
Faust's Dog: Kierkegaard, Despair & the Chimera of Meaning

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Abstract. *Through an exploration of Kierkegaard's journals and papers, as well as his published works, this article explores the questions of the motivation and meaning behind Kierkegaard's well-known preoccupation with the Faust myth. Scholars have been unanimous in noting the Danish philosopher's interest in the German myth, and have likewise been in consensus noting that Faust acts as a symbol for doubt for Kierkegaard. In this paper I ask why this symbolic obsession might have been necessary for Kierkegaard, arguing that Faust offered Kierkegaard both a way of working through his ideas about the meaning of doubt, and a poetic way of expressing these ideas to his reading public, whereby Faust could act as an ironic example to bring individuals to a confrontation with doubt, the prize being transcendent meaning that could only be resolved through a leap to faith.*

Keywords: *philosophy, religion, Kierkegaard, Faust, history, doubt, belief, nihilism, meaning, truth*

On March 16th, 1835, Søren Kierkegaard remarked in his journal that,

It is indeed curious that the legend has provided Faust with a dog in which the devil conceals himself. It seems to me that the legend thereby wants to suggest that for a man like Faust, for whom all conditions of life were so utterly askew and who had such a canted stance toward everything, that for him, I say, the dog, this usually faithful companion to man, here did in fact retain his character as faithful but also became an evil spirit who, in line with his faithfulness, never deserted him.¹

Kierkegaard's interest in the Faust myth is no secret. Most commentaries on Kierkegaard's life and work make at least passing reference to "Faustian" interests. And the connection between Faust and doubt in Kierkegaard's works is, likewise, well

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¹ Kierkegaard Søren, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, Hong, H. & E. (Trans.), (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967), Entry 5086.

attested. The Faust myth and what the character of Faust represented for Kierkegaard played important roles in his life and thought and are important now for anyone who hopes to come to some sort of an understanding of this difficult thinker. In this paper I want to draw attention to *the meaning behind Kierkegaard's relation to the Faust myth*; not just what the myth represented for the Danish thinker, but why Kierkegaard's use of the myth in his writings might have been necessary.

The Faust myth takes up a lot of real estate in Kierkegaard's journals and papers and plays an important role in two of his major published works,² and its importance in regard to the overall project of Kierkegaard's thought would be hard to overestimate. What I want to outline here is the place of Kierkegaard's conception of the Faust myth, as manifested in his journals and published writings, within the predominate theme of his thought: helping individuals move towards God. I argue that this place is determined, in part, by Kierkegaard's conception of the history of philosophy, and in part by what he sees as the timeless realities that underlie the thought represented by this tradition; thus there is both a timely and a timeless aspect to Kierkegaard's thought on the Faustian theme. Faust represents doubt for Kierkegaard, and it is as the symbol for doubt that the Faust myth enters into the overall project of his thought. Kierkegaard's account of the history of the Faust myth is tied to his conception of the history of the manifestations of doubt in different periods. And his conception of the timeless, universal, or ideal Faust relates to his concept of universal doubt. But why is Faust so important for Kierkegaard? And in what way might the myth be something of a necessary philosophical device? Here I will answer in brief that Kierkegaard arrives at his understanding of doubt by dwelling on the myth, and he needs Faust in order to communicate the meaning of doubt effectively through poetic and indirect means.

DOUBT

The significance of the figure of Faust for Kierkegaard's development is undeniable. Alastair Hannay refers to a "Faustian phase"³ when Kierkegaard, "at twenty-two, at

² Kierkegaard's journals and papers include 72 entries relating to Faust ranging from brief mentions to in-depth discussions spanning several pages. They date from 1835 to 1839 and include what some commentators argue is an aborted project that was to be composed of letters written from the point of view of a "Faustian doubter" (Argued by Emanuel Hirsch in *Kierkegaard Studien* (Gutersloh: 1933). See Note 245 in Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Vol. 5, p. 481.).

In addition to these entries Kierkegaard had planned to write a concerted work on Faust himself, but was beaten to the punch when H. L. Martensen published a Danish article in 1837 entitled "Observations concerning *the Idea of Faust*, with Reference to *Lenau's Faust*." In despair Kierkegaard abandoned the project, but not the topic.

³ Hannay devotes a chapter of his *Kierkegaard: A Biography* to Kierkegaard's "Faustian Phase" outlining what Faust represented for Kierkegaard (doubt) and noting the degree of his intense interest during the second half of the 1830's, and Joakim Graff, in his *Søren Kierkegaard: A Biography*, which Bruce Kirmmse has translated, also devotes time to Kierkegaard's "*Studiosus Faustus*." In their chapter on Goethe in tome 3 of *Kierkegaard and his German contemporaries*, Jon Stewart and Katalin Nun look at

large in Copenhagen and freed from his 'home' ... could savour life." And goes on to tell us,

He was making his mark, and new doors hitherto closed were opening. This was to be a Faustian period. The journal entries take up the theme of the legendary German necromancer who sold his soul to the devil in exchange for knowledge and power.

The Faust depicted here is the Faust of temptation. Here Hannay emphasizes the version of Faust as the man tempted by sin and experience, a very attractive figure for a young man who "seem[ed] to have been given no chance to assume responsibility at all" growing up, as he did, in a "theocratic household." Yet the role of the Faust myth in Kierkegaard's life and thought was more than this and Hannay quickly moves on to what Faust signified for Kierkegaard, noting that "it was Faust the thinker in whom Kierkegaard had been first interested, a thinker whose thinking led him to doubt."⁴

Kierkegaard saw Faust as a symbol for doubt. In a letter which may have itself been a part of a planned but unfinished book of fictional letters written by a "Faustian doubter,"⁵ Kierkegaard says that, "Just as our forefathers had a goddess of longing, so, in my opinion, Faust is doubt personified."⁶ Faust is a totemic symbol through which Kierkegaard comes to terms with, and later, attempts to explain, what it means to doubt.⁷ But this raises precisely the question: What *does* it mean to doubt? For Kierkegaard, doubt has meant many things at different historical moments, and, at the same time, there is a universal meaning of doubt that is made manifest in thought either to a greater or lesser extent *by* these particular historical manifestations.

Kierkegaard classified the various versions of the Faust myth that had existed since the earliest chapbooks of the mid to late sixteenth century, at the origin of the myth, according to the sort of doubt that each historical instance of the legend displayed. Each

Kierkegaard's thought on Goethe's version of the Faust myth in light of his relationships with other Danish thinkers. In his "A Problem in Values: The Faustian Motivation in Kierkegaard and Goethe," Forrest Williams offers an interpretation of Kierkegaard's notion of Faust and the meaning of the myth in Kierkegaard and Goethe's versions. In the upcoming installments of Volume 16 of the series there will be two essays pertinent to the topic: L. Lisi's "Faust: The Seduction of Doubt" in October 2014 and W. Williams' "Mephistopheles: Demonic Seducer, Musician, Philosopher, and Humorist" in January of 2015.

⁴ Hannay, Alastair, *Kierkegaard: A Biography*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 60.

⁵ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*. Vol. 5, Note 245, p. 481.

⁶ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 5092.

⁷ There is surprisingly little chronological overlap between the journal entries discussing doubt without using the framework of the Faust myth and entries about the Faust myth at all; that is, in the years 1835-1839, when Kierkegaard wrote nearly all of the entries pertaining to Faust, he rarely (entries 772, 1544, & 1592) discussed doubt outside of the Faustian framework. When he did begin discussing doubt without reference to Faust (1840-1851), I argue that he had already worked these ideas out whilst dwelling on Faust.

age had its own Faust because each age had its own idea of what it means to doubt. In Kierkegaard's own words:

As far as the criticism of the various versions of Faust is concerned, one can find a basis for classifying them and facilitate a survey of them by paying attention to how such an idea must be reflected in various ages, or how every age must look upon this idea through the prescription glasses of its individuality.⁸

These views represent the timely manifestation of doubt; they are views of an eternal condition from specific places and times. Again, in Kierkegaard's words: "for the single individual just as for the individual nation in the development of the world there naturally is one [Faust] for each."⁹ But these instances are not random; Kierkegaard's conception of these different Fausts is essentially historical. The form of the myth in a given time "is not a question at all of the poets' conceptions... but of how time lies before us in a world-historical sense;"¹⁰ how Faust is presented is dictated by how doubt is conceived in a given historical period.

Kierkegaard begins a journal entry from 1837 by remarking: "That the Faust who is now supposed to represent the age is essentially different from the earlier Faust and from the Faust of every other age is so evident that one needs only to be reminded of it."¹¹ He proceeds to contrast the modern Faust's despair with "the original Faust's despair," which "was more practical." The original, Sixteenth century, or "medieval" Faust, as Kierkegaard often describes him, despaired because his doubt rendered the knowledge of his time meaningless. He sought, as each Faust does, something beyond the destructive power of his doubt.¹² This Faust was the man who doubted the knowledge of his day and sought something more in action. Kierkegaard goes on to describe his plight:

He had studied, but his studies had not yielded him any return (what he saw next [the experiences and arcane knowledge that Mephistopheles made available to him] did yield something, even though infinitely little compared with what he wished; Faust's profit from knowledge was a nothing, because in the last resort it was not

⁸ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 1177.

⁹ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 1181.

¹⁰ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 2703.

¹¹ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 1182.

¹² Forrest Williams argues that "the Faustian motivation may perhaps be generalized according to several characteristic features," which he boils down to "the impulsion or force which drives the Faustian figure," which "bears a closer relation to his person than do many other aspects of his activity," as well as a certain "intimacy," both of which manifest themselves as an "intimate force," which drives Faust toward something that is "inscrutable regarding... its ultimate purpose." Williams, Forrest, "A Problem in Values: The Faustian Motivation in Kierkegaard and Goethe," in *Ethics*, pp. 251-261.

this question he wanted answered, but rather the question: *what he himself* should do).¹³

The original or medieval Faust sought meaning in action; he was seeking something beyond his doubt as does the modern Faust, as does every Faust -- the difference lies in what they conceive this something to be.

The most detailed account of this difference in what the modern and medieval Fausts seek, as something outside of their doubt, comes in the above mentioned journal entry. What the early Faust sought, as something outside his own doubt, was the answer to the question: "*what he himself* should do." The character of Faust seeks something; he seeks something beyond his doubt, something that he can hold on to that is more than "a nothing." According to Kierkegaard, the original Faust sought something beyond the knowledge of his day in activity. Faust could see the emptiness of the less advanced sciences of his day, and because his age had the character of "enthusiastic action in order to realize its ideal" he sought his answer here.¹⁴ The first Faust, "with his activist tendencies sank into sensuality," as an alternative to the knowledge, the import and meaning of which his doubt destroyed.¹⁵ This was the Faust that Hannay initially described, the activist Faust who seeks experience because knowledge has crumbled under the onslaught of his doubt. Kierkegaard, in another entry from 1837 remarks on the nature of this quest and what, in the end, it will signify:

Faust did not want to learn to know evil in order that he might rejoice over not being so bad (only the philistines do this); on the contrary, he wanted to feel all the sluice gates of sin open within his own breast, the whole kingdom of incalculable possibilities. Everything, however, will not be sufficient. His expectations will be disappointed.¹⁶

Thus the original Faust does not find what he seeks in experience, that solid ground that can withstand his doubt; instead, he is left more annihilated than ever; both knowledge and experience, all that sin has to offer, have failed him.

¹³ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 1182.

¹⁴ Kierkegaard argues that the Faustian requires this enthusiasm and activity in pursuit of an ideal such as occurred in the early years of the myth where "a great number of men... turned their heads to investigate a vanished past or immerse[d] themselves in investigating nature" but that the Faustian cannot develop until "first of all... this energetic life be paralyzed in some way or other." We can interpret this passage as saying that this necessary paralysis comes when the enthusiasm for the ideal meets the reality of its ultimate unfulfillment; and it is in our conscious realising of this (as a relation) that the Faustian doubt may be born. (See note 20 below for a description of this triad.) Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 1182.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 1182.

¹⁶ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 1185.

The modern Faust is a different sort of creature who seeks a different sort of answer. The modern Faust is incapable of resorting to activity like the original Faust. Kierkegaard tells us that those in whom “the Faustian” develops in the modern age are

the type of men who... seek by intuition to comprehend the infinite multiplicity of nature, of life, and of history in a totality-view. But here, too, there is something tragic, for much is already unrolled before their vision and more appears every day, and under all this knowledge of many things dozes the feeling of how infinitely small this knowledge is, and it is this feeling which paralyzes their activity, and now the Faustian appears as despair over not being able to comprehend the whole development in an all-embracing totality-view in which every single nuance is also recognized for its full value, that is, its absolute worth.

Kierkegaard here attempts to give a sense of the sheer volume of new knowledge that separates what the modern Faust is faced with from what the original faced. The original Faust, “on the basis of the far more elementary state of the sciences at that time, by means of a survey... could more easily have been convinced of their emptiness.”¹⁷ The modern Faust does not have this luxury. Instead, faced with the overwhelming amount of data that his world presents him, the modern Faust attempts to make sense of it all.

“Intuition” is what the modern Faust seeks. As the modern world progressed the great storehouse of knowledge filled, and now the only grasp of the totality of knowledge available is an intuitive grasp. This “totality-view” that Kierkegaard tells us the modern Faust seeks, is the view that will provide transcendent meaning, that is, meaning beyond the relativities that go hand in hand with modern doubt. But what does relativity have to do with intuition? “[A]s the world becomes older,” notes Kierkegaard,

The intuitive tendency must take precedence, and the question consequently becomes: how can true intuition enter in despite man’s limited position. But that which drives men on to this demand for a perfect and true intuition is a despair over the relativity of everything... He discerns how the most gifted of his contemporaries squeeze out a little yield (speculative abstracting or historical sketching), and he has a secret fear that this possibility may not be what they assume it to be – the most important – but merely what *they* succeed in comprehending and fathoming. He longs for a view which abolishes all relativities and shows him the absolute worth of even the most insignificant thing, because in the true (i.e., divine) view everything has the same magnitude.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 1182.

What Kierkegaard is describing here – that which confronts the modern Faust – is relative meaning. In the face of relative meaning *everything* falls prey to doubt. Any and all knowledge becomes suspect when we cannot say that it is anything more than “merely what *they* succeed in comprehending and fathoming.”¹⁸ The modern Faust is paralyzed by the fact that relativity brings everything under the power of his doubt; and here Faust must despair.¹⁹

The modern Faust is left without even the hope of finding meaning in pursuing action over knowledge as the original Faust did. Kierkegaard sums up the lack of options in the face of relative meaning when he says:

Herein now lies the despair. The way all of life alters for him now also shows him to be quite different from the first Faust, for while that one with his activist tendency sank into sensuality, this one will back out of everything, forget, if possible, that he ever knew anything, and watch the cows – or perhaps, out of curiosity, transport himself into another world.²⁰

When faced with the vast multiplicity of knowledge, answers, meanings, significations that the modern world provides him, the modern Faust is paralyzed. When every question has a multitude of answers, each as valid as the next, all answers become meaningless. Everything becomes relative and everything becomes prey to his doubt.

This historical trajectory that Kierkegaard sketches should be familiar to anyone who looks at the history of modernity, broadly construed. The problem of relational meaning and the overload of information and signification is the great problem of the modern world in which Kierkegaard lived and we continue to live today. This problem lies at the root of what is known as axiological or existential nihilism²¹ – when everything is laden with a superabundance of meaning, meaning itself becomes levelled, and the world becomes meaningless.²² This is also one of the central problems for those

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 1182.

¹⁹ Doubt is, as Kierkegaard will put it in an unfinished project about a man who takes seriously the claim that for philosophy to begin “everything must be doubted,” a “reflection-category” that is “*tricotomous*” (whereas reflection alone is dichotomous); it is not merely self and content (or knowledge) that are the issue, but self, content, *and the relation* between them in consciousness; “doubt *pre-supposes* reflection” as Kierkegaard puts it. Doubt is then, as a combination of self, content, and relation, specifically an *interested* phenomenon; reflection provides the conditions for doubt but is itself “*disinterested*,” which is why reflection need not always lead to doubt and why doubt cannot “be overcome by so-called objective thinking... for doubt is based on interest and all systematic knowledge is disinterested.” Kierkegaard, Søren, *Philosophical Fragments/Johannes Climacus*, Hong, H. & E. (Trans.), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 145 & 169-70.

²⁰ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 1182.

²¹ “The feeling of emptiness or pointlessness that follows from the judgement, ‘Life has no meaning.’” Carr, Karen L. *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth-Century Responses to Meaninglessness*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 18.

²² For more discussion of Nihilism in its various forms see: *Ibid.* esp. pp. 1-24.

thinkers who came after Kierkegaard and loosely fall into the so called “existentialist” tradition such as Nietzsche and Heidegger.

These historical manifestations however, are merely interpretations of a fundamental, universal doubt, based on the prevailing understanding of their times. In a journal entry from 1836 Kierkegaard asks himself: “What does it mean and to what extent is it true that every age has its Faust etc.?” and answers: “No, in the development of the world there is only *one* Faust... but for the single individual just as for the individual nation in the development of the world there naturally is one for each.” He notes that even the striking difference between Goethe’s Faust and the original version of the myth – that Faust is saved in the end – can be explained by this. Goethe can allow his Faust to be saved, “in which case this is the new period’s interpretation – which, please note, is not a conception of Faust but is the idea of the age.”²³ The essential or universal doubt is always there, but each particular age understands it to a greater or lesser extent.

This essential or universal doubt is reflected by what we can call the essential or universal Faust, the Faust of which “there is only *one*.”²⁴ This is the Faust by which Kierkegaard judges Goethe’s and all other versions of the myth. It is through contemplating this universal Faust that Kierkegaard worked out his ideas about what doubt itself meant, what the essence of doubt was. And it was through this universal Faust that he attempted to convey this idea of doubt at two important points in his published writings.

THE ESSENTIAL FAUST’S PLACE IN KIERKEGAARD’S PHILOSOPHICAL WORLD

Doubt, in Kierkegaard’s conception, is a force. Doubt undermines all knowledge and all significations. Against the paralyzing force of doubt all meanings dissolve into meaninglessness. Furthermore, doubt cannot be reasoned with; reason only feeds and strengthens doubt because reason is, in a sense, doubt’s handmaiden. In his uncompleted *Johannes Climacus or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*, a narrative of a young man who took seriously the claim that “everything must be doubted” and that philosophy must begin with doubt (likely penned in 1842-3), Kierkegaard gives us another account of doubt. This work is partially a lampoon of a different sort of doubt than the Faustian described above. It treats “the problem of systematic doubt” that played its role in the contemporary philosophy, particularly of H. L. Martensen, who espoused a “modern philosophy” that took its point of departure from Descartes and his famous act of doubting, culminated in Hegel, and then claimed to exceed him. The work uses a “*reductio ad absurdum* of the position of universal doubt” and particularly focuses

²³ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 1181.

²⁴ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 1181.

its criticism on the dissonance between the claims of Martensen and others to have “doubted everything” and their actual philosophical behaviour and lives.²⁵

Kierkegaard's criticism of the *feigned* universal sceptical doubt, a “detestable untruth that characterizes recent philosophy,”²⁶ is incisive. After naively heeding the words of the “philosophizers,” and attempting to pry apart what they actually mean, Kierkegaard's character comes to the realisation that he must attempt to start out alone and unguided on the path of doubting everything, even if he does not exactly understand what the various statements he has heard about this doubting mean or how they fit together. He “bade the philosophizers farewell forever” and “now followed the method he was in the habit of following – namely, to make everything as simple as possible.”²⁷

At this point the tone of the narrative shifts from the more satirical tone of the earlier chapters to a more exploratory discussion of the question “what is it to doubt?” Here reflection is presented as a condition that doubt “*pre-supposes*” while doubt itself is located in the tripartite structure of consciousness,²⁸ that is: self, object, and the relation between the two, which is one of involvement and interest on the part of the self. This is why knowledge can be no remedy for doubt, because knowledge alone is disinterested, whereas doubt is rooted in interest and impossible without it.²⁹ Unfortunately, the text breaks off just at the point where it is becoming intensely interesting in relation to our concern here.

It was through thinking about the Faust myth that Kierkegaard worked out his ideas about what essential doubt means. The Faust entries in the journals derive from the years 1835-1839. The entries discussing doubt in isolation from the Faust myth occur predominately after this period (running from 1840-1851). It is only *after* his detailed study of the Faust myth, and his discussions of Faust in relation to doubt that Kierkegaard begins to make detailed entries and more in depth studies of essential doubt on its own.³⁰

²⁵ Stewart, Jon, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 239.

²⁶ Kierkegaard, *Johannes Climacus*, p. 117.

²⁷ Kierkegaard, *Johannes Climacus*, p. 165.

²⁸ As Strawser puts it: “Consciousness is the third that establishes the relation between ideality and reality, or thinking and being. This relation has the form of contradiction, for to maintain that thinking and being are held in opposition by consciousness is to state the philosophically contradictory. Ideality and reality collide in consciousness and have nothing to say to each other.” Strawser, Michael, “Kierkegaardian Meditations on First Philosophy: A Reading of *Johannes Climacus*,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 32:4 (1994), pp. 623-643, p. 640. Strawser contraposes a “true doubt,” which Kierkegaard discusses here and which, as he points out, “is a recognizably different form of doubt” to the *feigned* universal sceptical doubt of the “philosophizers” (p. 641).

²⁹ Kierkegaard, *Johannes Climacus*, pp. 169-70.

³⁰ Martensen's publication of a work on Faust that anticipated Kierkegaard's planned project has been seen as one of the reasons why he may have abandoned the idea of a Faustian publication. See, for instance: Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relations to Hegel Reconsidered*, pp. 247-8.

This essential doubt is embodied in the person of the essential Faust. “Faust may be paralleled with Socrates,” notes Kierkegaard. “Just as the latter expresses the individual’s emancipation from the state, Faust expresses the individual after the abrogation of the Church, severed from its guidance and abandoned to himself.”³¹ There is nothing he can cling to because nothing is safe from the destructive power of his doubt.

For Kierkegaard, the essential Faust cannot be converted, as Goethe allows his Faust to be. He calls it “a sin against the idea” that Goethe offers his Faust salvation. Faust, as the arch doubter could never receive enlightenment in this way.

He approached the devil for the express purpose of becoming enlightened on things about which he was previously unenlightened, and precisely because he addressed himself to the devil, his doubt increased (just as a sick man falling into the hands of a quack is likely to get even worse). Admittedly Mephistopheles let him look through his spectacles into the hidden secrets of man and the world, but Faust could still not avoid having doubts about him, for he could never enlighten him about the most profound intellectual matters. In accordance with this idea he could never turn to God, for once he did that, he would have to say to himself that here was the true enlightenment, and at the same moment he would, in fact, deny his character as a doubter.³²

The essential Faust’s essential doubt, as we have noted, undermines all knowledge and signification, and thus renders enlightenment null. Faust cannot care about more knowledge, and he cannot be enlightened about the divine. As doubt personified, Faust in a sense, *is the site of* and *lives* this nullification. Under Faust’s doubting gaze all meanings are rendered meaningless; all meanings are rendered null. Inside Faust is the power that destroys meaning; within him, the annihilation of meaning occurs.

In a journal entry from 1842-43, Kierkegaard notes that “Doubt is produced EITHER by bringing reality into relation with ideality... OR by bringing ideality into relation with reality;”³³ that is, it arises when what we find in the world comes up against our conceptions – when, for instance, Christianity as an ideal is compared with observation of Christianity as an historical and sociological practice (the real actions of real people), or when we attempt to attribute and all encompassing meaning to the multifarious world which confronts us. In an 1851 entry, Kierkegaard notes how doubt relates to Christianity and knowledge. “Nowadays,” he says, “we have swung the whole thing around. Christianity is an objective doctrine – before I get involved it must first justify itself to me.” That is, Christianity, as a defined system of thought confronts the individual. “Good night to Christianity!” continues Kierkegaard, “Now doubt has

³¹ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 1968

³² Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 5092.

³³ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 891.

conquered. This doubt can never be halted by reasons, which only nourish doubt." In fact, "doubt can [only] be halted by 'imitation.'"³⁴ Only by abandoning thought and knowledge can one escape doubt. And Faust cannot do this without betraying the essence of the idea that he represents because "enthusiasm for knowledge... must be regarded as characteristic of [his personality.]"³⁵ Because Faust himself personifies doubt, he takes the path of knowledge, of thought, which leads away from and not towards Christianity. He doubts knowledge, and yet, as *the* doubter, it is knowledge that is his path. He has no vain hope that knowledge will lead him anywhere – no hope that it will offer him transcendence of any sort – knowledge simply is all he knows, and all he can know.

In Kierkegaard's time, and for many people in our own, transcendent meaning must ultimately come from God alone. God alone, the argument goes, is beyond all relativities. If we attempt to approach God through thought we will fail because doubt arises through thought where everything is relative. We cannot approach that which is beyond relativity through that which reduces everything to mere relativities. If we fail to see this and try to think our way to transcendent meaning, that is, meaning beyond doubt, as Faust attempted, already "doubt has entered in and, just like cholera, hangs on." We cannot then, Kierkegaard tells us, attempt to argue, or explain, or teach people toward transcendent meaning, in his terms, towards God. He goes on:

Every scholarly argument therefore merely feeds doubt; every organization-minded effort feeds doubt. Only God and eternity are powerful enough to cope with doubt (for doubt is precisely man's rebellious force against God), but if God and eternity are to get the better of it, then every human being must enter into the compression chamber of individuality.³⁶

Transcendent meaning then is not something we can seek with our minds, but only can have granted through the essentially miraculous relation between God and the individual. Transcendent meaning, meaning that is beyond all relativities and remains solid, standing firm against our doubt, then becomes a Chimera that we chase after, only giving more and more power to doubt which annuls its very existence, perpetuating the problem in an infinite loop, constantly creating absence and void out of our endeavour.

Doubt ultimately levels all interpretations and leaves the doubter standing before the chasm of meaninglessness where the only solution is a leap to faith. Through Faust we arrive before the leap that leads to Abraham. Doubt itself leads to despair, and it is

³⁴ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 1902.

³⁵ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 1180.

³⁶ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 1998.

faith, as “the highest,”³⁷ though thought and knowledge cannot offer reasons for this faith and in fact testify against it, that offers the only path to transcendent meaning. As Kierkegaard puts it, “Christianity is related neither to thinking nor to doubt, but to will and to *obedience*; you shall believe.” We cannot arrive at that which is beyond the relational by an act of, or guided by the light of our reason. “Wanting to take thinking along is disobedience, no matter whether it says yes or no.”³⁸ The obliterating power of doubt brings us to the edge of where thought can take us and leaves us standing naked before the question of the religious. In this way, though Faust cannot convert, he is the vehicle by which we arrive at the decision that is the moment of the religious.

Kierkegaard worked his way through to this conception of doubt by dwelling on the Faust myth. Faust, as doubt personified, is the levelling force that casts the world into meaninglessness, where we are left with nothing but the chasm over which the leap to faith may lead to the religious. Doubt becomes a force that clears the ground and brings us to the edge. And then there is nothing but the leap. The Faust story illustrates this metaphorically. But why is this story necessary for Kierkegaard? Why not just talk about doubt directly? Why did Kierkegaard feel that he needed Faust?

WHY FAUST?

As we have noted, the Faust myth provided Kierkegaard with a way of working out his ideas about doubt. But more than that, Faust provided Kierkegaard with a way of presenting doubt to his readers. The two major treatments of Faust in the published writings are in 1843’s *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling*, which were published in February and October respectively. A complicating factor is added to the discussion of these works, however, because they belong to the corpus of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous publications.

The question of just how we are to take the pseudonymous works, along with the question of their relation to the works Kierkegaard published in his own name, has been discussed extensively and permits of a wide range of possible answers. The extent to which we can or cannot attribute the words of the pseudonymous authors to Kierkegaard’s own beliefs is something that we cannot settle here; nor can the question be ultimately settled at all. It has been argued that the pseudonymous works are romantic narratives. It has been argued that they represent varieties of possible incorrect views. Evans has argued that the pseudonymity of *Fear and Trembling*, for instance, points to the need not to take the views expressed in it as Kierkegaard’s own.³⁹ The idea of a polysemous “Kierkegaard,” where the various parts of his output are not

³⁷ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 33.

³⁸ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 3049.

³⁹ See Evans, C. S. *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 84.

reducible to any sort of “real belief of Kierkegaard” vs. illustrative or otherwise purpose-directed but not “true” representations of Kierkegaard’s own views is also possible and, perhaps, even likely.

The possibility exists that the journal entries, like the works published under Kierkegaard’s own name, are perhaps no more reliable witnesses of what Kierkegaard may have actually believed than the pseudonymous works.⁴⁰ Indeed, the journal entries often display the same self-conscious artfulness and communicative purpose (whatever the actual intention of this communication may be) as the pseudonymous works. As Fenger notes, Kierkegaard “conceived of his journals as reports to history early on.” And we should all perhaps carry with us a certain “hearty skepticism toward Kierkegaard’s words.”⁴¹

Here I would not like to argue that what I am presenting is Kierkegaard’s *real* view, but, rather, that what I present represents a coherent interpretation that is one amongst the many that are possible and defensible. That what I present is *a* strand within the tapestry that is “Kierkegaard” is, I think, a defensible claim. That what I present is any sort of “real Kierkegaard” is not something I wish to claim or even believe is ultimately defensible.

The complex question of the purpose of the pseudonymous works and their role and place within the Kierkegaardian corpus is intimately tied and ultimately subordinate to the great question of Kierkegaardian communication more broadly. Again, there is a wide range of possible interpretations. That the pseudonymous works represent indirect ways to guide the reader towards views directly expressed in the works published under Kierkegaard’s own name is one such interpretation. My own view, while acknowledging the weight of this interpretation, is less schematic and more permissive of the possibility of a polysemous Kierkegaard. I think that a view that presents a hidden vs. exposed “real message” covers over the extent to which complication, paradox, and even relativity and confusion permeate the output that Kierkegaard has left us, and that uncertainty even (and perhaps especially) of that which appears most certain must always be bourn in mind. Kierkegaard’s indirect communication through the pseudonymous writings seems certainly intended to affect the reader. But those of us who do read them, along with the rest of Kierkegaard’s corpus, ultimately have only our own interpretations, which are always either more or less likely, never certain. Bearing that proviso in mind we may delve into *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling*.

⁴⁰ Indeed it is possible to “regard the whole of Kierkegaard’s life as a gigantic play in which Kierkegaard acted a profusion of roles, among them that of Søren Kierkegaard in countless versions.” Fenger, Henning, *Kierkegaard: The Myths and Their Origins: Studies in the Kierkegaardian Papers and Letters*, Schoolfield, G. (Trans), (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 147

⁴¹ Henning, *Kierkegaard: The Myths*, pp. 33 & 31

The primary treatment of Faust in *Either/Or* occurs in the “Psychological Diversion,” and appears as an examination of Margarete, Faust’s Gretchen. The section is a psychological profile of the tormented woman that Faust seduces and then leaves to die. What Kierkegaard describes is the role that doubt plays in the relationship between these two characters. Here we find familiar themes from the journal entries of the previous decade. Faust falls into his sensual relationship with Margarete because “he has lost a whole previous world,” And yet,

the consciousness of this loss is not blotted out; it is always present, and therefore he seeks in the sensuous not so much pleasure as distraction. His doubting soul finds nothing in which it can rest, and now he grasps at erotic love, not because he believes in it but because it has an element of presentness in which there is a momentary rest and a striving that diverts and that draws attention away from the nothingness of doubt.⁴²

Faust’s interest in Margarete is then nothing more than a longing for a brief distraction, which ultimately is as unsatisfying as every other experience for him. He seeks out a woman like the naïve Margarete because “his sick soul needs what could be called the first greening of a young heart.” Yet the peace he seeks is ephemeral; “he does not believe in it any more than in anything else”, but only hopes that “the plenitude of innocence and childlikeness can refresh him for a moment.” He can only find this in the childlike Margarete because “a so-called refined girl would fall within the same relativity as he himself;” Margarete provides something else: “Immediacy.”⁴³

Kierkegaard is careful to note that Faust does not press his doubt onto Margarete. “Margarete soon perceives that with respect to faith there is something wrong with Faust.” And Faust could turn his doubt onto her faith and crumple it if he chose, for Margarete’s faith is untested and simple. She has picked up the certainty of her religion from her upbringing, yet there is power in this childlike faith. “Faust is a doubter, but he is no vain fool who wants to make himself important by doubting what others believe... To wrest [Margarethe’s] faith from her is no task at all for him,” and yet he does not attempt this, but “on the contrary, he feels it is only through her faith that she is the great person she is.”⁴⁴ Here Kierkegaard presents us with the “*Either/Or*” of doubt coupled with knowledge or unquestionable and unquestioning faith; doubt cannot be assailed by knowledge and knowledge can never lead to faith. The path to transcendent meaning is a leap over the chasm to faith.

In *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard discusses Faust’s doubt in relation to the faith of another character, the Abraham of Mount Moriah. Here he describes Faust as “a

⁴²Kierkegaard, Søren, *Either/Or*, Part 1, Hong, H. & E. (Trans.), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 206.

⁴³ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, p. 207.

⁴⁴ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, pp. 208-209.

doubter, an apostate of the spirit who goes the way of the flesh.”⁴⁵ But Faust is not any doubter; he is “the doubter par excellence.” Kierkegaard notes that all the historical manifestations of Faust still do not attain a true grasp of the *essential Faust*. They “miss a profound psychological insight into doubt’s secret conversations with itself,”⁴⁶ Kierkegaard notes, and he proceeds to offer a detailed account of his conception of the essential Faust to his readers:

Only when one turns Faust into himself can doubt take on a poetic aspect; only then does he actually discover within himself all the sufferings of doubt. Then he knows that it is spirit that maintains existence, but he also knows that the security and joy in which men live are not grounded in the power of the spirit but are easily explained as an unreflected bliss. As doubter, as the doubter, he is higher than all this, and if someone wants to delude him into fancying that he has passed through doubt, he easily sees through it, for anyone who has made a movement in the world of spirit, consequently an infinite movement, can immediately hear from the response whether it is a tried and tested person speaking or a Münchhausen.⁴⁷

This is a Faust who knows the nature and scope of his doubt. He knows that he could easily turn his doubt “par excellence” upon the world and burn it down, yet he does not, for “he has a sympathetic nature.” This ideal Faust “remains silent, he hides his doubt more carefully in his soul than the girl who hides a sinful fruit of love under her heart.” In this sense Kierkegaard’s ideal Faust is a knight of infinite resignation, who has devoted his life entirely to an idea. His silence is therefore “a sacrifice to the universal;” there is no malice behind his doubt, for what meaning could malice have?

The ideal Faust with his doubt, as we have noted, levels the ground, renders meaning meaningless and brings us before the chasm of faith. Abraham dares to have faith against the levelling of doubt, not through knowledge or thought, but through a leap and, essentially, by an act of obedience.⁴⁸ He cannot think his way to faith “because

⁴⁵ Kierkegaard, Søren, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, Hong H. & E. (Trans.), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 107-108. *Fear and Trembling* (pp. 5-6) actually opens with a version of the criticism of the feigned universal sceptical doubt of Martensen and his “Hegelian” followers found in *Johannes Climacus*.

⁴⁶ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 108.

⁴⁷ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 108-109. Again, the criticism of the false claimants to real doubt echoes *Johannes Climacus*.

⁴⁸ Whether faith in general is a sort of divine command, as Evans argues, or whether the situation is more complex, the narrative of *Fear and Trembling* certainly revolves around the issue of Abraham’s obedience. On divine command see Evans, C. S. *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love*. As the reader will note from the above discussion of the pseudonymous works I do not follow Evans in his argument for “the non-identity of Kierkegaard and his pseudonym” in *Fear and Trembling* (p. 305) or in his argument that there is a single true message of divine command at play. Evans is certainly right, however, to stress that there is something of the command to obedience involved in faith. The journals tie Christianity and obedience together (as in entry 3049 above), argue that “the only thing which interests God is

faith begins precisely where thought stops.”⁴⁹ And so, taken to the brink by Faust we have “only one movement left, the movement of the absurd,”⁵⁰ the movement Abraham makes when he obediently has faith in the light of all-destroying doubt.

Faust then, provides us with a way of envisioning the absolute desolation in which the movement of faith must proceed. The Faust myth offers Kierkegaard a way of representing these essential aspects of human existence poetically; it offers him a way of getting the meaning of doubt across to his readers in a form that is not the sort of philosophical explanation, which, according to Kierkegaard’s understanding, goes hand in hand with this doubt. In an 1847 journal entry dealing with doubt and faith Kierkegaard notes that the category of “the single individual,” who comes into relation with God, through faith and against doubt, “cannot be taught directly.” He notes that “the single individual” as a category, which is his central concept, and which provides the entry way to transcendent meaning through a relation with God, “has been used only once before (the first time) in a decisively dialectical way, by Socrates in disintegrating paganism.”⁵¹ Socrates represented doubt turned upon his society through irony. A Faustian character, as a new instance of the ideal type of the doubter could perhaps do something similar in Kierkegaard’s own day not by leading people to doubt, as a “vain fool” would, but leading people away from doubt and toward faith, as an ironic example.

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obedience” (1436), and argue that in the New Testament “faith is demanded (as an expression of devotedness), believing against reason, believing although one cannot see” and that “the apostle speaks of the *obedience of faith*” (1154). Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*. Whether this connection between faith and obedience fully supports Evans’ overall argument or whether there is more room for other interpretations is another matter (we might, for instance, say that *Fear and Trembling* explores faith *in the context of command*). For alternatives see, for instance, Howland, Jacob, *Kierkegaard and Socrates: A Study in Philosophy and Faith*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), esp. pp. 1-2 & 13. And: Green Ronald “‘Developing’ *Fear and Trembling*,” In Hannay & Marino (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 257-281. Green addresses Evans directly and offers a different approach.

⁴⁹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 53.

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 101.

⁵¹ Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Entry 2004.

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