

Toward a *Positive* Defense of Existential Truth

Hacia una defensa positiva de las verdades existenciales

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ABSTRACT

Kierkegaard's conception of the truth as "subjectivity" has sparked a lot of debate throughout the years, since some people—mistakenly, in my opinion—have interpreted it solely as a dismissal of objectivity or the "what" of truth. As a counterweight, many other authors have tried to defend Kierkegaard from these accusations and take away the label of "irrationalist". But I think that this is not enough: to do justice to the depth of his thought, it is not enough to point out what Kierkegaard is *not* or does *not* say; rather than soften his position to make it compatible with the atmosphere of scientism in which we are immersed today, perhaps it would be more appropriate to try to understand the meaning of his forceful assertions and look for the *positive* aspects of that "existential truth". That is what I aim to do in this article.

Keywords: existential truth, knowledge, good, Kierkegaard, metaphysics

Although idealism is no longer popular, the scientism that is predominant today leads to a situation that is similar in some aspects to what Kierkegaard faced in his day. And, immersed in this environment—and in spite of Kierkegaard's advice to strip ourselves of our prejudices before setting out to swim¹—it seems that we are afraid to defend a position that is not purely rational, in the strict sense of the term. Today's mentality prefers a misconstrued scientific² and presumably aseptic vision of the world, with a perfectly traced out object, in which everything can be measured and quantified, and that delivers empirically demonstrable and universally acceptable results.

¹ See *Papirer XI*² A 227.

² For a correct vision of this problem, see: ПИТРОД, Abelardo, *Epistemología de las ciencias humanas y sociales*, México: Porrúa, 2010.

Perhaps that is the reason why most attempts to defend Kierkegaard from accusations of irrationalism and fideism try to explain that he does not completely discard the objective view, in spite of his conception of the truth as subjectivity. His defenders mainly highlight passages in his works that shield him from criticisms of prioritizing the “how” of truth over the “what”.³

But in my view, this is not enough. Although I am in complete agreement with those who fight to free Kierkegaard from the “irrationalist” label, I think that if we are to do justice to the depth of his thought, it is not enough to point out what Kierkegaard is *not* or what he does *not* say: he does not say that faith is against reason, he does not deny our capacity for an objective knowledge of the world, he does not say that the content of our beliefs is indifferent, he does not propose a relativistic subjectivism, and so on. This approach can offer certain tranquility to those who think that there is a good amount of lucidity and truth in Kierkegaard’s writings, but it does nothing at all to remove this narrow scientist vision that prevails in our times, nor to reach a deep understanding of the reality of the world and of the person. Thus, rather than trying to soften Kierkegaard’s position, perhaps it would be better to focus on trying to understand the meaning of his forceful assertions and try to get as much insight out of them as we can. Our approach should be to seek the *positive* aspects of “existential truth”, which any person who honestly wants to reach the truth must take into account. That is what I try to do in this article.

In order to achieve this goal, we need to view Kierkegaard’s work in its totality, get a more nuanced view by pairing some passages with others that often go unnoticed, and temper his occasional extreme statements with the weight of his deepest convictions. As McCombs says,

[...] owing to the fact that Kierkegaard is a dialectical writer it is necessary to be cautious whenever one encounters a statement in his books that seems extreme, exaggerated, or one-sided. For it is highly likely that this extreme statement is only one half of a dialectical pair of opposites. Sometimes the other half of the pair is obvious and easy to find elsewhere in the same book. Occasionally, however, there is no overt complementary statement, but a

³ As Marino and Hannay say, “myths attach rather easily to some thinkers, especially to those who like Hegel are hard to read or like Kierkegaard hard to place. Such myths are often based on hearsay or a superficial reading of the texts. One lingering myth about Kierkegaard is that he is an irrationalist in some sense that denies the value of clear and honest thinking”. AA.VV., *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, edited by Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino, Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 1. The opponents of this position include authors as varied as Fabro, Collins, Gilson, Viallaneix, Torralba, Holmer, McCombs, Evans, Vardy, Larrañeta, Pizzuti, Simpson, Marino, Perkins, Tutewiler, and Rudd.

suggestion or an implication that comes to light only with careful reading, or only by reading another book in the Kierkegaardian corpus.⁴

Haecker, for example, does not take this into account when he states—as a criticism of Kierkegaard—that «it is a very presumptuous ethic and is determined by formality and by the individual, not by things, social conditions or circumstances, with their truth and values».⁵ He adduces that man can live according to an idea of which he is fully convinced and that nevertheless is erroneous, in which case he ends up committing a great injustice.

Perhaps we would feel inclined to think Haecker is right when we read in *Postscript*, under the pseudonym Climacus, «Just as important as the truth, and of the two, the even more important one is the mode in which the truth is accepted»⁶. But then we would not be doing justice to the author, who warned us previously in the same work of the dangers that lie in wait on the subjective path: that by virtue of it, «lunacy and truth are ultimately indistinguishable, because they may both have inwardness».⁷ Or those others in which he says that purity of heart is desiring a single thing, and that wanting

⁴ MCCOMBS, RICHARD, *Paradoxical Rationality of Søren Kierkegaard*, Bloomington (IN): Indiana University Press, 2012, p. 69.

⁵ HAECKER, THEODOR, *Kierkegaard the Cripple*, translated by C. Van O. Bruyn, London: The Harvill Press, 1948, p. 20.

⁶ KIERKEGAARD, SØREN, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, vol. 1, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 247. Hereafter, *CUP1*, followed by the page number.

In reality, although many understand it in the sense that Kierkegaard is giving greater importance to the manner in which the truth is accepted, I think Evans is right when he makes us pay attention to Kierkegaard's words: "The words here are carefully chosen. Subjectivity is 'exactly equally important' as objective, propositional truth, and is to be preferred only if one is forced to choose between them. But when, one might ask, would such a choice be forced on us? The answer, I think, is that the choice is forced on us when we are told that objective truth requires the complete suppression of subjectivity, the adoption of the 'view from nowhere' in which I put aside emotions and passions and resolve to believe only what can be demonstrated on the basis of the objective reason". EVANS, C. STEPHANS, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction*. Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 63-64.

⁷ *CUP1*, 194.

Another possible position would be that of Hartshorne, who denies all value in Johannes Climacus' statements because it is a pseudonym, explaining that there is no equivalence between the existential truth that Kierkegaard defends and the subjective truth of the *Postscript* or of *Philosophical Fragments*, which can be followed by an endless variety of fanaticisms. (See HARTSHORNE, MARION HOLMES, *Kierkegaard, Godly Deceiver: The Nature and Meaning of his Pseudonymous Writings*, Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1990, chapter III). But, although both authors cannot be identified—and Hartshorne's book offers clear insight into why—in my view, in this case Kierkegaard would be in agreement with Climacus. This opinion is shared—with the necessary nuances—by Piety, who presents as one of the objectives of his book on the ways of knowing in Kierkegaard the goal of showing that the pseudonym works are substantially consistent with the rest of his writings, at least as regards epistemology. See PIETY, M.G., *Ways of Knowing: Kierkegaard's Pluralist Epistemology*, Waco (TX): Baylor University Press, 2010, p. 18.

a single thing does not mean falling into the «drastic error of presumptuous, ungodly enthusiasm: to will the great, no matter whether it is good or evil».⁸

We could continue along this path. For each of Kierkegaard's passages that seem to reject the objective content of the truth, we could find another that shows that he does not dismiss it, but rather presupposes and surpasses it, until we are convinced and can convince others that Kierkegaard is not at all irrational, and that he does not defend a position as extreme and unilateral as that of his attackers. But that will not be necessary, since we could just as easily turn to many of the stupendous monographs that have been written on the topic. To limit myself just to some of the publications of the last few years, I will mention McCombs' exhaustive study in his book *Paradoxical Rationality of Søren Kierkegaard*, in which he pulls together many examples showing the rationality of Kierkegaard's thought.⁹ Also Simpson, in *The Truth is the Way*, affirms that the Kierkegaardian maxim that «truth is subjectivity» is really far from the relativistic mode in which it is often understood.¹⁰ And Evans' explicit purpose in one of his works is «to show that Kierkegaard is not really an enemy of rationality», neither on the theoretical nor on the practical plane.¹¹ Many other names could be added here to back up this opinion, each one with its nuances and perspectives, such as Piety, John, Guerrero, Merigala and Larrañeta.¹² But perhaps it is enough to summarize the interpretation of a majority of the Kierkegaard scholars with Holmer's words:

⁸ KIERKEGAARD, SØREN, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 30.

⁹ "Søren Kierkegaard often seems to reject reason, but in fact he affirms it", he claims (McCOMBS, *Paradoxical Rationality of Søren Kierkegaard*, p. 2). McCombs's thesis is that, acting in keeping with his theory of communication, Kierkegaard lets himself seem irrational precisely to communicate rationality. Although I thought it was a good book and I understand and agree with what McCombs ultimately wants to say, I think that in his attempt to demonstrate the rationality of Kierkegaard's position, he may overlook what is one of his most important contributions, which I will discuss further on: the independence of the will in relation to the intellect. The intellect certainly influences the will in a powerful way, but it does not determine it, since if it did it would eliminate freedom.

¹⁰ See SIMPSON, CHRISTOPHER BEN, *The Truth is the Way: Kierkegaard's Theologia Viatorum*, Eugene (OR): Cascade Books, 2011, p. 5. Simpson holds that Kierkegaard conceives of the truth as a double reflection, a double movement: and in that achievement of the truth, the appropriation in which subjective truth consists is the second term, which presupposes the first, objective truth. See SIMPSON, CHRISTOPHER BEN, *The Truth...*, p. 18.

¹¹ EVANS, C. STEPHEN, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays*, Waco (TX): Baylor University Press, 2006, p. 7. Such an objective is present not only in this text, but in most of Evans' writings, to the point that we can say that it is one of the guiding threads of his thought. See also EVANS, C. STEPHEN, *Kierkegaard on Faith...*, p. X and chapter 3.

The objective of *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* is also similar. In its introduction, there is a line followed by the aforementioned words: "this collection of previously unpublished essays is offered as a proof of how wrong it is to suppose that if Kierkegaard's philosophical star is in the ascendant, as it now is, things must be going badly with philosophy". AA.VV., *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, p. 1).

¹² See the following books: SIMPSON, *The Truth is the Way*; PIETY, *Ways of Knowing*; JOHN, VARGHESE, *Truth and Subjectivity, Faith and History: Kierkegaard's Insights for Christian Faith*, Eugene

It is true that Kierkegaard opposed philosophical systems but he did not oppose systematic thought; he disparaged talk about the logic of events but not the logicality of argumentative discourse; he minimized the religious importance of discursive reasoning but not by saying that reason was irreligious; he praised subjectivity but not temperamentally; he abjured objectivity as a substitute for enthusiasm but not as a condition for knowledge.¹³

Holmer himself writes that although Kierkegaard criticizes any form of objectivity that would seek to turn itself into something absolute, at the same time, his attack is not a fulminating romantic battle against reflection.¹⁴ He leaves it at this:

It should be stated unequivocally that Kierkegaard is not suggesting that the fact that a “how” is more fundamental than a “what” means that there are no standards for judgment. On the contrary, there are standards for truth just as there are standards for right and wrong. Kierkegaard never denies these. His point is that the exclusion of the “how” from the philosophical account has produced a false and harmful tendency, one which erects an impossible and artificial view of the objectivity of science in contradistinction to the subjectivity of morals and religion and aesthetic judgments. His view is that there are various “hows”, various qualities of intending and of subjectivity within which concepts can be defined and rules ascertained. By getting these straight and not allowing the overlap of language to deceive one into thinking that the concepts were identical, Kierkegaard thought that a large part of the task was done. This, at least, was the technical responsibility of philosophy and theology.¹⁵

Having reached this point and conceded that he is not denying the possibility of an objective knowledge, what *positive* contribution does Kierkegaard make to the understanding of truth? What is it that he has to teach those of us who seek truth in our times?

In the first place, and as Holmer’s words above insinuated, Kierkegaard teaches us to *discern*.¹⁶

(OR): Pickwick Publications, 2012; GUERRERO MARTÍNEZ, LUIS, *Kierkegaard: los límites de la razón en la existencia humana*, México: Sociedad Iberoamericana de Estudios Kierkegaardianos, 1993; GABRIEL, MERIGALA, *Subjectivity and Religious Truth in the Philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard*, Macon (GA): Mercer University Press, 2010; LARRAÑETA, RAFAEL, *La interioridad apasionada. Verdad y amor en Søren Kierkegaard*, Salamanca: Editorial San Esteban; Universidad Pontificia, 1990.

¹³ HOLMER, PAUL L., *On Kierkegaard and the Truth*, edited by David J. Gouwens and Lee C. Barret. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2012, p. xxvi.

¹⁴ See HOLMER, PAUL L., *On Kierkegaard...*, pp. 11 and 143.

¹⁵ HOLMER, PAUL L., *On Kierkegaard...*, p. 152.

¹⁶ Evans points out something similar when he argues, against those who criticize Kierkegaard for speaking of the truth or falsehood of life, that it is not justifiable to reduce the term “truth” only to propositions. See EVANS: *Kierkegaard: An Introduction...*, pp. 61-62. And also Piety, since the start of his study —*Kierkegaard’s Pluralist Epistemology*— indicates that Kierkegaard distinguishes different modes of knowing or types of truth, that is to say, that we cannot speak of knowledge or truth in a univocal sense. See PIETY, *Ways of Knowing*, p. 3.

1. Different types of knowledge

One of Holmer's deep theses in the aforementioned work is that Kierkegaard's great task is to distinguish the meaning of the concepts according to the context in which they are used, always attending to the variety of their meanings and not trying to unify or homogenize them. For «concepts that fit everywhere really fit nowhere».¹⁷ And "truth" is one of those concepts. Thus, it is a mistake to apply it univocally to other fields as "objective truth" in a scientific sense, since the "how" of the truth will be different according to the situation in which it is used.

Faced with the Hegelian tendency to unify or synthesize concepts, Kierkegaard aims to do the opposite: to discriminate among their different meanings. What Kierkegaard condemns is the attempt to use a single definition of truth for all of the circumstances in which the term is used, the attempt to extend the concept of logical truth to ethical and religious problems. The mistake, Holmer says, is thinking that the concept of truth has a univocal meaning, regardless of the context in which it is used, or that the knowledge of a certain type of realities is exactly equal to that of others.

In short, Kierkegaard makes it very clear in his works that when he insists on the subjective component of knowledge, he is not referring to knowledge in general, but to a type of truths, to those that affect the person as such, that engage his being. He calls those "essential truths" because they are important for the person as such.¹⁸ «It is always to be borne in mind that I am speaking of the religious, in which objective thinking, if it is supposed to be supreme, is downright irreligiousness».¹⁹ Thus, he is not talking about mathematical or scientific truths, but about religious truth, ethical truth, existential truth. In the first case, objective thought can be legitimate, while the second type of truths requires that subjective appropriation on which Kierkegaard insists.

¹⁷ HOLMER, *On Kierkegaard...*, p. 53. That is why McCombs affirms that, seeing Kierkegaard's continual complaints about the "confusion" of his contemporaries, it seems that dialectics, which precisely distinguishes some concepts from others, has to play a very important role (see McCOMBS, *Paradoxical Rationality of Søren Kierkegaard*, p. 64).

In the *Postscript* there appears one of these complaints to which McCombs alludes: "while politicians anxiously expect a bankruptcy of nations, a far greater bankruptcy is perhaps impending in the world of the mind, because the concepts are gradually being canceled and the words are coming to mean everything, and therefore dispute sometimes becomes just as ludicrous as agreement" (*CUP1*, 363).

¹⁸ See *CUP1*, 199 footnote. On this point, see also EVANS, C. STEPHEN, *Passionate reason: Making sense of Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992, pp. 28 and p. 45.

¹⁹ *CUP1*, 76 footnote.

Although Holmer stops on the level of concepts, I think it is more fitting to extend it to the level of reality. Kierkegaard firmly defends the principle of non-contradiction, a principle that only holds sway in concrete reality. Precisely «for thought, the contradiction does not exist; it passes over into the other and thereupon together with the other into a higher unity».²⁰ Although this would not lead us to a *real* knowledge of reality, thought does indeed have the capacity to think of opposites;²¹ we can, as Hegel does in his dialectic, conceive of concepts as generating one another and merging in a new one. But it does not happen this way in the world of existing beings, in which something cannot be and not be at the same time and in the same respect.²²

And I think that Evans would be in agreement, since he affirms that for Climacus, «the nature of things is reflected in our statements; our statements do not dictate how things must be. Climacus seems closer in sensibility to a Greek or medieval philosopher here than to contemporary Wittgensteinians».²³

Thus, the answer to the question of why Kierkegaard distinguishes different types of truth seems clear to me: reality itself requires it. Ethical and religious knowledge is directed toward the person—divine and human—and what concerns the person. Knowing the person allows and demands a different type of knowledge than that which is required for knowing mathematical or physical laws.

Therefore, we have to give Kierkegaard credit for having rediscovered that not all realities allow for the same type or degree of knowledge. And I say “rediscovered” because this idea, now practically forgotten, was one of the keys of Aristotle’s thought.²⁴ I will refer back to his philosophy to try to explain it.

Everyone knows about Aristotle’s insistence on pointing out that being—as being—is not a genus. Rather, what we have is a genus of the knowable, the internally articulated, with a simultaneous articulation of realities and their knowability. Hence the particularity of the *πρώτη φιλοσοφία*, corresponding to the topic he considers. *Metaphysics* is not “one” because it deals

²⁰ KIERKEGAARD, SØREN, *Either/Or, part II*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 173.

²¹ In fact, Thomas Aquinas expressly states, following Aristotle, that opposites, in the intellect, are not opposites. See THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae I*, q. 75, a. 6 co; *Summa Theologiae I-II*, q. 35, a. 5 co; ARISTOTLE, *On the Soul*, 430b20; *Metaphysics I*, 4, 1055a30-33.

²² See ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics I*, 3, 1005b15-20.

²³ EVANS, *Passionate Reason...*, p. 122. Evans, like other authors such as Rudd, holds that Kierkegaard’s position falls rather on the side of epistemological realism. See also pp. 8-9; RUDD, ANTHONY, *Self, Value and Narrative: A Kierkegaardian Approach*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

²⁴ Although the context is clearly different. See ASPE ARMELLA, VIRGINIA, *Perennidad y apertura de Aristóteles: Reflexiones Poéticas y de Incidencia Mexicana*. México, Universidad Panamericana, 2005.

with a single genus of realities, understanding here by “genus” something similar to what the other sciences consider. First philosophy has unity because it encompasses all of reality, everything that is, but in its multiple and diverse senses, which intrinsically entail a different degree of knowability.

«There is a science which investigates being as being and the attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature».²⁵ But when he begins his long journey, Aristotle still does not know very well what “that which is”²⁶ comprises. Knowledge of the being is not constant throughout the development of Aristotle’s thought, but rather matures and reaches more precise limits as the reality that was recently discovered or more deeply understood demands from him greater attention by virtue of its degree of knowability, which is suited or proportionate to its way of being. And the science of being takes shape as its own object is determined more completely and clearly.

In other words, Aristotle begins by confronting all of reality, all that is. The Philosopher always maintains an attitude of openness, of contemplation... and he finds himself before an overwhelming diversity that leads to the affirmation that *what is* can be said in many senses.

As he examines those groups of senses, he not only warns that they are different, but that precisely for that reason, they do not all postulate or allow for the same degree of knowledge.²⁷ Reality cannot be simply known or not known, but knowledge can be greater or lesser, according to the degree of being since, as we read in *Metaphysics*, «as each thing is in respect of being, so is it in respect of truth».²⁸ These words of Aristotle, full of richness and meaning, are the key that also underlies Kierkegaard’s conception: since being is said in many ways, since there are different degrees of being, there are also different ways and levels of truth in reality and different types of knowledge. Thus, in Aristotle, the search of metaphysics is also the search for the knowability of its constituent parts. For the Philosopher, the intrinsic knowability of the object of our knowledge takes on great transcendence; for that reason, throughout the development of his thought, he will seek out that which allows for a greater knowledge. It will be the priority (although not the only) subject of the knowledge he pursues.

In other words, at first the *πρώτη φιλοσοφία* seeks to achieve a thorough understanding of everything that is, without excluding anything, although

²⁵ ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics* Γ, 1, 1003a18-19.

²⁶ At least, with the type of “rigorous knowledge” that he “seeks.”

²⁷ The “pursued” knowledge demands an internal articulation of its own object, also as a function of the degree of knowledge that each being allows and demands.

²⁸ ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics* A, 1, 993b31.

this implies that his object is not yet fully delineated. Only afterward, little by little, will he further define the conception of being, until he reaches a clearer knowledge of what it is more properly. We could say that it is the same totality of the real that, upon presenting itself in its exuberant variety to the person who contemplates it, marks out the path that he must follow:²⁹ it invites him to “leave aside” some realities and delve deeper into the knowledge of others whose fuller mode of being allows and demands greater attention.

In view of the foregoing points, Kierkegaard’s approach is not only legitimate but necessary and deeply fruitful, as he grounds his conception of “existential knowledge” on the distinction between different types of knowledge, according to the reality of the object toward which such knowledge is directed. For Kierkegaard is not talking about the truth or knowledge of minerals, plants, or some animal, or the history of mathematics. He is talking about the knowledge of the person (my own self and that of others) and of God. And if their realities cannot be equated, neither can the cognitive method used in some areas be extended to others.

Aristotle discovers throughout his journey that there are realities—which he later calls *per accidens*—of which the only thing we can know, in the strong sense of this word, is that “they are there”.³⁰ Kierkegaard is also very aware that the reality of the person, while allowing for other types of rapprochement—physical, medical, historical, etc.—insofar as it is a person, by its distinct mode of being, demands a knowledge that is not merely objective, but existential.

This is perhaps the first of the teachings that Kierkegaard reminds us about when he refers to subjective truth or existential truth. It is also the most basic, in the sense of serving as a foundation of the others. In a society that tries to homogenize or make everything equal—from the way of dressing to the way of thinking—we can never exhort each other too much to admire and contemplate the richness and diversity of the real. And if, as Aristotle and Kierkegaard argue, not all realities allow or call for the same type of knowledge, would it not be absurd to try, as so many do today and did in the past, to unify all the branches of knowledge, and to apply the same method—that of the experimental sciences, mathematics—to all intellectual disciplines, negating the validity of any other approach to reality?

²⁹ And, at least from this perspective, it also determines the pertinent *method* in each circumstance.

³⁰ From there the paradox—not the contradiction—that in different steps of *Metaphysics*, Aristotle holds that that type of knowledge should not study those realities... precisely the ones he is covering. Once again, our philosopher is looking not for a complete and perfect knowledge, but a knowledge suited to each reality, since not all realities allow themselves to be known in the same way.

If Kierkegaard's time needed a Socrates who would come to awaken it from so much speculation,³¹ perhaps ours requires a new Kierkegaard who will pull us out of the narrow scientific mentality.³²

2. Unity of truth and goodness

But Kierkegaard does not stop here. Once he makes this key distinction, which invites us to distinguish between the areas and modes of knowledge, he brings up the next question: what does ethical, religious, or philosophical truth have that is different and all its own compared to scientific, logical, or mathematical truth? Kierkegaard answers decisively on many occasions: that in the case of the latter, it is enough to *know* the truth to say that it has been reached, while in the first it is necessary to *be it*.

I am not inventing anything when I say that Kierkegaard always tried to promote greater unity between knowledge and life, between thinking and being. He energetically defended a conception of truth that was not simply known, but lived: existential truth. But what is the difference between knowing something and living it? Although it is not entirely correct and I will clarify it shortly, for the moment I will take the liberty of saying that in "knowing" something, just as Kierkegaard understands it, only the intellect is involved, while "living it" also involves the will,³³ the entire person.

I believe that if we were to ask the intellectuals of our time, many would say that it is much more serious and scientific, more professional, to leave aside any inclination, feeling, or personal interest when investigating a matter, to stick exclusively to what our intellect—further limited by the method used—can reach.³⁴ Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's entire work clearly shows that he

³¹ See KIERKEGAARD, SØREN, *The Sickness unto Death*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 92. Hereafter, *SUD*, followed by the page number.

³² Kierkegaard "is not in the least tempted to think about philosophy as a unified science or a philosophy of necessary and universal categories. Both the Hegelian system and materialism and positivist schemes seemed to him to have arbitrarily excluded the equivocal and multiple features of both knowledge and the world". HOLMER, *On Kierkegaard...*, p. 164.

³³ And many other aspects, very important for Kierkegaard as well, like passions, feelings, desires, and so on. On this respect, see FURTAK, RICK ANTHONY, *Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity*, Notre Dame (IN): University of Notre Dame Press, 2005.

³⁴ They forcefully describe — while criticizing— these words of Kierkegaard: "Let the scientific researcher labor with restless zeal, let him even shorten his life in the enthusiastic service of science and scholarship; let the speculative thinker spare neither time nor effort — they are nevertheless not infinitely, personally, impassionedly interested. On the contrary, they do not want to be. Their observations will be objective, disinterested. With regard to the subject's relation to know truth, it is assumed that if only the objective truth has been obtained, appro-

considers it definitely better or more fitting³⁵ to reach a truth that involves the whole person, with each of the dimensions that make it up. Who is right?

Kierkegaard does not deny the intellectual capacity or possibility of objective knowledge, not in the least; but he does widen the field of knowledge, of the truth, to let all of reality into it, both the known and the knowable.³⁶ Thus, as I understand it, Kierkegaard's position is much more correct, since it more closely follows the nature of the real—both of the world and of the person.³⁷

It is true that Kierkegaard emphasizes the second term, the nature and intention of the individual who knows, the interest that guides him. But, precisely because the truth he talks about is ethical and religious, and because its object is the divine and human person, it does not seem farfetched to affirm that he is also taking into account the object of knowledge. He never says that it is necessary to reach an existential truth when we set out to know, for example, the interesting world of insects. While Kierkegaard does fundamentally emphasize the mode by which we know, he is not indifferent to either of the two terms of the relation. Thus, the specific object of the truth is also relevant when it comes to involving the whole person or not in its contemplation, when it comes to deciding to *be* that truth.³⁸

priation is an easy matter; it is automatically included as part of the bargain, and *am Ende* [in the end] the individual is a matter of indifference. Precisely this is the basis of the scholar's elevated calm and the parrot's comical thoughtlessness" (*CUP1*, 21-22).

³⁵ More "rational", McCombs would say. See McCOMBS, *Paradoxical Rationality of Søren Kierkegaard*, p. 3.

³⁶ "Kierkegaard's understanding of subjective truth brings attention to a broader arena of truth, beyond the merely intellectual to one's ongoing relation to and being in (and as a) reality". SIMPSON, *The Truth is the Way*, p. 47.

³⁷ As Larrañeta states, "Kierkegaard strives to establish a knowledge of the truth that responds best to the demands of reality and the potentialities of the subject". LARRAÑETA, *La interioridad apasionada*, p. 70.

³⁸ I know that Holmer perhaps would not agree with me on this point, since he affirms that for Kierkegaard, distinguishing between theology, morality, history, and the natural sciences by referring to reality ["fact"] is a mistake, since the way is to see how the passions, feelings, and interests are part of knowledge in each one of them. See HOLMER, *On Kierkegaard...*, p. 75. But, as I just wrote, I think that for Kierkegaard too, although he does not say so explicitly, it is reality itself or the object of knowledge that guides or determines how the relationship with the subject should be.

My point of view on this specific point agrees more with Rudd's. In relation to the field of ethics and not of knowledge, he states that «if the rationality in question is to be more than instrumental, then rational choice must be the capacity which orients us to what is genuinely worthwhile (apart from the making of that choice). So personhood essentially involves the capacity to assess one's being and doings in the light of the Good. This means that the Kantian respect for persons as rational beings cannot be free-standing; it depends on a Realist conception of the Good. Rational choice is worthy of our respect, not just because of its formal structure, but because it allows us to *get things right*. If it didn't, there would be nothing particularly deserving of respect in my capacity for choice". RUDD, *Self, Value and Narrative*, pp. 115-116. See also WOLF, SUSAN, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, pp. 8-9.

In this respect, why do some realities demand more involvement from us, an affirmation of the entire person and not just of the intellect?

If I previously paid recourse to Aristotle's metaphysics, perhaps now it would also be good to turn to another philosopher in whom we can find indications of the same position that Kierkegaard defends: Thomas Aquinas. Although I am not saying that the Danish philosopher used him as a source,³⁹ I will take the liberty of relating them to penetrate better into the reality of the matter that we are discussing and, in passing, to show that different paths can lead to the same truth.⁴⁰

Aristotle said that not everything is equally knowable, but that as each reality is in respect of being, so is it in respect of truth. But, Thomas Aquinas adds, not only the truth, but also the other transcendentals are convertible with being (and, in this sense, as we know, convertible with each other).

In effect, goodness and being, in reality, are the same thing, and they are only distinct in our understanding. And this is easy to understand. The concept of the good consists in something being desirable, and that is why the Philosopher said that goodness is «what all things desire». But things are desirable insofar as they are perfect, since everything seeks its own perfection, and they are that much more perfect when they are more in act; we thus see that the degree of goodness depends on the degree of being, since being is the actuality of all things, as we have seen. It follows that the good and being are really one and the same thing, although the good has the aspect of desirableness.⁴¹

Thus, we can echo Aristotle by saying that as each thing is in respect of being, so is it in respect of goodness. For it is the very act of being that sustains both the

³⁹ To know more about Kierkegaard's knowledge of Thomas Aquinas, see the corresponding chapter in *Kierkegaard and the Patristic and Medieval Traditions*. Series "Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources", vol. 4, edited by John Stewart. Aldershot (UK)-Burlington (VT): Ashgate, 2008, pp. 183-206.

⁴⁰ Stengren's article in the *Kierkegaardiana* magazine is very interesting in this regard, as he defends that "St. Thomas does differentiate between two modes of knowing: one, an affective, concerned, committed type, commonly called 'knowledge by connaturality', and the more familiar abstract, 'scientific', speculative type of intellectual cognition. Furthermore, these two ways of knowing are not necessarily incompatible or mutually exclusive. Without suggesting that there in any direct or even indirect connection between Aquinas and Kierkegaard, it is my contention that there is a very close parallel between these two types of cognition in the writings of Aquinas and Kierkegaard's distinction between subjectivity and objectivity". STENGREN, GEORGE L., "Connatural Knowledge in Aquinas and Kierkegaardian Subjectivity", in *Kierkegaardiana*, vol. 10, Copenhagen: C.: Reitzel, 1977, p. 185.

Roberts also reads Kierkegaard more as a successor of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas than as a predecessor of authors like Sartre or Foucault, centering specifically on the concepts of "character" and "emotion". See ROBERTS, Robert C., "Existence, Emotion and Virtue: Classical Themes in Kierkegaard", in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*.

⁴¹ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae I*, q. 5, a. 1 co.

truth and the goodness of a reality. Therefore, although our intellect's limitation obligates us to distinguish them formally when we know them, they are actually united in reality, in each existing individual. «Because the good and the true are really convertible, it follows that the good is apprehended by the intellect as something true; while the true is desired by the will as something good».⁴²

The truth of a being does not appeal only to the intellect that knows it. Insofar as the degree of truth is also the degree of goodness, since both are of being, it also calls the will to adhere proportionally to that good. The *verum* of everything that is demands of us that we know it precisely insofar as it is: more if it is more, less if it is less. And since that which is, is both true and good, knowing it insofar as it is means we must also consider it as a good—greater insofar as its act of being is greater—which, as a result, entails a *moral imperative*. Being itself, when understood in all its depth, is not something neutral, purely “objective” in the Hegelian sense of the term, but together with the truth it offers to our understanding, carries value.

Kierkegaard is thus right when he says that certain knowledge is not such when it does not entail the adherence of the will. Because, the greater the category of the reality that is known—the divine and human person, in Kierkegaard's case—the greater must be the union between intellect and will, between reason and life. The greater the perfection of the reality's being, the more truth, goodness, and beauty it has. The being thus demands a different response from us, one that involves the entire person. For the knowledge of truth entails the discovery of the good, and thus impels us to respond with all our being.

And this is so by virtue of the unity of the known being. As it is simultaneously true and good, it apprehends the intellect and the will, insofar as it *is*—but also, and no less, by the unity of the person who knows. For, in strict terms, it is not the intellect or will in isolation that direct the being, but «one and the *same* person who is intelligent and free».⁴³

Along with the unity of truth and goodness in the known object, there is the highly elevated unity of the unique act of being of each person: «from this soul and this body there results *a single act of being* in a unique compound».⁴⁴ Understanding and loving are distinct operations, but both are rooted in and substantiated by the act of being, the principle of operations and of all acts. In the end, it is not the intellect that knows, but the man through his intellect.⁴⁵

⁴² THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, q. 59, a. 2 ad 3.

⁴³ MELENDO, TOMÁS, “El desafío educativo en Benedicto XVI”, en *Familia et vita*, Anno XVII, núm. 1-2/2013, p. 171.

⁴⁴ THOMAS AQUINAS, *De ente et essentia*, c. 3. My italics.

⁴⁵ Because everything in man is personal and puts his being into play: less of his being is involved when what he is facing is of a lesser category; more is in play when its reality is greater;

But if all this is true—and I think it is—then it would be a mistake to attempt to separate truth and goodness, intellect and will, and ultimately knowledge and life. Then a knowledge that should be but does not become subjective or—in Kierkegaard’s words—existential, is not really knowledge, since it does not correspond to reality. Therefore, both completely and in a strict sense, it cannot even be called knowledge.⁴⁶

And this is precisely what Kierkegaard tries to tell us, what he reminds us of with his “subjective truth”: that the separation between knowing the truth and being the truth is a falsehood,⁴⁷ that we cannot isolate the intellect from any of the other faculties of man, because then we would not be taking into account that man is a singularity, an existing individual, a person!

The subjective truth that Kierkegaard defends—once the first distinction between the degrees of knowledge is realized—is the truth of the *integral* person,⁴⁸ and not the view of a person who is decimated or truncated, a view that forgets that he is not only intelligent, but free.⁴⁹ It is what Kierkegaard learned from his esteemed teacher Socrates: that philosophy is not mere knowledge, but a way of life, that it is *love* for wisdom, «and do we call a lover a man who knows everything about love, but *is not in love?*»⁵⁰

What Kierkegaard does is put into play other dimensions of the person, without which we would be obviating two fundamental things: that in every reality, there is not only truth, but also goodness; and that it is only the unique person who understands and loves, who lives and who is. Therefore, only a truth that heeds the integrity of the person will truly be human.

less when the operation that the person makes is inferior (like walking or breathing); more insofar as it is more spiritual.

⁴⁶ For knowing means knowing reality; if not, there would be no real knowledge.

⁴⁷ See KIERKEGAARD, SØREN, *Practice in Christianity*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 205. Hereafter, *PC*, followed by the page number.

⁴⁸ Thus, McCombs proposes calling it “humane” or “holistic rationality”. See McCOMBS, *Paradoxical Rationality ...*, p. 3.

I would like to clarify that when I say that the subjective truth is the truth of the “integral” person, I am not referring to a completed person, or to someone who is completely given. The meaning of life as a task, of the self as something that man himself has to build throughout his life, is one of the keys of Kierkegaard’s thought. When I use the term “integral”, I am referring rather to the idea that the subjective truth is a truth that heeds all of the dimensions of the person and does not focus only on one of the faculties —the intellect— leaving aside other essential aspects like the will.

⁴⁹ “To make philosophy a responsible activity as it was for Socrates requires not doctrines but a kind of integrity”. HOLMER, *On Kierkegaard...*, p. 157.

⁵⁰ GILSON, ETIENNE, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2nd edition corrected and enlarged, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1952, p. 144.

3. Importance of the will

Thus, far from negating the validity of objective knowledge, what Kierkegaard wants is to open our eyes to a series of truths for which that type of knowledge is not so much unnecessary as it is insufficient.⁵¹ It is completely legitimate to study the composition of iron in an *objective* way, to learn the list of its properties and uses, of the chemical processes that arise when it is mixed with other elements, until one acquires a totally scientific knowledge that can be used consistently to manufacture different objects. But that does not at all involve my entire person: I can limit the study of iron to moments when I am in the laboratory or the library, without having to bring about any other change in my life, in my day, in my way of acting. By contrast, the knowledge that has to do with the person or God calls for a much more complex and committed response from the person: it is not enough to know these realities; one has to live them, make them one's own. Then, can it really be said that someone really knows what generosity is if he *is not* generous or fighting to be generous, no matter how many treatises he has read? Or take someone who studies anthropology but then treats people as if they were objects: can it really be said that he has reached the truth about the person? Taking it a step further: can someone, even a theology teacher, really say he knows God if he has never been alone before Him?

In these last cases, in which existential truth is at stake, both the intellect and the will are involved.⁵²

⁵¹ "Any rational decision-making is bound to clash with the emotional, irrational, dimensions of actual existence. Such a clash, however, does not imply that rational decision-making proves superfluous when grappling with existential questions. Rather, it indicates that purely rational decision-making is deficient in an existential context. In consistent thinking, the logical and rational dimensions are essential, since the individual cannot force itself not to ask questions, or not to make conscious decisions, or not to weigh the different possibilities, and the repercussions of each and every one of them on its life. In particular, it cannot force itself to avoid them (and their opposites) once they emerge. Thus, the rational dimension must be perceived as a necessary yet insufficient means for existential decision-making". AYLAT-YAGURI, TAMAR, "What is Qualitative about Qualitative Dialectic?", in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook*, 2011, p. 270.

Evans also argues that objective knowledge is insufficient, although he does come to say that it is unnecessary, even though preferable. See EVANS, *Kierkegaard: An Introduction*, pp. 61-63.

⁵² As Gabriel affirms, "Kierkegaard uses the term 'subjectivity' to emphasize the will as the vital organ for spiritual development". GABRIEL, *Subjectivity and Religious...*, p. 91. However, I do not totally agree with Gabriel when he says, in the conclusions of his book, that "Kierkegaard's philosophy is a radical break with traditional Western philosophy. His 'passionate individualism' is an amalgam of the philosophy of life and 'irrationalism' ". GABRIEL, *Subjectivity and Religious...*, p. 175. Precisely one of the things that I try to show in this work is that there were already indications supporting Kierkegaard's position in other prior philosophies, although I also think that Kierkegaard had much to contribute even to these, which he took

In reality, we would have to say that the will is always involved in any kind of knowledge, whether objective or subjective. As a free act, knowledge (also the kind that Kierkegaard calls objective) needs the will at the beginning. And, precisely because he who knows is always a person, an existing individual, when we engage in the act of knowing, we can never totally get rid of our yearnings, desires, or inclinations...⁵³ or of our personal and historical situation.⁵⁴ That is why I argued before for the need to qualify the idea that only the intellect is active in objective knowledge. And for the same reason, Kierkegaard often ridiculed the desire for pure objectivity in so many intellectuals.

But apart from this, in the search for those truths that are really important for man—the “edifying truths”, as Kierkegaard calls them—the will is not only involved in the beginning or in the decision to know,⁵⁵ but is also present in that second movement that Kierkegaard calls reduplication or appropriation, which is indispensable for reaching the complete truth, for *being* the truth.⁵⁶

Kierkegaard writes that «the being of truth is the redoubling of truth within yourself, within me, within him, that your life, my life, his life expresses the truth approximately in the striving for it, that your life, my life, his life is approximately the being of the truth in the striving for it».⁵⁷

But to *be* the truth, to redouble it in our life—which requires both the unity of truth and goodness in the known and the unity of intellect and will in the knowing individual—the intellect is not enough; the will must also be put into play. This is one of Kierkegaard’s greatest contributions to the topic of truth: that if we truly want to heed the reality of what exists, the process must not end when the intellect presents us with an objective truth that we can know.

into account. On the other hand, and as I said in the beginning, it seems that using the term “irrationalism” to speak about Kierkegaard can lead to unwanted confusions.

⁵³ Although Pojman criticizes this position in Kierkegaard because he considers it “volitionalism”, that is, that our beliefs are under the control of the will. See POJMAN, LOUIS P., *Religious Belief and the Will*, London-New York, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986, p. 129, Evans does not agree with him and affirms that “it is a plain and evident fact of human psychology, like it or not, that how we interpret evidence, is heavily shaped by our desires”. EVANS, *Passionate Reason...*, p. 137; see also cap. 7.

⁵⁴ Evans’ comments on the matter are very interesting, as he states that “the kind of absolute certainty sought by modern, western philosophy is unattainable for finite human existers. Human persons are historically situated beings, and they are incapable of thinking *sub specie aeternitatis*, as Spinoza thought we should aspire to do”. EVANS, *Passionate Reason...*, p. 56. For us, finite and historical human beings, the attempt to reach pure objectivity is absurd, since we will always begin, like it or not, from a personal and historical base that we cannot completely leave aside.

⁵⁵ *Something*, in the first place, and *this* in place of something else.

⁵⁶ See CUP1, 73.

⁵⁷ PC, 205.

Rather, the more important task is to take hold of that truth, to make it flesh of our flesh, to redouble it in our life. And to do that, we need to make a *leap*, a voluntary, free, and personal decision that is not determined by our intellect.⁵⁸

«In pure ideality», Kierkegaard writes, «where the actual individual person is not involved, the transition is necessary [...], or there is no difficulty at all connected with the transition from understanding to doing».⁵⁹ But in subjective or existential thought, in the definitive thought that truly heeds reality in its variety and complexity, the decisive point is that leap or transition from the understood to the lived. It is a leap that must be done by the will, since the reason, no matter how much it goes over it, cannot generate a conviction, a decision.⁶⁰ There comes a point at which, when we do not want to do something that we know we should do, that we have recognized as true and good, «willing allows some time to elapse, an interim called: “We shall look at it tomorrow”. During all this, knowing becomes more and more obscure, and the lower nature gains the upper hand more and more».⁶¹ Thus, we could let our life pass by between unending reflections and thoughts, living in the world of possibility and not in that of actual reality, without ever coming to make a decision, without acting, without living a truly human life.

⁵⁸ On this “leap”, Fabro writes prolifically and very insightfully, explaining that this is what faith consists in, and in a certain way, freedom as well. See FABRO, CORNELIO, *Dall'essere all'esistente*, 2^a ed. Riveduta, Brescia: Morcelliana, 1965. Yet, although I think that this does not invalidate the essence of what is affirmed there, it is also worthwhile to read McKinnon's article, in which he demonstrates that the expression “leap of faith”, while used frequently by many of his readers, including Fabro, never appears in Kierkegaard's writings. See MCKINNON, ALASTAIR, “Kierkegaard and the Leap of Faith”; in *Kierkegaardiana*, vol. 16, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel, 1993.

⁵⁹ SUD, 93.

⁶⁰ “All decision, all essential decision, is rooted in subjectivity. At no point does an observer (and that is what the objective subject is) have an infinite need for a decision, and at no point does he see it. This is the *falsum* [falsehood] of objectivity and the meaning of mediation as a passing through in the continuous process in which nothing abides and in which nothing is infinitely decided either, because the movement turns back on itself and turns back again, and the movement itself is a chimera, and speculative thought is always wise afterward” (CUP1, 33).

In reference to this same point, Evans comments that «reflection for Kierkegaard has a potentially infinite quality. Anyone who has agonized over ordering form a menu in a restaurant understands that the reflection that precedes a choice can be indefinitely extended and the choice postponed. Thought never brings itself to a close. Rather, the person must choose to end the process of reflection, and this happens when a person is motivated to act and thus brings deliberation to closure. One element that is required is affective; Kierkegaard rejects the idea of a *liberum arbitrium*, a disinterested will that is objective and neutral. Rather, our willing is always done in the context of our desires and passions. Nevertheless, the will is not simply the outcome of the desires a person feels at a given moment; we have some ability to weight our desires and —over time— to form them, through repeated choices of the will”.

EVANS: *Passionate reason...*, p. 25.

⁶¹ SUD, 94.

Yet, the will cannot embrace anything unless the reason presents it first. Indeed, as Kierkegaard argues, there is no necessary causality between knowledge and will: the leap between one and the other is free and it is necessary to exercise it.⁶² But, at the same time, it is the reason that makes such an exercise of the will possible, by opening it to a world of “possibilities”.⁶³

Thus, we can conclude by saying that the subjective or existential truth that Kierkegaard defends really does respond to the nature of both the known and the knower.⁶⁴ To that of the known, since it does not try to impose a uniform criteria for any possible object, but respects the richness and diversity of the real, without forgetting that everything that is true is also good. And to that of the knower, because it does not sideline or scorn the intellectual and rational capacity of the human being but, quite the contrary, warns and takes into account that man is not only intelligent but also free, and that he is gifted not only with reason, but also will.

And only such a truth that is personally assimilated until it becomes part of our own life allows us to live a truly human life, allows us to become *den Enkelte*, the single individual that each of us is called to be and that Kierkegaard makes the cornerstone of his thought and his life.

⁶² See FABRO, CORNELIO, *Tra Kierkegaard e Marx: Per una definizione dell'esistenza*, Roma: Logos, 1978, p. 111.

⁶³ See GUERRERO MARTÍNEZ, *Kierkegaard: los límites de la razón en la existencia humana*, pp. 86-87.

⁶⁴ For Kierkegaard, as Tutewiler recalls, “the existing human being is the one thinking, and “so his thought must correspond to the form of [his] existence” (*CUP1*, 80). Thought loses itself without such a foundation. To be reconciled unto itself, human thought must first be reconciled to human nature”. TUTEWILER, COREY BENJAMIN, “Being and Thinking Humanly: Human Nature as Criterion for Thought in Kierkegaard”, in *Acta Kierkegardiana*, vol. 6, 2013, p. 18.