



The Silence that is not Silence

by Blake T. Ostler

There is a certain sense in which I cannot speak the truth. It is not that the truth cannot be spoken, but only that *I* cannot speak it. The simple reason that I cannot speak this truth is that it is not my truth to speak. There is a sense in which in speaking I shall not have spoken. These words on this page must be seen through rather than looked at. The simple reason for this is that the truth of which I speak is not on this page nor is it before your eyes. You must look elsewhere. Yet in reading this you may discover where the truth is hidden. I cannot speak the truth that only you can speak.

The silence that I want to speak of is the two-fold attitude of subjectivity or passionate “inwardness” made famous by the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard – but Kierkegaard as seen through the optic of the Jewish Hasidic philosopher Martin Buber. The two basic words of relationship, of discourse between an “I” and an “other,” are I-Thou and I-It. However, the two movements of soul that arise as fruits of these attitudes are not opposites of subjectivity and objectivity, or inwardness and outwardness. Rather, the two movements of these attitudes are, respectively, subjectivity and hidden-ness. These two movements are expressed in numerous different spheres of discourse, different ways of

Element

being in the world, and different ways of life that play distinct language games. In the aesthetic mode of being, the hidden-ness is manifest as pre-tense, or choosing to not choose by choosing to not be present – literally not in this tense. In other words, it is a choice to not be conscious. In the ethical sphere of existence, the hidden-ness is manifest as pre-conceptions that precede our judgments. That is, the ethical sphere is characterized by a categorical schema that lays a matrix over the world and through which we judge right and wrong, true or false. Yet there are only two modes of discourse – authentic discourse that proceeds from the total person rooted in existence passionately, and inauthentic discourse which seeks to hide the truth about itself from itself, that runs from its own freedom, feigns no accountability for its own existence, and takes the meaning of itself from the other.

I emphasize that a mode of discourse is not talking, but a mode of being in the world, a way of standing (from Latin *stare* meaning both to stand and to exist) in the world with others. To exist in a mode of discourse is to be called forth to reciprocity by the other, to give wholly (holy) of one's entire being and to receive the mysterious revelation of the other in wholeness (holiness). My way of being in the world determines whether I am open to the other to receive the revelation, or whether I will force the other into the schema or categories of understanding that I have created.

SOCRATIC SUBJECTIVITY

The challenge of speaking as a Christian is that the goal is not to convey information that constitutes the truth, to impose it on you from the outside. The goal is a change of heart that opens to the truth. The goal is to find what cannot be found by searching. The truth that matters to Christianity cannot be given to you, it is something you must appropriate, something to be lived with passion in the living of it. The most difficult part of communication as a Christian is that what I speak to reveal to you, you already know – though it is hidden from you. In fact, it is the very fact that you already know it that may blind you to its truth. If you already know it, but you don't know that you know it, then how do we overcome your obstinate resistance to what you know? Worse yet,

why do you have this obstinate resistance?

There is an irony in knowing and giving meaning to what is said. Take for example Socrates who adopted a maieutic method to draw knowledge out of those he “taught.” The Socratic method itself assumes that the truth is already possessed by the person questioned, or that it can be derived by what is already known. The *mythological* explanation for such knowledge is Plato’s theory of the soul that pre-existed mortal existence. The soul had a vision of the truth, of the Forms, before birth and this knowledge remains latent in the mortal person. The knowledge is explained mythologically because it cannot be spoken directly. Why can’t it simply be spoken directly? According to Plato, the soul is in resistance to what it knows because it is fooled by the appearances of the senses. Plato thought that the truths of Reason (writ large and with a capital “R”) alone can pierce the veil of ignorance. Reason can lead us to the Forms or Ideas that are “out there” to give meaning to our statements. Our statements and propositions are true when they correspond to the universal Ideas. The problem of course is gaining access to the Ideas, for they are not phenomena to be experienced and we do not know through experience how to relate the Ideas to our world of experience. To access the Ideas we have to get what is “out there” in the world of Ideas somehow “in here” in our heads. Yet in principle it is impossible to get the out-there inside the in-here, for it is out there. The Platonic myth of the Ideas remembered from another life is thus a mockery of Socrates. In the place of drawing the truth out of his students, Plato would have it imposed on us from outside of us. Plato wanted to expose us to the truth without overcoming our resistance to it first. He thought he could talk us out of our resistance to the truth by reasoning with-in us, but all he succeeded in doing was making our resistance reason-able. However, the truth remains hidden because to grasp the truth, we first must become response-able.

And yet there is an irony within irony here. Socrates claims to be the wisest of all men because he doesn’t know anything – but at least he knows that he doesn’t know. Thus, he knows more than anybody else because he is aware of his ignorance. Yet his maieutic method assumes that in fact he knows, and that he knows that he knows. Whereas everyone else is ignorant of the fact that they know, Socrates’ very actions

show that he knows that he knows and that they know what he knows and it is left for him to give birth to their knowledge. It is as if his ignorance is the source of his knowledge – and so it is. Ignorance silences the objective assertion of truth or the pretense that somehow we can convey the truth objectively by speaking it. If this is how we approach language, as an objective statement contained in propositions and sentences, then we are indeed ignorant. All knowledge is self-knowledge: to know, know thyself. Yet this claim that we already possess the very truth that we seek, that somehow the kingdom of God is already with-in us, is puzzling.

The key to this hidden knowledge is locked on the other side of the very door that we must unlock to find it. The knowledge of truth on such a view, nay, the very truth itself, is found by looking inward and not outward. As Søren Kierkegaard noticed in passing: “When subjectivity, inwardness, is the truth, the truth becomes objectively a paradox; and the fact that the truth is objectively a paradox shows in turn that subjectivity is truth.... The Socratic ignorance gives expression to the objective uncertainty attaching to the truth, while his inwardness in existing is the truth.”¹ The truth that matters for an existing individual is not found by looking to the Ideas, but by existing inwardly. Kierkegaard is not saying that truth is ultimately paradoxical, but merely that for us as existing individuals the truth appears objectively paradoxical: “Socratically the eternal essential truth is by no means in its own nature paradoxical, but only in its relationship to an existing individual.”² Yet I have already misspoken, for there is no truth “for us,” for if truth is indeed inward, then there is only truth *for individuals individually*.

ETHICAL HIDDEN-NESS

The objective/subjective distinction opens a dichotomy of “in-here” and “out-there.” Yet this opposition is a mistaken view. The opposite of inwardness is not outwardness, but hidden-ness. The counterpoint to subjectivity is not objectivity, but pre-tense. We are searching for an expression of the truth by speaking, and yet our search is in vain, for we have hidden from ourselves what we seek. We opened the door and then locked it, and then we threw the key in and slammed the door shut. And now we search for the key pretending not to know where it is hidden. The

fruit of our search cannot be found by looking for it; it cannot be spoken by speaking it; but only by surrendering to it. The fruit of our search must grow out of us, for if it is not in us as existing individuals, it cannot be given expression. Your refusal to know is a refusal to pierce your own soul. The truth is a gaping wound that has cut you to the heart.

Kierkegaard held that truth is subjectivity.³ Søren Kierkegaard gives a tight definition of truth: "An objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth!"⁴ This assertion is literally non-sense. How can the "passion" – the subjectivity – with which a belief is affirmed vouch for the truth of that belief? The truth has to do with the way the world is, not the way I am. How can the beliefs in my head be true unless there is something "out there" to which my beliefs correspond, something other than the belief itself that makes it true rather than false? How could I presume by the mere fact that I have a belief that it is true? For I know that I can hold a false belief. Thus, it is not of the truth value of the words on this page that I speak.

And yet there is something that seems right about what Kierkegaard said. Within the range of a certain kind of belief, my way of being in the world, my "form of life" is precisely the truth that is at issue. Such truth claims exist in the sphere of the ethical and religious. For Kierkegaard, the truth of my belief is guaranteed precisely by its very passion, by the fact that I give myself to it heart, might, mind and strength. The truth is that the way of being in the world as a Christian is to commit everything to it or really to not commit at all, and *in* this commitment to have found the way, the truth and the life. I must risk everything – I must stick my head into the mouth of the Lion to know what is in there, and trusting that as I look he will not bite my head off. The greater danger is that whether or not the Lion bites my head off depends not on the Lion but on *how* I stick my head in: all the way or not at all. "Without risk there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty."⁵

There is a sense in which I hide the truth in the very act of trying to make it objective. That is, even if we wanted to speak of objective truth, the very use of reasoning and language defeats us and hides the truth that is actually spoken. If truth is indeed subjectivity, how could there be any communication of information in dialogue, in writing, in any human

Element

action at all? By the mere act of writing, of speaking, I assume that you have certain capacities. I assume that you already have the capacity for truth. And yet *you* do not have the capacity for truth. One of the reasons I cannot speak the truth to you and that *you* cannot appropriate the truth is that *you* see the world through your categories of thought. By speaking to you I am also speaking from within my categories of thought. These words with which I communicate all assume that they refer to categories of meaning that we share in common in giving meaning to words. Even if the meaning is merely a “family resemblance,” these words must belong to the same family to have meaning. These words represent a categorical range of meaning shared to some extent that we both grasp in our minds.

Yet the legacy of Western philosophy is to trap us inside of our minds with no escape. In his *Meditations*, Descartes writes: “Every idea is a work of the mind.”⁶ Such a statement is not so surprising. After all, we are the creators of our thoughts. Yet as Kant pointed out, such a view leaves us in a quandary: How can ideas that have their origin in the mind nevertheless give us knowledge of anything independently real? Descartes thought he could resolve the problem through proof of God’s existence who surely would not allow us to be so deceived that our senses mislead us, at least not with respect to sense impressions that are clear and vivid. And yet Kant points out that God’s existence cannot be established through Descartes’ proofs, and even if the proofs were valid, such proofs could not guarantee sense experience. Thus, Descartes is stuck trapped all alone in his world of ideas. There is no connection with an other who is not an other one of his ideas.

Edmond Husserl takes Descartes’ notion that ideas are the creations of our minds to its logical conclusion in his *Cartesian Meditations*: “Consciousness makes present a ‘there-too, which nevertheless is not itself there and can never become an ‘itself-there.’” Husserl concludes that the other is “there” for me in some sense to be present to me; but only in the sense that it has “for me.” In other words, all I can really know of you is what I can grasp of you, and what I can grasp of you is only my own idea of you. Thus, the “other” referred to by Husserl is not a person who exists independently of me or an “extra-mental” other; rather, the other only *is* my interpretation that I constitute for it. The

“other” is therefore really the same – the same as my idea. If I add that my ideas are my invention, my creation alone, then I am stuck in a solipsism all alone. My ideas cannot get outside of my head to refer to any independently existing other persons or things. I am stuck all alone in my head with my ideas.

Kant does not rescue us from ourselves. Kant provides an elaborate map of the mental apparatus – the categories – by which we bring our sense experience to consciousness and interpret it. He adds that certain ideas must be present already in experience to make experience possible. Such ideas are therefore *a priori* or before experience, but they remain merely creations of our minds. These ideas do not give us contact with the phenomenal world to know things in themselves as noumena. All I really know according to Kant are the categories of understanding that originate in my own mind. I remain stuck in my head completely alienated from the world.

Now I am convinced that this way of describing human experience is a genuine problem for a certain way of being in the world. This way of being is the ethical orientation by which one “posits good and evil” categories for the world: “it is not so much a matter of choosing between willing good and willing evil, as of choosing to will, but that in turn posits good and evil.”⁸ In creating my categories by which I judge the world, I create my world. Kierkegaard refers to ethical judgments in a sense that is broader than “moral” judgment; rather, he speaks of judgments in the Kantian sense as judgments of the intellect that we lay upon the world. In a sense, we create our very idea of our self through such judgments, for the ethical individual chooses “the absolute that chooses me ... that posits me.”⁹ Yet the absolute that posits me in this ethical sphere of existence is not God, but me! The absolute is “myself in my absolute validity” or in other words freedom.¹⁰ And yet at this level I choose in despair, for the choice is a burden upon me because I create the very world of good and evil myself: “I choose despair, and in despair I choose the absolute, for I myself am the absolute.”¹¹ I am in despair because I have created my self, and in making myself I have made myself the absolute arbiter of all judgments of any kind whatsoever. I create the world of good and evil myself. If even God were to command me to do something contrary to my judgment, I would either conclude that “this is not God,”

Element

or I would assert myself as the absolute and defy God. From the ethical perspective, Abraham is an attempted murderer and his faith is both an offense and non-sense. I can make no sense of a God who could violate my judgments of good and evil from this perspective.

By engaging in the act of judging our experience through the categories of thought, we are ultimately alienated and apart. Our every judgment is a judgment of ourselves only. When I judge you, it is really only my idea of you that I know, and that is what I judge. And yet this way of being is the way of judgment, for in judging I necessarily take a thing only partially and not in its wholeness. In the act of judging, I necessarily abstract this thing, analyze it and take it to fit into a category. It is as if I see the world through a filter of my own creation. Yet like the lens through which I take the picture, I cannot see my own lens – the lens that colors the photograph never appears in my picture.

It turns out that the “truth” as *you* and as *I* see it is thus precisely a subjective idea merely. *You* have created this elaborate schema of the world in your head, but of course you are hardly aware of your creation because it is before you - prior to your experiences. It is only in you and for you. It arises out of your way of being in the world and is a certain form of life. Yet if the truth, if the very meaning of the words I choose to use merely express the Ideal world created by my mind, then in attempting to speak I am merely feigning to convey to you, for in reality I cannot succeed in speaking at all. The truth is merely a subjective creation of my own that may or may not have contact with some outside reality, if any.

But this is not what Kierkegaard means when he says that truth is subjectivity, for this type of truth can be accepted while sitting in an armchair unconscious. There is no passion in it. It doesn't require all of you to appropriate it. In fact, what makes your categories possible is necessarily only a part of you, something less than you in your wholeness. The truth seen through your mind is abstracted, categorized, and separated from the whole. It is truth alienated from itself – which is to say, not truth at all.

It is not the truth that is located in the categories of thought in your head, arrived at through the act of judging, that is the truth that is in you. Saying that truth is subjectivity is somewhat misleading – in an indirect sort of way. The truth that I am speaking of is like light in the sense that

it is not what is seen, it is what illuminates reality so that it can be seen. And yet the light by which reality is seen is also the reality that is in fact seen. I am looking at a couch. I see it. And yet the couch has not entered into my eyes and into my head that I might know it. It is "out there." What I see and know is the light reflected off of the couch. I touch it, but it isn't the couch that enters my fingers, it is the resistance of the couch against my finger that I feel. What I feel is not the couch at all but the resistance of the couch. I experienced the resistance of the couch against the cells in my fingers. And yet the resistance is not in me, it is not what I experience when I experience the couch.

The categories of thought control what we experience, for they act as a filter through which our experience must pass. The categories pre-reflectively sift out of our experience what is irrelevant to experience even before we can reflectively assess our experience. Thus, we cannot assess the evidence based upon a phenomenological analysis to determine the structure or content of human experience because our pre-reflective categories have already sifted out everything that doesn't fit our pre-conceptions. The structure and meaning of our experience is already given to us. But the categories of understanding go beyond violence to pre-reflective experience, for they also dictate the outcome of reflective experience. For example, an argument concerning any point of logic must proceed according to the "rules of logic." But who wrote these rules of logic? For example, which is the appropriate geometry, Euclidian, Lobachevskian, Reimann's? Which logical system, Frege's, Russell's, Leibniz's? Once it is seen that there are various competing systems of logic, the discussion itself must collapse. Once we see that the rules themselves are subject to doubt, that they are not, as the realist assumes, inexorably written in reality, then we must assess arguments at the meta-logical level. We are left with comparing logical systems. Yet what rules will guide such a metalogical discussion, for the rules by which the argument may proceed are themselves in question? Every argument thus turns out to be either question begging or circular because it assumes a logic which is the very point to be proven.

Thus, the categories of understanding are hidden from my view. I cannot experience them, for they are before experience, they are the matrix that shapes experience itself. I do not experience them, rather, I experi-

ence *through* them. Nor can I reason about them, for they are the very schema of logic that dictates the outcome of the logical discussion. Thus, I do not argue for or about them, rather, I argue based upon them.

That is why I cannot speak the truth. It is obscured by the very act of experiencing me as speaking to you, by the very act of assessing what I say to you. The truth is something that must be delivered in the pains of birth from out of you rather than something I tell you. If I were to speak the truth to you straight out, you would sift it out of your experience, or you would decide that it doesn't fit within your rules of logic. Thus, the truth spoken straight out of necessity is paradoxical and offensive. It is paradoxical because the truth confronts the pre-reflective pre-conceptions that you have about the truth before it can speak the truth to you. This con-front-ation will appear not to be true because it won't fit what you take to be your experience and it will be contrary to what you take to be sound rules of logic. It will be offensive because the natural tendency is to preserve the categories of understanding as much as possible before abandoning them. To abandon the categories that give shape to your experience is uncomfortable because without them experience seems to be chaotic and even scary. To abandon the categories is offensive because the message is: the way you see the world is wrong – and it feels rotten to be wrong. Thus, the natural reaction to the suggestion that your categories of thought hide the truth is to resist the move, to avoid the cognitive dissonance – for the very suggestion must be seen as non-sense. It is easier to simply be offended and to shut off the whole discussion as beyond the realm of logical possibility – it is easier to just decide that the truth so spoken is not a live option.

When I say that truth is subjectivity I am not saying that you get to decide what the truth is. I am not saying that you are the measure of all things. If there is to be any truth spoken, if there is to be any truth heard, it must come about in an appropriation process whereby in our dialogical relationship this truth is created between us – drawn out of you by me and out of me by you. Yet to draw it out of you, you must let go of what you know. Unless I can persuade you to die to everything *you think you know*, you cannot give birth to this truth. For I am not your categories of thought, and no encounter can take place if we merely remain within the ethical sphere that is a creation of these categories.

AESTHETIC HIDDEN-NESS

The aesthete is a person who experiences the world sensually. The sensual existence takes many forms. At its most developed, it is the reliance on evidence of the senses as the basis and justification of all beliefs and commitments. From Kierkegaard's perspective, such a mode of existence is a way of passing off response-ability for the beliefs that, at some level of our being, we choose into. Thus, I refuse to make a decision, to commit myself to any way of being in the world until the evidence is all in. I place the basis of a decision outside of myself on the evidence. I dispassionately assess the evidence, waiting for it to make my decision for me. There is no urgency. In fact, there is never a decision because all of the evidence will never be in – such a way of being is an endless approximation, an eternal waiting for the physical universe to cause me to decide.

The avoidance of taking accountability is thus a form of subjecting ourselves to a causal determinism that makes all of our decisions for us. It is what Jean-Paul Sartre called "bad faith." It is a form of pre-tense – a decision to not exist in any tense of time. Sartre famously tells the story of a woman, Lucienne, who is unhappily married to Henri. She is encouraged by her lover to leave her husband. Her friend, Henriette, sees that freedom from the prison of her existing marriage is the only way Lucienne will ever have a chance at happiness and urges to leave her husband for her lover. Yet Lucienne sabotages her escape from the marriage by insisting on meeting her lover in a part of Paris where she knows that Henri is likely to see her and stop her. When she runs into Henri, he seizes her by the arm and pulls her in one direction while her lover pulls on the other arm in the other direction, with Lucienne in the middle as "limp as a bag of laundry." Sartre observes that Lucienne has chosen, at some level of (un)consciousness, to not choose what to do. She hopes that one of them will pull hard enough to relieve her of the burden of having to choose for herself.¹² Lucienne knows that she is free to choose, but she attempts to hide her freedom from herself and pre-tend to not be free, but a victim of circumstances. Only a being that is afraid of its freedom and of the response-ability which arises with this freedom could seek to hide itself in this way.

Element

Yet being a victim of circumstances as a way of being in the world is more common place than Sartre's literary devices. On the way home the other night, a jerk cut me off in the road as I was driving home. I reacted in a predictable (at least for me) manner. I felt a sense of anger rising in me. I became very angry and honked my horn and yelled in the silence of my car: "You jerk!" for that is how I experienced the person who so rudely cut me off in traffic. Yet in that moment I engaged in a form of hiding my response-ability. I could have chosen to ignore it. I could have chosen to see this "jerk" with compassion. Perhaps he was a father, a brother, a loved one. Yet I chose to give this "jerk" a power he would not have had without my complicity, without my giving it to him – the power to make me angry and upset. I chose to be "caused" by him to be angry. By being unconscious and not choosing to act with kindness I chose to not choose my choice, for I could have chosen to act in love and would have made *that* choice had I been conscious. Instead, I chose to merely re-act and become an effect. I chose to enter the world of cause and effect. He was the cause, I was the effect. I chose to see "the jerk" as a thing that caused me to think, feel, and act. Thus, I chose to be just another "thing" in the world, to be an effect. I first made him in my image, the image of thing in the world, and then I made myself in his image, another thing in the world; for like causes like. I chose to be his victim – and the irony is that the jerk is the last person in the world I would want to give this power to, this awesome power to choose how I think, feel, and act.

The moment I categorized the "jerk" as such, I engaged in a pre-tense. In other words, I chose not to be where and when I was. I feigned that I was not free to choose how to act and instead became a re-action. I gave away my freedom, my power over the basic act of human existence – the act of choosing my attitude toward the circumstances in which I find myself. But I chose not to find myself, but to engage in a pre-tense. Our language is wise beyond reason – for pre-tense is exactly living in the past – still reacting to incidents in my past rather than living in the present.

The aesthetic is inevitably a victim of the world, at the mercy of things. The world of senses is a world of causal determination. Consider that every sensation I have is caused by some thing in the world. I have sensations when things act upon my senses. Moreover, I am passible in

the process of sensation. I seem to simply be at the mercy of what is delivered to my senses by the physical world. By the time I experience anything, it is already fixed in my past, it is beyond my control and my ability to change, already given in my experience of it, already seemingly beyond choice and accountability for it. When I experience things I see them as another link in the chain of causally determined events of which my sensation is just another link. Strangely, there is also a sense in which these things I experience, including human things, are also caused *by me*; for I prejudge them and place them in categories of my own making. Thus their place in the world for me is where I have caused them to be in my categorization of things. Moreover, what I experience through my senses are meaningless things – they have no meaning in and of themselves. It is a dead world of lifeless things. As Martin Buber observed:

In the It-world causality holds unlimited sway. Every event is either perceivable by the senses and 'physical' or discovered or found in introspection and 'psychological' is considered to be of necessity caused and a cause. Those events that may be regarded as purposive form no exception insofar as they belong to the continuum of the It-world.¹³

In this way we inevitably see ourselves as victims of all that has gone before, as the mere causal effect of the way the world was before we got here and now. To live in this world is to regard myself as just another one of the objects, another thing in the world of things. Because this way of being in the world is a choice to not make a choice, every choice is foisted on me as "not my choice." The despair of this type of life is the despair that no matter what I choose, I refuse to own it, refuse to passionately appropriate it for myself. This way of being in the world is the ultimate lose-lose situation. Kierkegaard captured the aesthetic either/or in this message to himself:

Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will also regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way. Whether you marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way. Laugh at the stupidities of the world, and you will regret it; weep

over them, and you will also regret it. Laugh at the stupidities of the world or weep over them, you will regret it either way. Whether you laugh at the stupidities of the world or you weep over them, you will regret it either way. Trust a girl, and you will regret it. Do not trust her, and you will regret it. Trust a girl or do not trust her, you will regret it either way. Whether you trust a girl or do not trust her, you will regret it either way. Hang yourself, and you will regret it. Do not hang yourself, and you will also regret it. Hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way. Whether you hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way.¹⁴

The reason that whatever we choose in such a sphere of existence is regret-able is precisely that we have chosen to not choose it passionately. The choice means nothing to us because it is not our choice. Indeed, because we have foisted the responsibility for choice onto things outside of ourselves, I experience every choice as some thing I want to avoid. Thus, the subjectivity or truth of this mode of existence is precisely the freedom that is hidden to avoid accountability. And yet it is only because the knowledge of freedom is highlighted all the more brightly by the absurdity of this mode of existence that its truth is made manifest. All of the absurd actions and self-defeating behaviors we engage in to avoid responsibility for our freedom expose the truth about our freedom. The only person fooled by our self-deception is our self. In this sense, once again, subjectivity is truth.

SUBJECTIVITY AND EXISTENCE COMMUNICATIONS

Kierkegaard also uses the term “existence communications” to refer to truth as subjectivity. An existence communication stands in opposition to speculative theology and doctrine – or even to theology as it is done in the Western world at all:

Christianity is not a doctrine but an existential communication expressing an existential contradiction. If Christianity were a doctrine it would *eo ipso* not be an opposite to speculative thought, but

Blake T. Ostler

rather a phase within it. Christianity has to do with existence, with the act existing; but existence and existing constitute precisely the opposite of speculation.¹⁵

The truth of Christianity is thus a different sphere of existence than other kinds of truth. It is a kind of communication. But what kind of *communication* could possibly be subjective, for communication just is to engage the “other”? This fact, that communication is with an Other is precisely the existential contradiction. We cannot communicate to others the truth that is in us, that is known only by living a life, *my* life, filled with pathos and passion. Yet by immersing more deeply in existence and in so engaging life with inward concern, my very life becomes the message that is communicated. What is at issue is not the truth value of propositions, the establishing of facts, or the conveying of truths, but the very meaningfulness of human existence lived one life at a time. It is this truth that is involved in all real communications. All other “communications” are merely vibration of voice in the air and marks on paper. Yet this life, lived in passionate inwardness, becomes the only way to bridge the solipsism of objective communication by living as a dialogue that embraces the Other and crosses the threshold of the mind to enter the heart of the Other.

Existence communications have several features. The most prominent feature is that the truth of the communication is not established by the *what*, or objective content of the message, but by *how* the dialogue is entered – how we are challenged, con-fronted and called forth into interpersonal dialogue at the deepest recesses of our being. Take this proposition: Life is meaningful. As stated, this proposition could not have meaning, for it is life in the abstract, no particular life involved at all. Indeed, this assertion is lifeless. Propositions, assertions and sentences are abstractions. The very assertion is therefore the opposite of life, for life is life lived as a particular individual. There is no such thing as a communication in which my life is not involved, no dispassionate communication of anything. It follows that the very notion of a truth without passion, without my concerned involvement, is meaningless. Life lived in the abstract is also meaningless. Thus, for any statement to have meaning, it must be meaningful because it expresses my existential communication;

Element

it expresses the meaning of my life. Thus the truth is not *what* is, but *how* life is lived.

The reason that this truth – *life is meaningful* – has any meaning at all is that it is *my* life. I cannot divorce myself from it; I cannot approach it without caring for what being an existing individual means. It follows that life lived subjectively cannot but be meaningful. This communication of truth – *life is meaningful* – cannot be demonstrated by looking somewhere in the world of empirical truths for it. Looked at empirically, the world does not yield any meaning. It is only because I exist in the world as an individual that the statement has any meaning – and yet as a statement it is the antithesis of what is asserted. Neither can this assertion be known to be true by thinking about it, for in such thinking I abstract it and kill it. If I stop to think about my life, I put my life on hold. It is as if I am on the down side of the roller coaster and I stop and ask myself: “Gee, am I having fun?” If I ask, I’m not! Only by abandoning myself to the thrill of the ride in the flow of life lived passionately in this very moment can the statement: “I am having fun” be true. By thinking of my life reflexively I make my life an object that is “Other” than me to be scrutinized and analyzed. Yet in dissecting my life I kill it like a frog on the dissection table being examined. I take my life and break it down to be swallowed one piece at a time. Thinking is parasitic on life and the parasite kills its host.

This truth is subjective because the tenor of my life lived inwardly brings it about. If I believe that life is meaningless, I prove myself right because the very belief establishes my life as meaningless. If I refuse to find any meaning, then what other meaning for my life could exist to be found? Yet if I believe *passionately* that my life has no meaning, then I have proven to myself that life has meaning after all, for now I have a cause, I have a passion that gives life to my meaning. If I rebel against life and the meaningless world with all of my heart, might, mind, and strength, then I have given this meaning to my life: to stand before life’s meaninglessness and dare it to steal the meaning of my life from me. The simple truth is that single individuals create the meaning of this statement – *life is meaningful* – in the living of it. Without life lived one life at a time, there is no meaning – no meaning apart from life lived abstractly, which is to say, no real life at all.

The truth of this assertion – *life is meaningful* – therefore becomes true when I assert it with my whole being, with inward passion. It becomes false when I merely assert it. I hide the truth of the meaning of this statement – *life is meaningful* – when I speak of it as a mere object of discourse. Thus, the meaning of this statement depends on how I assert it. It is subjective because its truth value depends on whether I assert it with my entire soul or not at all. The truth value of this statement is something I cannot assert for you, on your behalf. I cannot convey the truth of this assertion to you, for you can know it only by choosing it passionately. Thus, the truth value of this assertion is subjective because it is found inside you. The truth value of this statement is a fact about the world only insofar as I am an existing individual in the world. If I assert this statement with my whole being, with everything that I am, then I have established that life has meaning because I am an existing individual that is in the world and this truth is in me.

Thus, existence communication is the very life I live, my being in the world. It is the “given” in all experience and all reasoning *that precedes and exceeds both experience and reason*. Thus, truth is subjectivity because it arises out of my being in the world. It is a “first principle” of meaning for everything in my life. By the very “firstness” of existence, it cannot be preceded by something more basic or justified by some other explanation. In this sense, existence communications are “regulatory assertions” which play a different role in thinking than evidence or speculative arguments. Thus, subjectivity is a truth claim that resists logical and experiential grounding. Existence communications are truth claims, but not the same type of truth claims as empirical and logical assertions. Rather, existence communications are the form of life that makes explanation or description possible wherever they apply. Everything that we experience and say is already conceived in a way that presumes the truth of our existence communications – the very passion for the meaning of life itself as life is lived one life at a time.

Truth as subjectivity is thus not merely in me, but transcends me and calls me to con-front the given in my experience, the basis of my reasoning, that exceeds me as a mere subject. Thus, subjectivity is not *merely* me as subject, for I am the subject merely in the ethical and aesthetic spheres of existence. Rather, my subjectivity transcends me. Once having found

Element

myself, I am called by the given in my experience to go beyond my self, to trans-send that by which I am con-fronted, met in a face to face revelation with that which is truly Other than me. Thus, having found myself I am called by this absolute Other to lose myself. I am called forth by the avocation of my life, the excess meaning of my life that I have not created myself and which surpasses my freedom. If I am called merely by my freedom, then I posit the truth by my own act. When I am called forth by that which transcends my freedom, by that which I cannot account for by merely referring it to the ideas created by my own ego, then I confront a holy Thou which calls me in such a way that only the fullest passion of my life responding wholly in loving service is an adequate recognition. I am confronted by an Other who refuses to be reduced to a mere thing that calls me to encounter its holiness. As Emmanuel Levinas observed, the face of the Other shatters my ego-bound existence, the existence of a world I have created to satisfy my enjoyment. The fact that the Face of Other exceeds any idea or concept that I can have, beyond my categories of understanding, not already included in my past given experience, violates my ego-bound existence. Thus, in con-fronting (Latin *con frontare* – to be faced with) the Other, I (as ego) discover that “something has overflowed my freely taken decisions, has slipped into me [*s’est glisse*] *unbeknownst to me*, thus alienating my identity.”¹⁶ The Other is hidden in my experience and reasoning because it precedes them both as the ground that makes them possible.

Buber is broader in his discussion than Levinas because it is not limited to the ethical demand made by persons when we confront them; rather, the I-Thou relation extends to persons, nature, and God; all that is in its totality. According to Buber, there is no such thing as an isolated “I” in the world: “There is no I as such but only the I of the basic I-Thou and the I of the basic I-It.”¹⁷ This basic word pair is spoken with my being and the way I speak these basic words defines my way of being in the world. When I speak the basic word pair I-It, then I *experience* the world through my categories and uses of it. I experience everything in the world as a thing, as an object of knowledge, even if that object or thing be a person: “as he beholds what confronts him, its being is disclosed to the knower. What he beheld as present he will have to comprehend as an object, compare with objects, assign a place in an order of objects, and

describe and analyze objectively; only as an It can it be absorbed into the store of knowledge.”¹⁸

Yet there remains a question: if I experience the face of the Other through my categories of thought, then how is it that I transcend myself to truly encounter the Other as Other rather than the same, that is, the same as my idea? Buber is careful in his language to distinguish between an encounter and an experience. I may *experience* the world, but I do not *encounter* the world through my categories of things. A Thou is encountered directly, in its wholeness, without being mediated through my categories: “The relation to the Thou is unmediated. Nothing conceptual intervenes between I and Thou, no prior knowledge and no imagination. . . . Every means is an obstacle. Only where all means have disintegrated encounters occur.”¹⁹ How then can I encounter the world without the means of my categories of thought that are necessary to make sense of it? The answer is: I do not do anything that could result in encounter. There are no formulas, for any attempt to manipulate the world to find the truth of it or any expectation of what I will encounter precludes true encounter. To manipulate the world is to deal with things. To have expectations is to overlay the world with how it looks for me – in so doing I preclude the revelation of the other as Thou. Then how does encounter occur? The Thou gives in grace as present before I formulate It: “The Thou encounters me by grace – it cannot be found by seeking. But that I speak the basic word to it is a deed of my whole being, is my essential deed.”²⁰ Thus, I encounter a Thou that has intrinsic meaning to reveal to me and not a meaning that I posit for it. The Thou gives this revelation as a gift already present to me – if I look for it or expect it I lose, for I have no right to expect such a gift. The Thou is before me, precedes me, it is already in my life: “All actual life is encounter.”²¹ I encounter the Thou by speaking with my entire being, by standing before existence wholly, or holy, and give myself to be disclosed in return. In so doing, I have no preconception, no expectation or demand about how I am received by the Other; I simply dare to stand naked before the world in transparent transcendence. The truth is encountered by gracious giving and receiving of my life. In the words of Kierkegaard, I become subjective by immersing myself more deeply in existence.

For Buber, there is thus a “given” in my very being that is beyond me

Element

and transcends my experience and ideas. There is a “gift” already present that reveals to me and that gives in self-disclosure and revelation to me, and the world opens to me as a realm of sacred life. In the revelation, what is disclosed is *how* I am being in the world with the Other. I am revealed in the revelation of the Thou to me. The encounter occurs only when I let go, give up my resistance, and surrender to receive the gift. Buber describes this surrender:

The Thou encounters me. But I enter into a direct relationship to it. Thus the relationship is election and electing, passive and active at once: An action of the whole being must approach passivity, for it does away with all partial actions and thus with any sense of action, which always depends on limited exertion.²²

The Thou remains truly Other, but it transcends by confronting me, encountering me, creating me anew. The moment of encounter is a moment of creation – of the creation of the I in the I-Thou relation, the creation of the Thou in the I-Thou relation, and the creation of the world of dialogue and intercourse that encompasses us in the creation of the relation itself. I cannot create this relation with Thee, and Thou canst not create it without me, together we create as co-creators: “Creation - happens to us, burns into us, changes us, we tremble and swoon, we submit. Creation - we participate in it, we encounter the creator, offer ourselves to him, helpers and companions.”²³

In existing, I find there already a “being-with,” a given that exceeds and transcends me. Moreover, this knowledge of being-with is not merely my always already being in a world that precedes my experience of it, but being-with a knowledge that is part of my very consciousness. I am not merely in a world given before my experience, but confronted by a mysterious Other who dynamically challenges me to move beyond. I am already with an Other who is breathed into me with every breath, and receives me with every breath breathed. In confronting, encountering, being violated by the Thou, I am called forth to a fullness of reciprocity that is giving myself wholly without reserve and receiving the Other without restraint. It cannot be forced, it cannot be learned, it cannot be found by searching; for it is as natural and easy as breathing – thoughtless and

life giving.²⁴ Both Levinas and Buber speak of the “face” of the Other which confronts us and calls us out of ourselves as an encounter.²⁵ Both apparently have in mind the Hebrew word for “face,” *'appayim*, having the sense of “to fall with the face against the ground.”²⁶ The meaning is not merely “face” but an active encounter, a confrontation, a smack in the face. It is a sense of being slapped in the face by an Other to wake up to the Other’s presence. When Moses speaks with God face to face, it is a revelation of God as an Other, as a holy Thou who lays demands upon Israel by his gracious presence (Deut. 34:10; Ex. 33:11). The Other, the holy Thou, calls me forth to enter into relationship – and in so doing spells out the nature and demands inherent in relationship.

Subjectivity is thus like a light that illuminates my experience and intellect so that I can see. It is like the back light that illuminates my understanding. The light shines in me and illuminates me; as also the light of the sun, the moon, and the stars. It is the light which shines which gives me light. The light shines through the Other to enlighten my eyes, both the light by which I see and the light that shines in my eyes; which light also quickens my understanding. This hidden light is in all things, gives life to all things, and is the law by which all things are governed. Without the light that illuminates my way before me, I could not abound. Yet it is a light that I hide from myself, and in hiding expose the fact that I am naked before the world. To live life as a Christian is to no longer hide my light, but to share it in a loving and gracious act of giving and receiving. Yet in the giving of myself, I discover that the Other has always given to me first, for I am drawn out of myself only because the Other draws me. I love because the Other loved me first. I am able to see the Other as a holy Thou, as not the same as me, only because I cease to judge and make the Other an object to be categorized for me. To engage in existential communication is thus to transcend myself as my light escapes me and I open to the light of the Holy Thou who discloses and exposes in a sacred revelation of a self.

The only way to believe subjectively is to passionately live life adhering to this meaning. For example, (a true story) – two women went to their car and discovered that the lights of the car had been left on all night. When they attempted to start the car it would not start. Because the lights had been on all night, their situation appeared hopeless. The

Element

driver said a fervent prayer and then she said: “buckle up your seat belt, for I know that the car will start even though the lights have been on all night.” She turned the key and the car immediately started. Only later did the driver learn that the car would not start unless the seat belts were buckled. Though objectively in the wrong, they were subjectively in truth. The truth that the prayer was answered is not in the *what*, but the *how*.

Subjective truths then are not propositions, sentences or analyze-able pieces of knowledge; rather, they are ways of arranging knowledge and giving it life as a way of being in the world. Such truths are not grounded in facts about the world, but the discovery of our way of being in the world. Subjective truths are not the categories of thought; they are the modes of existence that precede all thought and all categories – and in the spiritual stage of being escape all categories of judgment. However, I cannot talk about this spiritual way of being in the world by speaking or writing – it is beyond *mere* human language. Such truth can be expressed only in a life that existentially embodies the communication spoken. Subjectivity is a way of being that opens itself to be drawn out of itself by the Other, and in being so drawn to open the eyes of the heart. Thus, existence communications are silent, but they are what give voice to our dialogue. They are like the air that acts as the medium for the sound waves – they make dialogue possible. They give meaning not only to life, but to any act so speaking that is meaning-full at all.

Existence communications are expressed through the life lived by the Christian passionately in an appropriation process. In this life, the flow of the spirit eases all burdens. In the wind that acts as the medium of the sound waves of dialogue is the rustle of the spirit; and the stillness of silence becomes the mighty rushing wind and a voice that is as the roar of the great water. The silence becomes deafening as ears give way to listening and eyes surrender to seeing. In the stillness, that which I already know can be heard. The locked door to my heart opens only to the silence of surrender. In the silence, God speaks and in speaking he says....

Blake T. Ostler is an independent scholar and practicing attorney in Salt Lake City

NOTES

- ¹ Johannes Climacus (Søren Kierkegaard), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 183.
- ² *Ibid.*, 184.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 339.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 182.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, ed. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. T. R. Ross., vol. 2, *Meditations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 162.
- ⁷ Edmond Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: an Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1960), 139.
- ⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), I:14.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, II:213.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, II:214.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, II:213.
- ¹² Jean Paul Sartre, *Le Mur*, "Intimate."
- ¹³ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribener's, 1970), 100.
- ¹⁴ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, I:38-39.
- ¹⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 339.
- ¹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, "Sans identité" in *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1972), 102 [English *Ethics and Infinity*].
- ¹⁷ Buber, *I and Thou*, 54.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 62-63.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 130.
- ²⁴ Breathing just is to receive the other into me, for the oxygen is not of my making. Breathing just is giving, for the carbon dioxide gives life the very plants to give my life back.
- ²⁵ Buber, *I and Thou*, 131.
- ²⁶ Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared to Greek* (New York: Norton & Co., Inc., 1960), 106.