I let go of it—consequently, I have to let go of it. So also with the demonstration—so long as I am holding on to the demonstration (that is, continue to be one who is demonstrating), the existence does not emerge, if for no other reason than that I am in the process of demonstrating it, but when I let go of the demonstration, the existence is there. Yet this letting go, even that is surely something; it is, after all, *meine Zuthat* [my contribution]. Does it not have to be taken into account, this diminutive moment, however brief it is—it does not have to be long, because it is a *leap*. However diminutive this moment, even if it is this very instant, this very instant must be taken into account. . . .

Therefore, anyone who wants to demonstrate the existence of God (in any other sense than elucidating the God-concept and without the *reservatio finalis* [ultimate reservation] that we have pointed out—that the existence itself emerges from the demonstration by a leap) proves something else instead, at times something that perhaps did not even need demonstrating, and in any case never

² *in suspensio*: in suspense (Latin) [D.C.A.]

³ *Cartesian dolls*: tumbler dolls with off-center weights inside that make the dolls roll to their feet when released [D.C.A., after H.V.H/E.H.H., eds. and trans.]

anything better. For the fool says in his heart that there is no God,⁴ but he who says in his heart or to others: Just wait a little and I shall demonstrate it—ah, what a rare wise man he is! If, at the moment he is supposed to begin the demonstration, it is not totally undecided whether the god exists or not, then, of course, he does not demonstrate it, and if that is the situation in the beginning, then he never does make a beginning—partly for fear that he will not succeed because the god may not exist, and partly because he has nothing with which to begin. In ancient times, such a thing would have been of hardly any concern. At least Socrates, who did indeed advance what is called the physico-teleological demonstration for the existence of God,⁵ did not conduct himself in this way. He constantly presupposes that the god exists, and on this presupposition he seeks to infuse nature with the idea of fitness and purposiveness. If he had been asked why he conducted himself in this manner, he presumably would have explained that he lacked the kind of courage needed to dare to embark on such a voyage of discovery without having behind him the assurance that the god exists. At the god's request, he casts out his net, so to speak, to catch the idea of fitness and purposiveness, for nature itself comes up with many terrifying devices and many subterfuges in order to disturb.

The paradoxical passion of the understanding is, then, continually colliding with this unknown, which certainly does exist but is also unknown and to that extent does not exist. The understanding does not go beyond this; yet in its paradoxicality the understanding cannot stop reaching it and being engaged with it, because wanting to express its relation to it by saying that this unknown does not exist will not do, since just saying that involves a relation. But what, then, is this unknown, for does not its being the god merely signify to us that it is the unknown? To declare that it is the unknown because we cannot know it, and that even if we could know it we could not express it, does not satisfy the passion, although it has correctly perceived the unknown as frontier. But a frontier is expressly the passion's torment, even though it is also its incentive. And yet it can go no further, whether it risks a sortie through *via negationis* [the way of negation] or *via eminentiae* [the way of idealization].

What, then, is the unknown? It is the frontier that is continually arrived at, and therefore when the category of motion is replaced by the category of rest it is the different, the absolutely different. But it is the absolutely different in which there is no distinguishing mark. Defined as the absolutely different, it seems to be at the point of being disclosed, but not so, because the understanding cannot even think the absolutely different; it cannot absolutely negate itself but uses itself for that purpose and consequently thinks the difference in itself, which it thinks by itself. It cannot absolutely transcend itself and therefore thinks as above itself only the sublimity that it thinks by itself. If the unknown (the god) is not solely the frontier, then the one idea about the different is confused with the many ideas about the different. The unknown is then in *diaspora* [dispersion], and the

⁴ Psalms 15:1 (14:1 in some versions); Psalms 53:1 (52.1) [D.C.A.]

⁵ See Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, Book I, Chapter 4, Sections 2-7. [H.V.H/E.H.H.] Xenophon (about 431-352 B.C.E.) was a Greek historian. The “physico-teleological” argument for God's existence is based on the premise that things in the universe act for a goal (*telos* in Greek). [D.C.A.]

understanding has an attractive selection from among what is available and what fantasy can think of (the prodigious, the ridiculous, etc.).

But this difference cannot be grasped securely. Every time this happens, it is basically an arbitrariness, and at the very bottom of devoutness there madly lurks the capricious arbitrariness that knows it itself has produced the god. If the difference cannot be grasped securely because there is no distinguishing mark, then, as with all such dialectical opposites, so it is with the difference and the likeness—they are identical. Adhering to the understanding, the difference has so confused the understanding that it does not know itself and quite consistently confuses itself with the difference. In the realm of fantastical fabrication, paganism has been adequately luxuriant. With respect to the assumption just advanced, which is the self-ironizing of the understanding, I shall merely trace it in a few lines without reference to whether it was historical or not. There exists, then, a certain person who looks just like any other human being, grows up as do other human beings, marries, has a job, takes tomorrow's livelihood into account as a man should. It may be very beautiful to want to live as the birds of the air live,⁶ but it is not permissible, and one can indeed end up in the saddest of plights, either dying of hunger—if one has the endurance for that—or living on the goods of others. This human being is also the god. How do I know that? Well, I cannot know it, for in that case I would have to know the god and the difference, and I do not know the difference, inasmuch as the understanding has made it like unto that from which it differs. Thus the god has become the most terrible deceiver through the understanding's deception of itself. The understanding has the god as close as possible and yet just as far away. . . .

Most likely you do not deny the consistency of what has been developed—that in defining the unknown as the different the understanding ultimately goes astray and confuses the difference with likeness. But this seems to imply something different, namely, that if a human being is to come truly to know something about the unknown (the god), he must first come to know that it is different from him, absolutely different from him. The understanding cannot come to know this by itself (since, as we have seen, it is a contradiction); if it is going to come to know this, it must come to know this from the god, and if it does come to know this, it cannot understand this and consequently cannot come to know this, for how could it understand the absolutely different? If this is not immediately clear, then it will become more clear from the corollary, for if the god is absolutely different from a human being, then a human being is absolutely different from the god—but how is the understanding to grasp this? At this point we seem to stand at a paradox. Just to come to know that the god is the different, man needs the god and then comes to know that the god is absolutely different from him. But if the god is to be absolutely different from a human being, this can have its basis not in that which man owes to the god (for to that extent they are akin) but in that which he owes to himself or in that which he himself has committed. What, then, is the difference? Indeed, what else but sin, since the difference, the absolute difference, must have been caused by the individual himself. . . . Only the god could teach it—if he wanted to be teacher. But this he did indeed want to be ... and in order to be that he wanted to be on the basis of equality with the single individual so that he could completely understand him. Thus the paradox

⁶ See Matthew 6:26 [H.V.H/E.H.H.]

becomes even more terrible, or the same paradox has the duplexity by which it manifests itself as the absolute—negatively, by bringing into prominence the absolute difference of sin and, positively, by wanting to annul this absolute difference in the absolute equality.

But is a paradox such as this conceivable? We shall not be in a hurry; whenever the contention is over a reply to a question and the contending is not like that on the race track, it is not speed that wins but correctness. The understanding certainly cannot think it, cannot hit upon it on its own, and if it is proclaimed, the understanding cannot understand it and merely detects that it will likely be its downfall. To that extent, the understanding has strong objections to it; and yet, on the other hand, in its paradoxical passion the understanding does indeed will its own downfall. But the paradox, too, wills this downfall of the understanding, and thus the two have a mutual understanding, but this understanding is present only in the moment of passion.

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