

# *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics*

## **KIERKEGAARD'S VIRTUE EPISTEMOLOGY**

*Michael D. Stark*

### **INTRODUCTION**

**E**pistemological emphasis often focuses on what is true or right. It is obvious that the possession of knowledge and truth is valuable, but perhaps epistemic rightness ought not be the sole, primary concern. Indeed, perhaps the epistemic process, i.e., the pursuit of knowledge and truth, and the characteristics of the learning agent thereof, ought to be equally prioritized. This paper argues for the prioritization of the epistemic process using the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaardian epistemology has often been relegated to various forms of fideism, but perhaps with much haste. In light of Kierkegaard's emphasis on the individual, further epistemological examination is warranted. This article will argue that aspects of Kierkegaard's epistemology can be categorized under virtue epistemology. Understanding Kierkegaard through virtue epistemology can help us: (1) understand the role that self-formation plays in relation to belief-formation, (2) apprehend the role subjectivity plays in Kierkegaard's thought, and (3) respond to the frequent objection that he was a fideist.

## VIRTUES & KIERKEGAARD

Much of Kierkegaard's epistemological discussion surrounds selfhood and the activities and decisions which bring forth selfhood—virtues by which a person fulfills human potential.<sup>1</sup> This is, I believe, an appropriate connection with contemporary virtue epistemology. Adapting a definition from Robert C. Roberts, virtue epistemology is described as traits or values that a knowing agent possesses that constitute the agent's understanding and knowledge in relation to the self and its development.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, Roberts, working with W. Jay Wood, defines virtue as “acquired bases of excellent intellectual functioning.”<sup>3</sup> That is to say, a virtue is not merely a properly functioning cognitive ability; rather, a virtue is an acquired and cultivated activity that facilitates human flourishing and self-development.

A Kierkegaardian virtue epistemology must be connected to individual life. That is, the virtues are directly related to the fulfilment of the existential components of humanity. Classical virtues fit the model, such as discernment, intellectual honesty, objectivity (unbiased), and truthfulness.<sup>4</sup> While the building of these virtues may correspond to human faculties, such traits are not *of* the faculties *per se*.<sup>5</sup> Properly functioning faculties do not alone comprise virtues. For example, one may possess healthy mental faculties only to use them for endeavors that bring forth harm instead of benefits. Consider, for example,

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<sup>1</sup> “Self” is a central component of Kierkegaard's philosophy. The self is essentially a relation to, and a consciousness of, itself. Each individual lives in a manner that continuously discovers the self and becomes more conscious of its own importance. The relation of self extends beyond self; it is a relation to God. In order to properly relate to God, one must authentically develop the self.

<sup>2</sup> Robert C. Roberts, “Kierkegaard's Virtue Epistemology: A Modest Initiative,” in *Why Kierkegaard Matters: A Festschrift in Honor of Robert L. Perkins* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2010), 220.

<sup>3</sup> Robert C. Roberts & W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 60.

<sup>4</sup> This abbreviated list of epistemic virtues are similar to, yet categorically distinct from, the classical moral virtues (such as those endorsed by Aristotle and Aquinas). While the moral and epistemic categories are both necessary for aiding selfhood, they are, in fact, distinct. However, this paper will later address how the two are correlated when considering Genesis 22 with regard to Kierkegaard's religious stage of life.

<sup>5</sup> Roberts, “Kierkegaard's Virtue Epistemology,” 220.

Kierkegaard's response to Pastor Adolph Adler in *The Book on Adler*. In 1843 Adler wrote *Several Sermons*, which testified to a personal revelation Adler supposedly had from God. In short, Adler was chastised for the book and later suspended from the pastorate. What Kierkegaard saw as troubling was that Adler later recanted the revelation and subsequently considered his book the work of genius. *The Book on Adler* is Kierkegaard's response, not so much a critique of Adler's content as it was of Adler as an author himself. When Kierkegaard writes of a discourse shared with Adler, Adler is prompted to give explanations for his original claim and its redaction. Kierkegaard writes that Adler's response was not truthful. In fact, Kierkegaard says that Adler's "best answer can be regarded as an evasion."<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard went to great measures not to condemn the former pastor; he tried instead to ascertain the situation Adler found himself in. Debate is had over the mental awareness of Adler during this period, but assuming his intellectual faculties were functioning adequately, his resistance to direct answers and truth escapes the role of the virtuous knower and learner that Adler was claiming to be. Someone with profound insight ought instead to speak directly and authoritatively about one's own authorship and the criticism it may elicit.

With this brief examination, then, it can be said that virtuous traits must lead to human flourishing and excellence, and the cultivation of selfhood. With this understanding, Kierkegaardian categories will also be added to the list normal epistemic virtues (such as intellectual honesty, humility, discernment, truthfulness, etc.), with special attention being paid to subjectivity, faith, and recognized epistemic uncertainty. For Kierkegaard, focusing on the subjective is connected to fulfilling one's life. As Climacus writes,

To become subjective should be the highest task assigned to every human being, just as the highest reward, an eternal happiness, exists only for the subjective person or, more correctly, comes into existence for the one who becomes subjective.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 56.

<sup>7</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 163.

## THE VALUE OF SUBJECTIVITY

Kierkegaard's concern is with the individual, namely the individual's understanding of human condition and the transcending of this condition in relation to God.<sup>8</sup> This transcending is a double movement away from depravity and toward development with God. Yet, this may come in a variety of manners, depending on the person.

While it is true that Kierkegaard thinks subjectivity brings forth religious truth, it would not follow that Kierkegaard is some radical subjectivist or denied the ability to ascertain objective truth. It would be more appropriate to say that Kierkegaard's view is that that objective inquiry cannot alone lead to Christian truth. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus focuses attention on an objectivity void of subjective interests.<sup>9</sup> Objectivity is said to be unemotional, disinterested evaluation. To possess knowledge of this kind is to merely know, to know without appropriating this knowledge and truth through practical implementation or recognize one's existential passions, which Climacus (and Kierkegaard) thinks is necessary to Christianity. Objectivity also has the tendency to abstract one's individual traits (emotions, desires, etc.) in favor of some knowledge that would otherwise be distorted without abstraction. Climacus writes that "the question about what Christianity is must not be confused with the objective question about the truth

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Delfino has raised an objection surrounding the inclusion of God. Delfino "doubts [Kierkegaardian virtue epistemology] will hold much attraction for agnostics and non-theists." I do, however, respectfully disagree on two fronts. First, I do not believe that Kierkegaard must be a Christian to adopt a virtue epistemology, though I believe that his religious convictions strengthen the claim. That is, one need not be a theist to accept the premises and conclusion of this paper. One may object to theism while still accepting this interpretation of Kierkegaard. Second, I believe that any belief structure can fit Kierkegaard's understanding of virtue epistemology. For example, if Kierkegaard were an atheist or adherent to another religion, this strand of virtue epistemology would only need be modified to account for proper selfhood under those alternative convictions. Quotes taken from a written and verbal commentary by Robert A. Delfino, "Commentary on Michael Stark's Virtuous Self: A Kierkegaardian Virtue Epistemology" as presented at the Long Island Philosophical Society Conference, May 4, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Adapted from C. Stephen Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason: A Kierkegaardian Account* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 107. In this paper I will refer to Kierkegaard's pseudonyms and take the pseudonyms seriously. However, it is my goal to show elements of virtue throughout the Kierkegaardian corpus and thus I will make references to various pseudonyms, and Kierkegaard himself, for support.

of Christianity.”<sup>10</sup> At this critical juncture, Climacus postulates that what something is may be distinct from its lived-out-truthfulness. The ascertaining of truth and the ascent to belief in the cognitive sense is merely one step of a twofold process of possessing truth. The second step, the subjective one, is putting cognitive truth into action. This is especially true for Christianity. Christian truth cannot be known merely through objective understanding that is distinct from subjective living. One can know the truth—claims Christianity makes regardless of whether one believes it to be true or not; furthermore, one can believe Christianity to be true but stop short of living Christianly. For truthfulness to be expressed, it must cohere to subjectivity. That is to say, truth must be appropriated into each subjective individual life.<sup>11</sup> Kierkegaard states that belief is actually better understood as an existence—one that involves a relation between an individual and God, thereby breaking down the notion that Christianity is just something that must be believed without appropriated living.

Kierkegaard writes that “the only fundamental basis for understanding is that one himself becomes what he understands and one understands only in proportion to becoming himself that which he understands.”<sup>12</sup> The pursuit of understanding is the activity by which one makes decisions. Kierkegaard directly asserts that subjectivity is both personal and active, saying that “the essential thing about subjectivity is that in resolution and decision of choice one takes a risk.”<sup>13</sup> M. G. Piety articulates further, saying “Kierkegaard maintains that we have an essential interest ... in choosing the proper interpretation of existence. Our eternal blessedness ... is ultimately dependent on this choice.”<sup>14</sup> Choices are

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<sup>10</sup> Kierkegaard, *CUP*, 371.

<sup>11</sup> Note that objective knowledge is not denied. Rather, its importance is diminished without an individual assenting and relating to knowledge in a subjective manner. For example, take the proposition “murder is wrong” as objective moral knowledge. What purpose would such a proposition contain apart from individuals who comply or deviate from its nature? The objectivity here is not disputed, but its *telos* lacks minus subjective interaction.

<sup>12</sup> Søren Kierkegaard’s *Journals and Papers*, vol. II, 2299. Ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970). Subsequent footnotes from Kierkegaard’s journals and papers will take the shortened citation version.

<sup>13</sup> *JP* IV 4537.

<sup>14</sup> Marilyn Gaye Piety, “Kierkegaard on Rationality,” in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, ed. John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Chicago: Open Court, 2001), 65.

contingent on a variety of factors, and objective reasoning has a pivotal role. However, it would be hasty to assert that objective reasoning is the only factor with regard to choices and belief. As Kierkegaard makes so evident, choice is "interested" and related to the passions. Passions, as they are here connected with choice and belief, are connected to the epistemic virtues. Inasmuch as passions are pruned and refined through life, the epistemic virtues likewise undergo continuous refinement in order foster a higher quality of intellectual living and personal development to inform beliefs and choices.

Whereas the epistemic virtues are objective by nature, different persons will experience and direct the will towards the objective in their own individual, subjective manners. Objective truth remains valued, but the mere possession of truth lacks significance if it does not affect the subjective individual in some manner. A subjective interest in a truth-claim, especially religious truth, plays a pivotal role in choice and decision-making. It is for this reason that Kierkegaard objects that Christianity is merely a set of doctrines that must be believed in—Christianity is to be existed in. Doctrine can only take human reason so far. Where it leaves off, the issue becomes an object of faith.

Louis Pojman correctly notes that Kierkegaard claims that propositions such as "God exists" are "objects of belief which affect one's inner being."<sup>15</sup> Subjectivity, in Kierkegaard's sense, is always intentional—a willed movement toward an object.<sup>16</sup> Pojman limits his discussion to the subjective pursuit of understanding. However, Kierkegaard's embrace of subjectivity is not only for this pursuit. Through understanding, one develops better intellectual functions and develops capacities not previously held. For what purpose would there be in knowing *of* love without then *experiencing* love? A knowledge of love without an experience of love would separate love from passion, a separation of love from its essence.<sup>17</sup> Yet through an understanding of what love is in the objective sense

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<sup>15</sup> Louis P. Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity: Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1984), 56.

<sup>16</sup> This does not exclude mental activity.

<sup>17</sup> This is perhaps most evident in the Kierkegaardian corpus in *Repetition*. In that text, the pseudonym Constantin Constantius dialogs with an anonymous young man regarding the young man's engagement. They discuss love—Constantius from an objective perspective that yields unfavorable results for the young man. The concluding discourse is written with passion, as the young man rediscovers his passions, his subjective features, which made him a

one builds a subjective interaction with the object. A subjective interpretation of the objective is then transmuted into action. An act of knowing ought to propel the individual into reflection about, and action in, one's life. As Climacus writes, "Essential knowing is related to the knower, who is essentially an existing person, and all essential knowing is therefore essentially related to existence and to existing."<sup>18</sup> Knowing is subjective, and its function in subjectivity grows one in relation to oneself.

Parsing this further, take the proposition "God is love." To understand this utterance, one must come to an understanding of three conditions: (1) an understanding (but not belief) of what (or who) God is, (2) an understanding of the characteristics of love shared between two subjects (forgiveness, kindness, etc.), and (3), the embodiment of love by God. In the learning of these, a volitional appropriation is undertaken. Two people might attempt to properly understand these objective propositions only to subjectively appropriate them differently. Each person experiences something unique. As Sylvia Walsh writes, knowing God "is 'a voyage of discovery' in which one comes to know God through an 'inland journey' into oneself."<sup>19</sup> Thus, each individual undertakes a subjective interpretation and volitionally puts it into action in a similar, yet non-identical, manner. Each journey is individual-specific insofar as each life comprises a unique set of experiences, emotions, and passions which relate to God.

The preceding exposition might read as epistemological subjectivism, the skeptical view of objective knowledge and its possession. It would be a mistake to read Kierkegaard this way. There is a stark, fundamental distinction between epistemic subjectivism and the *value* of subjectivity. Whereas subjectivism may deny, or attempt to eradicate, any value of objective knowledge, the virtue and value of subjectivity affixes personal desires, characteristics, and traits to objective knowledge.

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captivating individual. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling & Repetition*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983); *Repetition* is pp. 125-330.

<sup>18</sup> Kierkegaard, *CUP*, 197-98.

<sup>19</sup> Sylvia Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 51.

## THE VIRTUOUS SELF

Climacus examines the question regarding the possibility of completing the becoming self. He writes,

...when time itself is the task, it becomes a defect to finish ahead of time. Suppose a person is given the task of entertaining himself for one day and by noon is already finished with the entertainment—then his speed would indeed be of no merit. So it is also when life is the task. To be finished with life before life is finished with one is not to finish the task at all.<sup>20</sup>

The developing self is a fundamental and primary value of life. There is no allotment of time in which the self's task of developing is finished prior to death, which is the finality of the self's development. The value in this epistemic good rests in Kierkegaard's plea that one be active, even until the point of death. There is for the self no temporal completeness, and thus the goal of the self never changes: it must become.

## ON BELIEFS, FAITH, & UNCERTAINTY

Many operate under the assumption that Kierkegaard was an irresponsible fideist.<sup>21</sup> This claim will be addressed later, but Kierkegaard's "leap" into religious faith is connected with his analysis of belief formation. Of pertinent concern is whether or not beliefs are volitional. Climacus calls into question not only the certainty of personal beliefs, but also the objectivity by which some beliefs are founded. In Christianity, the basis of faith has several components, one of which is its set of historical claims. Yet, historical claims are not objective in the sense many theologians assert. History is an "approximation" and therefore not conclusively sufficient to base one's beliefs on.<sup>22</sup> By approximation,

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<sup>20</sup> Kierkegaard, *CUP*, 164.

<sup>21</sup> Here I am following Alvin Plantinga's definition of fideism as "exclusive or basic reliance upon faith alone." See Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga & Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 89.

<sup>22</sup> Kierkegaard, *CUP*, 23.

Kierkegaard means that no record of history is without some error, and thus cannot be indubitably trusted, especially in matters related to “eternal truth,” issues of lasting importance. There are bound to be errors in historical reports. When related to passionate interest, no error is small enough to avoid being worrisome, as even a small error could be a barrier between the individual and eternal truth.<sup>23</sup>

With this understanding of historical claims, the individual begins the speculative journey in search of truth. In this search the individual discards any approximations previously acquired. Truth is not approximated as in objectivity, but rather appropriated in subjectivity. The individual must leap into belief with passionate action. The highest capacity for approximated historical truths (and all speculative doctrine) is also the limit of human reason. Human reason is limited, and thus cannot possess any perfect knowledge, despite how close doctrine may get us to the objective understanding. At this juncture, an object of belief ceases to be a category of reason, but rather a category of faith.

Climacus frustrates his reader by stating that the speculative leads to an answer of “mystification.”<sup>24</sup> Speculation will not allow one to arrive at a certainty through which one can claim to have discovered the eternal truth. Yet speculation is what motivates the individual toward faith. The focus is on the hopeful conclusion: reaching eternal truth. Climacus wants the individual to *choose* to believe—thus indicating a direct connection between one’s volition and personal belief. As Alastair Hannay comments,

The uncertainty confronting faith, and which faith must overcome, is whether the theological interpretation is *ever* the right one. Its being the right one is precisely what, in the absence of any evidence *at all* that historical phenomena, or nature itself, are manifestations of divinity, he must choose to believe. This, then, is the uncertainty of which Kierkegaard speaks and of which he goes on to say that, in faith, it is embraced.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Merrihew Adams, “Kierkegaard’s Arguments Against Objective Reasoning in Religion,” in *Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Louis P. Pojman (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998), 425.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>25</sup> Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard* (Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 125.

Belief in eternal truth is based on the arrival of uncertainty. While this will likely leave some in angst, it may be Kierkegaard's hope. Anxiety is a psychological state in which one realizes the gravity of beliefs (and actions). It is at this juncture that one "leaps" into one belief over another. The leap rests not on mere non-rationality, but on the truths and beliefs one has available. Here, the individual gains a higher level of certainty by the appropriation of truth in faith.. The foundation of faith is objective uncertainty. Its result is a more certain subjectivity.<sup>26</sup> Truth is in the subjective; it is the action of belief.<sup>27</sup>

Historical approximations lack the certainty that one may desire, yet they serve as evidence by which one can, to a certain degree, make a rational leap into belief. Anxiety itself is an epistemic virtue (as it places the individual at a point of decision-making), but it leads to a correlative one: the love of knowledge. The lover of knowledge "wants his beliefs to be true, and to be adequately supported, in whatever way of supporting is appropriate to his particular belief in its particular circumstance."<sup>28</sup> If this analysis is accepted, two conclusions can be drawn: (1) the quest of knowledge and belief, although resulting in some degree of uncertainty, is virtuous, as it requires the individual to examine one's epistemic conditioning, and (2) Kierkegaard cannot be rightly classified as an irresponsible fideist. Faith is not a mere irrational curvet into belief. Rather, the foundation of faith is entrance into uncertainty while simultaneously based upon the reasoning and evidence of the approximated historical claims. If the leap operates in this function, the movement is an epistemic virtue that directs one to the subjective building of the self. The leap of faith is one that places faith not *against* reason, but *beyond* reason. Nowhere in Kierkegaard's writings, pseudonymous or otherwise, is there evidence for a repudiation of reason. Agreeing with the likes of St. Thomas Aquinas,

<sup>26</sup> In his admiration of Socrates, Kierkegaard employs the historical figure in an account of uncertainty with regard to subjectivity and objectivity. The Socratic discussion surrounds *if* there is immortality after death. Kierkegaard determines that Socrates' uncertainty helped Socrates' personal development and acceptance of his death sentence. Kierkegaard writes, "on this *if* [Socrates] risks his entire life." This risk is subjective, as the "proofs" for an immortal soul (read: objectivity) are "dead to spirit and enthusiasm" and prove some abstract notion that lacks passion. See *CUP*, 201.

<sup>27</sup> As Climacus writes, "If I am able to apprehend God objectively, I do not have faith; but because I cannot do this, I must have faith." See *CUP*, 204.

<sup>28</sup> Roberts & Wood, *Intellectual Virtues*, 156.

Kierkegaard asserts that there are objects of faith rather than objects of reason. Take, for example, Kierkegaard's interaction with the incarnation of Christ. One can gain a certain level of understanding regarding the incarnation, but where human reason becomes limited the incarnation becomes an object of faith.

The preceding can be clearly seen in *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard questions whether there is a teleological suspension of the ethical committed by Abraham in Genesis 22. Here he makes the provocative claim that Abraham committed an act of the "absurd"—placing himself, a single individual, higher than the ethical universal. He seeks a "higher expression for the ethical that can ethically *explain* his behavior, ethically *justify* him in suspending the ethical duty."<sup>29</sup> Note the epistemic terminology here. How can the seemingly absurd be explained in an epistemically justifiable manner? And how can an individual who places oneself above the ethical exist? The answer: by *believing*.

That is the paradox by which he remains at the apex and which he cannot make clear to anyone else, for the paradox is that he as the single individual places himself in an absolute relation to the absolute. Is he justified? His justification is again the paradox, for if he is justified, it is not by virtue of being something universal, but by virtue of being the particular.<sup>30</sup>

The Christian and Jewish traditions place much value on Abraham's example. Ethical judgment of norms was necessarily suspended to allow Abraham to act in faith. He committed the absurd—a willful intention to kill his son and place himself beyond the ethical. This leap had the most uncertain end and required great faith to commit. Yet, this is no mere fideistic lunge into the unknown. Entering into the unknown required a faith that was not on its own sufficient for Abraham's decision. It is conceivable that the decision to follow through on God's command was based on his prior experiences with God. In pushing past the uncertainty in faith, Abraham formed a belief that he was justified in his action, as it correlated with the eternal truth. This example further

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<sup>29</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. C. Stephen Evans and Sylvia Walsh, trans. Sylvia Walsh (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 49. Emphasis mine.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

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demonstrates that, for Kierkegaard, Christianity is something that should be *existed in*, not merely believed in.

It has been shown that speculation, uncertainty, and faith fit the mold of epistemic virtues, as they place the individual on the path of knowledge which can formulate belief. Though certainty may be lacking, Kierkegaard is more concerned that the individual develops the faculties of humanity and fulfills each of his or her capacities in a manner which subjectively forms personal beliefs. When Kierkegaard's philosophy is understood as an endeavor to develop the self, his epistemology, by nature, must exclude pure fideism. Rather, he develops virtues which force one to recognize the power of knowledge that is appropriated into action. Beliefs based solely upon objectivity diminish the existential role that truth possesses. A life voice of subjective appropriation of knowledge will likely lack meaning and a deeper understanding of one's self. The acquisition of knowledge must be personal and subjective in order to properly arrive at truth. In essence, each person is his or her own "Abraham." Each person must appropriate what is objectively known and act accordingly. This is the movement of the developing self.