

# Kierkegaard's Conception of God

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## Abstract

Philosophers have often misunderstood Kierkegaard's views on the nature and purposes of God due to a fascination with his earlier, pseudonymous works. We examine many of Kierkegaard's later works with the aim of setting forth an accurate view on this matter. The portrait of God that emerges is a personal and fiercely loving God with whom humans can and should enter into relationship. Far from advocating a fideistic faith or a cognitively unrestrained leap in the dark, we argue that Kierkegaard connects this God-relationship to (a particular kind of) evidence and even knowledge. However, such evidence and knowledge – and hence God himself – may remain hidden from many individuals due to misconceptions of God and misuses of the human will.

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In one of his last philosophical works, Kierkegaard (hereafter K) exclaims: 'Oh, to what degree human beings would become – human and lovable beings – if they would become single individuals before God'. This exclamation expresses a main goal of K's literary efforts, early and late: to invite readers to 'become single individuals before God' (1851a, 11). Accordingly, he remarks: 'To me, not personally but as a thinker, this matter of the single individual is the most decisive' (1859, 114). He also puts this goal as: 'To come to oneself in self-knowledge *and before God*' (1876, 106). A key limitation on K's invitation to self-knowledge before God is that 'I cannot make my God-relationship public' in a way that disregards its 'purely personal inwardness' (1859, 25). We shall examine K's understanding of God and a God-relationship, in the light of his mature work beginning with his 'turning-point' in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846).

## 1. Method

Although K wrote some books under pseudonyms and some under his own name, each of these works reveals, directly or indirectly, a conception of God. For instance, a particular conception of God is revealed by Johannes de Silentio, the pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling*, and commentators have written much about this conception. Even so, because their writing focuses on a pseudonymous work, it does not immediately address the issue of *Kierkegaard's* conception of God. To avoid this problem, we shall survey views of God from some of K's later works regarding which we can be confident of K's own views. K, however, is not interested in a speculative, or abstract philosophical, understanding of God; instead, he aims to portray God as the One with whom humans can and should be in life-giving 'spiritual relationship'.

We follow K's own suggested distinction between the first and the second authorship. The first consists of the works prior to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, most of which are written under pseudonyms. The second consists of works written after the *Postscript*, most of which are written under K's own name. The *Postscript* itself occupies a middle ground designated by K as 'the turning point in the whole authorship', a point that belongs

neither to the early nor to the later works (1859, 55; cf. 9, 29, 31, 63, 94). Although written under the pseudonym 'Johannes Climacus', this work has K named as its editor. At the end of the *Postscript*, K adds 'A First and Last Explanation' in which he signs his own name and takes credit for creating the earlier pseudonyms. However, he writes that 'in the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by me', that is, representative of his own position (1846, 626; cf. 1859, 24). According to *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, the main focus of K's authorship is to describe what it means to become a Christian. The early works lead up to this focus indirectly, and, beginning with the *Postscript*, the later works treat it directly and extensively.

Despite K's stated literary intentions, some commentators hold that we should not take him at his word regarding those intentions. They include Fenger (1980), Garff (1997, 1998, 1999), and Mackey (1986). In contrast, commentators who recommend taking K's stated literary intentions at face value include Walsh (1999) and Evans (2006, 35–41). We ourselves find K's most direct and most mature thoughts on God in the second authorship, in keeping both with his stated intentions and with the fact that none of the early pseudonyms claims to have knowledge of God. Accordingly, our survey devotes most of its attention to some of K's later works. (For some excellent studies that focus almost exclusively on K's second authorship, see Come 1997; Walsh 2005; Gouwens 1996; Dewey 1968.)

## 2. *God as Personal*

K's God, unlike the God of Plato and Aristotle, is inherently personal and hence purposive. Here, we use the slippery term 'personal' broadly, in such a way that whatever is personal has intentions or purposes and whatever has intentions or purposes is personal. K's conception of God is very different from Aristotle's conception of an Unmoved Mover, and is anchored in Christian theological concepts (see Law 1995). Accordingly, Gouwens (1996) places K 'at the center of the Christian tradition rather than at its fringe' (22). K affirms that 'God is love' and that God is the 'source of all love' (1847b, 190, 3). He refers to God as 'my lover', and predicts that his lover will someday come and, seeing through all misleading appearances, perceive the truth behind K's authorship (1859, 69–70). He remarks on the role God played in the production of his writings, and emphasizes that he has needed God's help and assistance to write each day. At times he was conscious of writing as an act of obedience toward God, but at other times, according to K, God directed things behind the scenes, when K was not yet conscious of the full meaning of his written words. Regarding the direction and final shape of his authorship, K writes that 'Governance [=God] had curbed me in every respect' (1859, 86). K makes it clear, however, that this was not manipulative; instead, he saw it as a sign of divine 'compassionate love' that God chose to use him in this way (1859, 87).

K reports that he has been assured that God has been pleased with his work as an author. He says that 'I know with God' that his work 'finds favor' with God, and that 'It is truly pleasing to God that the truth is served in this way' (1859, 24, 60). Regarding how this was made known, K writes that God's 'spirit witnessed powerfully with my spirit that it had his complete and highest approval' (1859, 60). Accordingly, K conceived of God as someone whom human beings can know and interact with, spirit to Spirit. K portrays God as a personal being who can (and does) intentionally and lovingly guide human beings.

K's conception of God as personal Trinity emerges in *For Self-Examination*, a book divided into three parts that begin with prayers offered, respectively, to the Father, to

Christ, and to the Holy Spirit. We see, accordingly, that K conceives of God as a personal agent to whom humans can pray. The book's three parts reinforce a personal Trinitarian approach to God, as follows. The first part, 'What is Required in Order to Look at Oneself with True Blessing in the Mirror of the Word', presents what the Christian requirements are, as given in love by God the Father. The second part, 'Christ is the Way', shows how one can meet these requirements through imitation of Christ. The third part, 'It is the Spirit Who Gives Life', explains that this Way can be followed only through the help of the Holy Spirit, because it is God's own Spirit who gives humans 'new life' by helping them 'die to' the selfishness of the world.

K's emphasis on the importance of the Holy Spirit continues in *Judge for Yourself!*, which begins with a prayer asking God to send God's Spirit 'into our hearts' (1876, 95). We must receive this life-giving Spirit, according to K, to 'die to' selfishness and live in faith toward God (1876, 98). Although it is painful at times to yield to the Spirit who seeks to kill habits and practices opposed to God's unselfish love, true life requires obedience to this divine teacher.

K emphasizes the importance of imitating Jesus, and speaks of cognitive benefits that arise as a result of such imitation. He writes that 'the demonstration of Christianity really lies in *imitation*' (1851b, 68), and that 'the proof does not precede but follows, is in and with the imitation that follows Christ' (1876, 191). He also maintains that imitation is the key in abolishing doubts and gaining certitude (1876, 190–1, 197), including certitude regarding various facts about Jesus and his resurrection (1851b, 70). Accordingly, K holds that faith's life of imitation leads to a subjective demonstration and personal assurance regarding some truths concerning God and God's reality. (See Dewey 1968, for a portrayal of Kierkegaardian imitation and its importance for K's authorship.)

While calling for a rigorous Christian life, K portrays God as gracious. Specifically, he holds that every command issued by God, no matter how rigorous, is motivated by God's love and concern for each human being (1876, 156). Both Ferreira (2001) and Hall (2002) highlight many of the difficulties (and joys) of living out K's understanding of love. Although K emphasizes Christ as Prototype, he also stresses that Christ is first and foremost Redeemer, and that Christ the Redeemer is the condition for the possibility of imitating Christ the Prototype (1876, 147, 159). K acknowledges that there is nothing a human being can do to come closer to God (1876, 152). Instead, we must rely on God's love and grace that come to us in Christ, the Redeemer and Prototype.

Even K's late polemical publications, in his 'attack on Christendom' of 1854–1855, present God as personal and loving, particularly as fiercely loving (1855a, 78; 1855b, 173, 251, 294; 1855c, 271, 280). That is, God loves humans and wants the best for them, but what is best for humans is often opposed to human selfishness or what 'the world' encourages. As a result, God's love is not pure comfort, and God must not be viewed as merely a 'nice guy'. Instead, God lovingly calls humans to undergo the suffering of 'dying to' the selfishness of the world (1855b, 177–178, 251–252, 294–295).

K's 1855 *The Changelessness of God: A Discourse* (1855c, 263–281) underscores that God is love, and that God's changelessness refers primarily to the fact that God will not cease to be loving. Even when humans do not submit to God's loving will, God does not for that reason cease to love them. According to K, the most important thing in life is to discover God's love within a personal God-relationship. It is wonderful if this can be discovered through gentleness, but if severity or suffering is required, then so be it (1855c, 276). The ultimate tragedy, by K's lights, is that a human might live this earthly life, whether in suffering or in comfort, and never experience God's changeless love.

### 3. God-Relationship

The true God, according to K, is not related to humans via human speculation. Writing as Climacus in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, K proposes that 'the God-relationship of the individual human being is the main point', that is, what 'makes a human being a human being' (1846, 77, 244). A human thereby 'find[s] repose... in a spiritual relationship with God', and this depends on an 'inwardness' whereby one is 'awakened to a God-relationship, and then it is possible to see God everywhere' (1846, 45, 247). K warns against having 'one's God relationship transformed into a speculative enterprise on the basis of probability and partnership and fellow shareholders' (1846, 66). He holds that 'all religious, to say nothing of Christian, venturing is... by way of relinquishing probability' (1876, 100) for the sake of faith as passionate inwardness and choice (1850, 86–87, 140–141; cf. 1846, 113, 116, 129, 221). This position endures throughout K's writings, and it rests on K's view that 'God and man are two qualities separated by an infinite qualitative difference' that can be mediated only by God himself (1849a, 126).

One might propose that K is developing Kant's critical program of denying knowledge (and evidence) to leave room for faith, but the story is not so simple or familiar. We shall propose, instead, that K denies one kind of knowledge (and evidence) of God to leave room for another, better suited kind of knowledge (and evidence). In particular, as we shall see, he denies the 'profane' kind to leave room for the 'sacred' kind. We see no reason, however, to conclude that K is committed to traditional negative theology of any kind (on which see Law 1993).

Regarding Christian belief that divine incarnation occurred in Jesus, K holds that '... the contradiction between being God and being an individual human being is the greatest possible, the infinitely qualitative contradiction' (1850, 131; cf. 1876, 121, 134). He adds, accordingly, that 'Christianity is a madness because it is incommensurate with any finite wherefore.... Be quiet: it is the absolute. And that is how it *must* be presented' (1850, 62). This appears to be sheer dogmatism, without any compelling rationale, if not unbridled fideism, too. This, however, is only an appearance.

Contrary to Garelick (1965), Blanshard (1969), Penelhum (1983), and others, K is no fideist who jettisons reason or does away with cognitively significant restraints in commitments regarding God (for a more detailed treatment of this issue see Evans 1998). As K says, 'Christianity has its own characteristic way of restraining' regarding belief and action (1876, 100). The first hint of K's distinctive epistemology emerges in an important but under-appreciated footnote in *Practice in Christianity* (25), where K mentions "'history" ... understood as profane history, world history, history directly understood in contradistinction to sacred history.' The profane – sacred distinction arguably applies, in K's thinking, not only to history but also to *knowledge, reason, understanding*, and related phenomena. The category of the 'profane' involves a world devoid of the voice of the personal God. Profane history, knowledge, reason, and understanding have no place for the voice of such a God. Even religious people can be in the grips of profane categories. As K remarks: 'One makes God's Word into something impersonal, objective, a doctrine – instead of its being the voice of God that you shall hear' (1851b, 39). He adds: '... what a monstrous mistake it is, almost the greatest possible, to didacticize Christianity' (1850, 206).

K makes various claims that lead many commentators to portray him as abandoning religious knowledge for the sake of mere, cognitively unrestrained faith. This is a mistaken portrayal, as we can see in K's second authorship. Some of the most decisive evidence is in Part 1 of *Judge for Yourself!* (98–143), where K explains the crucial role of

'self-knowledge' in human commitment to God. The self-knowledge in question is irreducible to any kind of immediate experience, and contrasts with any knowledge in which 'you forget yourself, are absent from yourself' (1876, 105). He characterizes it as requiring one 'to come to oneself... before God as nothing before him, yet infinitely, unconditionally engaged' by God (1876, 104).

K aims to identify a kind of sacred self-knowledge (in contrast with profane knowledge) wherein one sees one's complete inadequacy before God, is humbled before God, and receives God's call to be made new and to live anew in perfect love before God. Such self-knowledge is qualitatively and existentially very different from any kind of profane knowledge or evidence, and it is not humanly controllable, given God's indispensable role. Indeed, it can seem foolish or absurd from the perspective of profane knowledge or evidence. In addition, it offers a 'way of restraining' theistic, and particularly Christian, belief and practice and thereby steers clear of an 'anything goes' fideism. A serious problem with profane knowledge, according to K, is that it 'does not touch my life at all, its desires, its passions, its selfishness, and leaves me completely unchanged' (1876, 116). Before the God of unselfish love, humans would be called to a change of becoming unselfishly loving as God is loving.

K elaborates his distinctive epistemological position as he explores the 'difference between truth and truths' (1850, 206). He draws an important distinction between knowing the truth and being the truth (1850, 205–206). With regard to sacred truth, according to K, it matters *how one acquires* this truth. More specifically, 'only then do I know the truth, when it becomes a life in me' (1850, 206). In other words: 'knowing the truth is something that entirely of itself accompanies being the truth, not the other way around' (1850, 205). In contrast to the truths of 'all temporal, earthly, [and] worldly goals', K has in mind 'the ethical, the ethical-religious, ... *the truth*' (1859, 106). Phrasing this distinction another way, K writes: 'by *truth* I always understand *eternal truth*' (1859, 109–110). K's concern is not with miscellaneous truths but is rather with the sacred truth regarding God's redemptive intervention in human affairs, particularly in Jesus. More to the point, K has in mind a personal God who, with authority, calls people to undergo transformation toward God's morally perfect character, and (sacred) knowledge and evidence follow suit. That is, such knowledge and evidence are purposively designed for 'single individuals' who are willing to be changed in the direction of God's redemptive transformation. (See Moser 2008, 2009, for an attempt to develop such a volitional religious epistemology.)

K's 'God-relationship' is anything but an object of human speculation. It demands engagement of the human will (and choice), on the basis of a distinctive kind of cognitive 'restraining' found in sincere human self-knowledge (before God). One can sincerely inquire about the ingredients of such self-knowledge, including the role of divine intervention, but such inquiry will have to ask about human volition. In particular, is a person sincerely *willing* to undergo the kind of transformation in question? If not, could this volitional position cloud otherwise available evidence or restraining from God? This question leads to the issue of why God is not more obvious to (all) humans. There are resources in K's later works to address this issue, and they offer an illuminating response.

#### 4. *Divine Hiding*

K does not provide a formal argument seeking to justify, excuse, or fully explain divine hiddenness. However, throughout his later works K provides numerous reasons why many individuals do not see or recognize God. Here, we will discuss four such reasons. In each instance, both human volition and K's conception of God play crucial roles.

First, K maintains that those who seek God merely by means of objective information will be frustrated. Although K does not disapprove of objective knowledge as such (1847b, 233; 1848, 119), he strongly warns against approaching God as an impersonal object to be studied. In his words, 'God is not like something one buys in a shop, or like a piece of property' (1848, 88). Instead, God is a personal agent, a subject with definite redemptive purposes for humans. Human knowledge of God, therefore, ought to be characterized by subjectivity and relationality, not by impersonal or detached forms of objective knowledge. Merely objective knowledge about God does not entail personally knowing God via a God-relationship (1848, 197–199). Moreover, obtaining merely objective knowledge may also promote complacency or a false sense of superiority. As K puts it, the 'most terrible thing of all is' to be 'deceived by much knowledge' (1847a, 153). In the end, some people who pursue only objective knowledge or evidence of God miss the fact that God is a subject and they therefore fail to encounter God as a personal agent, as person to person in an 'I-Thou' relationship. In this respect, knowledge of God is not available in a purely objective approach (1846, 55, 66, 77).

Second, K expects that God will remain hidden from presumptuous individuals. In *Christian Discourses*, K devotes an entire discourse to the theme of presumptuousness (1848, 60–69). Presumptuousness might manifest itself when someone ignores God, explicitly denies God's existence, or demands particular services from God. All of these manifestations stem from a position of selfishness and cognitive arrogance wherein one desires to live 'as if he were his own master, himself the architect of his fortune' (1848, 66–67). However, a presumptuous stance demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of who human beings are and who God is. Human beings are not ultimately their own masters, just as God is not a genie in a lamp who exists to cater to their wishes. As K points out elsewhere, an attitude of presumptuousness begins and ends in despair (1849a, 68). Therefore, such an approach is likely to leave one without illumination regarding God's existence and character.

The third reason why God may remain hidden from many people brings us back to the crucial issue of self-knowledge. According to K, to know and relate to God properly (as a morally perfect agent), one must break through to a consciousness of one's sin (1850, 67–68, 155; 1847a, 151–152; 1847b, 201; 1855b, 238). Sin and moral imperfection separate, or alienate, human beings from the holy and morally perfect God (1849a, 75–131). To lead people to such an awareness, according to K, God creates each human being with an inner conscience, i.e., a personal 'preacher of repentance' (1848, 192; 1851c, 182–183; 1847a, 128–134; 1849a, 124). However, the truth of one's sinfulness is difficult to confront for a human. Many humans are afraid of this truth and prefer to retain a posture of self-sufficiency and an attitude of selfishness (1847a, 103; 1848, 170). Therefore, owing to selfish choices, actions, or fears, God's call to many humans via conscience is ignored or avoided (1847b, 385; 1848, 253–254; 1847a, 128–129). As a result, such people fail to hear God's voice.

Finally, K explains that Jesus' life is the possibility of offense and, as such, prevents many people from enjoying a God-relationship. K emphasizes sin to discuss forgiveness. After one's confession of sin, the claims of Jesus should be of interest to one. K notes that Jesus offers rest to each individual through reconciliation with God and the forgiveness of sins (1848, 262–267; 1849c, 143, 1851c, 169–170; 1850, 11–22). However, many people do not accept this offer because Jesus is also the possibility of offense. First of all, it is potentially offensive that Jesus, a human being, claims to have divine authority (1872, 33, 182–183; 1851c, 185). Next, it is highly offensive that Jesus 'declared himself to be God' (1849b, 63). K describes in detail the various ways in which this claim can be offensive

(1850, 81–82, 94–105; 1849a, 129–131). The very concept of the ‘God–man’ is also problematic for some. K describes this ‘composite’ as the absolute paradox (1850, 30, 63, 82, 123), as a ‘sign of contradiction’ (1850, 125), and as something that brings the understanding to a standstill (1850, 82, 116, 120). There is no irrationalism here, but rather an insistence that profane reason and profane history can never directly demonstrate (i.e., deductively prove) that Jesus is also God. K maintains that this situation is the result of Jesus’ free choice to hide his divinity in what he calls ‘the most profound incognito’ (1850, 128, 131). The significance of the incognito is that it forces the issue of needed human faith to the forefront. K likens the possibility of offense to ‘standing at the cross-road’, where ‘one turns either to offense or to faith’ (1850, 81). Those who are offended at Jesus turn away from faith and hence also from forgiveness and a personal God–relationship.

Each of the reasons we have examined serves to keep God hidden from many people. In each case, the human will is central. Ferreira 1991 argues that, for K, the imagination rather than human volition is of primary importance in the transition to faith. However, her account arguably does not do justice to K’s understanding of the role of the human will in commitment, indifference, or opposition to God. (For discussion, including a balanced critique, of Ferreira’s position, see Come 1997, 320–337.) After all, how we approach the issue of God’s existence is under our control, indirectly if not directly. Will one demand merely objective evidence and knowledge? Will one adopt an attitude of presumptuousness from the start? It also remains to each individual to choose one’s response to one’s conscience and to Jesus. Will the former be heeded or ignored? Will the latter be an occasion for faith or offense? None of the answers here is predetermined. Although human imagination undoubtedly plays a role, according to K, it is ultimately left to the human will to decide what response to make, if any.

All of the aforementioned issues are inseparable from K’s conception of God. When individuals think or act in ways that prevent them from recognizing God, it is often because of a misunderstanding of the character of God. To search for or demand merely objective knowledge of God is to miss the fact that God is a subject, a personal agent with definite redemptive purposes for humans. To approach God presumptuously ignores that the fact that God, if God exists, has the wisdom, power, and authority to be *God*, that is, one who is worthy of worship. Those who drown out their conscience sometimes deny a contrast between God’s moral perfection and their selfishness and moral deficiencies. In addition, those who are offended at Jesus might misunderstand God’s humble, compassionate, and self-sacrificing love for God’s lost and dying creatures.

In the *Postscript*, K poses the question: ‘Why is God illusive?’ (1846, 243). His answer is that God ‘is truth and in being illusive seeks to keep a person from untruth’ (1846, 244). As we have seen, the second authorship supports this response. God refuses to appear in ways that misrepresent God’s character or are otherwise antithetical to God’s purposes. God’s illusiveness therefore stems from God’s love and actually protects human beings. In many cases, such hiddenness preserves the possibility of a reconciled God–human relationship through faith that increasingly transforms a human into God’s unselfish, loving likeness. At the same time, we must allow that someone in a sincere quest for God can be in doubt (at least for a time) about God’s existence. Such objective doubt is fully compatible with a volitionally sensitive quest for God. It is God’s sole prerogative to set the fitting time to remove objective doubt about divine existence. (For elaboration, see Moser 2008, 2009.)

In sum, then, K’s conception of God is morally robust and existentially significant for humans. Clearly, it is not a conception designed for people looking for a spectator sport.

In particular, it brings a morally serious challenge to inquirers, a challenge regarding who they are and who they should be in the presence of a God of morally perfect, unselfish love. This challenge is at the very heart of what Martin Buber (1923), under K's influence, calls the 'I-Thou' relationship between a human and God. It is also at the heart of the kind of existential crisis that looms large, again under K's influence, in the early 20th-century theological writings of P. T. Forsyth, Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, Emil Brunner, H. H. Farmer, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

### Short Biography

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### Note

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