

The Stillness of History: Kierkegaard and German Mysticism

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The German mystics were particularly important for Kierkegaard because of the proximity of Germany to Denmark and because of their influence on both German idealism and the Pietist tradition in which Kierkegaard was raised. This article is the first attempt to look at the issue of how the views of the German mystics may have influenced Kierkegaard's thought. It begins with an introduction to what one could call mystical epistemology, but then looks more specifically at the epistemology of two medieval German mystics, Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler, and at Kierkegaard's exposure to the German mystical tradition. Finally, it presents an account of Kierkegaard's own religious epistemology that makes clear that it is largely indistinguishable from the epistemology of Ekhardt and Tauler.

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Introduction

"Danish civilization," writes Thorleifr Gudmunson Repp in 1845, in the preface to the first lexicographically defensible Danish-English Dictionary,

is in fact in every particular essentially German, and Denmark has for ages become so much accustomed to German dictature and supremacy in intellectual matters, that an emancipation from it would be suicidal to Danish culture and entirely check the progress of enlightenment in Denmark. ... Danish civilization and literature accordingly are subject to, and *must* for all time to come be *perpetually* subject to German influence. ... If owing to physical as well as moral causes, Denmark is a kind of Galilee to Germany (Germany being considered as Palestine), that circumstance must never be lost sight of by any one who treats of its language, its literature, or its history.¹

The influence of Germany on Danish culture rarely was lost sight of in Kierkegaard's day. Danes were deeply ambivalent about their relation to Germany. On the one hand, they looked up to Germany as more cultured and cultivated than provincial Denmark, but on the other Danes were fiercely determined to assert their own national character over and against that of the Germans. Kierkegaard, made merciless fun of his compatriots, whom he felt would sometimes "speak in German" because of their inability to "speak philosophically."² He often appears to ridicule Germans, but closer inspection of these passages generally reveals that his true target is Danes. He pokes fun in, for example, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, of the German "assistant professor," but in commenting on a review of the *Postscript*, he observes:

for a long time now here in Denmark certain ones have made themselves important by what they have learned from the Germans and rendered practically word for word (as if it were their own), what they have compiled {from}various diverse German thinkers, professors, assistant professors, tutors, etc. (*Pap. X⁶ B 128.*)³

Kierkegaard's attitude toward Germans and Germany cannot have been subtle to his contemporaries. It would not have escaped their notice that his real contempt is reserved for Danes who slavishly emulated Germans in respects he considered superficial as is evident, for example, in his reflections from 1854 on the German word *Windbeutel*, or "windbag," as we say in English.

It is an extraordinary word; I envy the Germans for having it ...

The Germans have the word because there is such continual use for it in Germany.

We Danes do not have the word, but that which the word designates is not characteristic of us Danes either. Being a windbag really does not belong to the Danish national character.

However, we Danes do have another fault, and the Danish language also has a word for it, a word which the German language perhaps does not have: windsucker [*Windsluger*].

This is just about the way it is—a German makes wind—and a Dane swallows it—Danes and Germans have been related to each other in this way for a long time. (*Pap. XI*¹ A 183.)

But if Germans, on Kierkegaard's view, tended to be windbags, the fact that they were generally superior scholars was not lost on him. He occasionally refers approvingly to German scholarship.⁴ Unfortunately, few contemporary scholars appear to appreciate the respect with which Kierkegaard viewed at least some German thought, hence most miss the positive influence this thought had on him. This is undoubtedly part of the reason that almost no attention has been given to the subject of the influence of German mysticism on Kierkegaard's thought.

This is not the only reason, however, for the neglect. What few explicit references Kierkegaard makes to mysticism tend to be pejorative. The task of understanding Kierkegaard's relation to mysticism is complicated even further by the fact that an understanding of Kierkegaard's epistemology is essential to understanding this relation and few scholars, for reasons I address in my book *Ways of Knowing*,⁵ have dared to venture out onto the apparently murky waters of that area of Kierkegaard's thought.

The German mystics were particularly important for Kierkegaard because of the proximity of Germany to Denmark and because of their influence on both German idealism and the Pietist tradition in which Kierkegaard was raised. There is, to my knowledge, only one examination of Kierkegaard's relation to German mysticism, Peter Sajda's article "Kierkegaard's Encounter with the Rhineland-Flemish Mystics: A Case Study."⁶ The subject of Sajda's article, however, is Kierkegaard's exposure to the German mystics. He devotes almost no attention to the issue of the substantive influence these figures had on Kierkegaard's thought.

The present article is thus the first attempt to look at the issue of how the views of the German mystics may have influenced Kierkegaard's own thought. It will begin with an introduction to what one could call mystical epistemology. Next, it will look more specifically at the epistemology of two medieval German

mystics, Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler, and at Kierkegaard's exposure to the German mystical tradition. Finally, it will present an account of Kierkegaard's own religious epistemology and proceed to show how this epistemology is largely indistinguishable from the epistemology of Ekhardt and Tauler.

I. Mystical Epistemology

"It is characteristic of mystics," writes Edward Scribner Ames in his article "Mystic Knowledge,"⁷ "to claim for themselves a kind of knowledge or illumination different from ordinary sensuous or reasoned knowledge."⁸ "The uniqueness of this mystic knowledge," he continues, "is further emphasized by the fact that it is attained by no ordinary means. It does not lie at the end process of perception or of reasoning or of scientific experiment. ... Such methods involve effort and lead to provisional conclusions." But the mystic wants absolute conclusions. The mystic, continues Ames, "thus employ[s] the common processes only in order to deny them, to transcend them."⁹

Mystics, Ames explains, are not "troubled by the question of the existence or the reality of God."¹⁰ The passion of the mystic is, rather, "to *find* God, to ascend to his presence, to enter into communion with him."¹¹ That is, the craving of the mystic is "to secure a vital and satisfying relation with the supreme reality."¹² Yet to the extent that the supreme reality "is in no way conditioned,"¹³ "[n]ot only is the goal of his endeavor unintelligible but the method by which he proposes to reach it is non-intellectual. ... [M]ystic illumination cannot be scientifically or systematically induced. The subject of it receives it passively. After doing his utmost to earn it, or achieve it, the greatest need is that he shall be passive and receptive."¹⁴

In order to understand, however, how such "passivity" and "receptivity" can lead to knowledge, we need to look briefly at what it means to know something. Scholars have argued that there are two fundamentally different approaches to understanding what it means to know something. The first sees knowledge as, in effect, a reconstruction of reality in the mind of the knower, something like a mirror image of the reality that is known. This view is generally

recognized to be characteristic of modernity. There is a much older view of knowledge, however, that interprets it as involving substantial contact with reality, a coming together, so to speak, of the knower and the thing known. This is the view that finds expression, for example, in the wax metaphor of the mind from Plato's *Theatetus* where the things known impress themselves upon the mind of the knower.¹⁵

This substantive view of knowledge was characteristic of the ancient world. For Plato, the ultimate objective of the knower was union with "the good." Plato did not originate the view, however. "The idea of Divine Union as man's true end," observes the scholar of mysticism Evelyn Underhill in her classic study of the subject, "is...of great antiquity. Its first appearance in the religious consciousness of Europe seems to coincide with the Orphic Mysteries in Greece and Southern Italy in the sixth century B.C."¹⁶ What Plato did was to connect the idea of such union with knowledge.

The view that to know something was to have a kind of contact with it was appropriated by Aristotle and spread to such early fathers of the Christian church as Clement of Alexandria and Irenaeus, who were heavily influenced by the works of both Plato and Aristotle.¹⁷ "The most important aspect of Clement's philosophy," writes Salvatore R.C. Lilla in his book *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism*, "is represented by the idea of *gnosis*."¹⁸ "[T]he idea of *gnosis*," he continues however, "is in Clement's thought, closely connected with that of *pistis* [i.e., faith] (Lilla, 119). Clement was concerned not merely to discredit the gnostics, who, in Lilla's words "sharply distinguished the *pistis* of the common believers from the higher *gnosis* which, according to them, was a natural gift bestowed as a privilege to only a very few persons, the πνευματικοί" (Lilla, 118-19),¹⁹ but also to defend Christianity against the accusations of Greek philosophers that it represented an *irrational* faith, a faith that offered no higher knowledge of the truth.

Man's aim, according to Clement, "is to know God, to have knowledge of God (γνωσις του Θεου): 'We call upon man,'" writes Clement, "'who was made for the contemplation of heaven, and is in truth a heavenly plant, to come to

knowledge of God (Protr. 100.3).”²⁰ There are two respects, however, in which one can “know” God. Close examination of the writings of Irenaeus, one of the earliest of the early church fathers, reveals that he believes the idea of God is built into human consciousness. God, according to Irenaeus,

confers on all a great mental intuition and perception of His most mighty, yes, almighty greatness. Therefore, though ‘no one knows the Father except the Son, nor the Son except the Father, and those to whom the Son has revealed Him’ (cf. Matt. 11:27), yet *all beings* know this fact at least [i.e., that there is a God] because reason, implanted in their minds, moves them, and reveals to them that there is one God, the Lord of all.²¹ (italics added.)

That is, “[c]reation,” according to Irenaeus, “shows its Creator, and what is made suggests its Maker” (33). One need only be a “lover of truth,” according to Irenaeus, in order to see this.

This innate knowledge that there is a God is not, however, specifically Christian and it is specifically Christian knowledge in which the Church fathers are interested. To the extent that Christianity has always emphasized the primacy of faith relative to knowledge, it’s tempting to conclude that there was no such thing as specifically Christian knowledge in the early church. Such a conclusion would, however, be mistaken. Sin, according to the Christian tradition, separates man from God, but faith in Christ reunites them. The view that there is specifically Christian knowledge is part of the earliest Christian orthodoxy. The foundation of such knowledge, according to Clement, however, is faith-πιστις. “[T]he two cannot be separated: ‘Now neither is knowledge without faith, nor faith without knowledge’” (ἡδη δε ουτε η γνωσς ανευ πιστεως ουθ η πιστις ανευ γνωσεως) (*Strom.* 5.1.3) (Hägg, 151). Or as Wilhelm Scherer expresses it: “Ihm steht es von vornherein fest, das sich die Ergebnisse des Gnosis nicht von der Regel des Glaubens entfernen können.”²²

But how does faith result in knowledge? Ames is correct in his claim that “mystic illumination cannot be scientifically or systematically induced,” that the subject ... receives it passively, after doing his utmost to earn it, or to achieve

it.”²³ The answer is that faith is a gift of Grace to those who seek earnestly to attain it. It is the “condition,” as Kierkegaard expresses it in *Philosophical Crumbs*, that one who has surrendered his understanding receives from “the god,” and which then conditions his understanding of the truth.

II. The Epistemology of the German Mystics

Meister Eckhart was born around 1260, and Johannes Tauler was born approximately forty years later, around 1300. Despite the fact that they were born long before the Protestant reformation, both were popular with later Protestant theologians. There are a number of reasons for this. First, like all mystics, to paraphrase Ames, they emphasized the exclusive, private character of human experience, viewing it as an affair between the individual and God.²⁴ Second, though both were formally educated (Eckhart received a degree in theology from the University of Paris and Tauler studied under Eckhart at the Dominican convent in Strasbourg), they wrote in the vernacular. Eckhart was the more speculative of the two and hence influenced the German idealists, particularly Hegel. Both were also somewhat unorthodox. Eckhart was formally charged with heresy because of his occasionally unusual language. Tauler not only emphasized the importance of a personal relationship with God, he was a universalist.

Both Eckhart and Tauler appear to have held, in keeping with the views of the Church fathers, that a kind of religious knowledge was possible even outside revelation. Eckhart speaks, for example, of “the natural light of the rational soul” as conveying a knowledge of religious truth.²⁵ The reference to “an inward sight” that bears a striking resemblance to Irenaeus’ “mental intuition,” occurs also in *Theologia Deutsch*, a work Kierkegaard would have assumed to have been by Tauler. This “inward sight,” asserts the author of *Theologia Deutsch*, is “able to perceive the one true good.”²⁶ Tauler himself, also, refers to a knowledge of God that “springeth from within.”²⁷

Just as was the case, however, with the Church fathers, this innate knowledge that there is a God is less important for the German mystics that is

specifically Christian knowledge. The substantive view of epistemology, expressed in the idea that faith can bring the believer into a kind of contact with God in the person of Christ found its way into the thought of such medieval Christian thinkers as Johannes Scottus Eriugena, and eventually to the German mystics. Meister Eckhart asserts, for example, that “[i]n faith alone do we have true knowledge.”²⁸ Tauler also refers to “the light of faith as leading to a “knowledge of God.”²⁹

Despite Eckhart’s view that human beings have a kind of innate religious knowledge, he asserts that “neither the skills of all creatures, nor your own wisdom nor the whole extent of your knowledge can bring you to the point that you have a divine knowledge of God. If you wish to know God in a divine manner, then your knowing must become a pure unknowing, a forgetting of yourself.”³⁰ “Where you truly go out of your will and your knowledge,” he asserts, “God truly and willingly enters in with his knowledge and shines there with great brilliance.”³¹ That is, you must surrender your understanding to God, according to Eckhart, and then God, in turn will bestow on you the gift of faith that leads to “divine knowledge.” This faith represents a kind of union with God that leads to true knowledge. Hence Eckhart asserts that “[t]he higher we ascend with our knowledge, the more we are one in him.”³²

“[M]an by nature, observes Tauler, “desireth to know [Wissen] all created things, and the distinction that he perceives in them is given to him by his natural knowledge [Wissen]. And to know begets in him great pleasure, and the pleasure driveth him on to know more and more.”³³ “[N]atural knowledge [Bekenntnisse], according to Tauler, “is not to be denied ... for natural knowledge [Bekenntnisse], if he be willing, leadeth a man into knowledge of grace, and knowledge of grace leadeth him to divine knowledge.”³⁴ That is, it is this knowledge that is a product of Grace that is the ultimate objective of the Christian. It is the end toward which he strives even in his progress through natural knowledge.

Natural knowledge does not of itself, however, produce a knowledge of Grace. It merely leads the seeker to the limit of the unaided, or un-illuminated,

understanding. Knowledge of Grace is achieved *through* Grace, which is to say: through the gift of faith and the subsequently illuminated understanding which comes to a new knowledge of religious truth. “[T]o man in a state of grace,” asserts Tauler,

is given the power of distinguishing the Holy Scriptures, so that he comprehend them in full truth, and that in bearing and reading he should understand them in the best and most profitable way. And this knowledge [Verstentnisse] is by grace and not from nature; for by mere nature you cannot come to true knowledge [Bekentnisse] of the Holy Scriptures. For the Holy Scriptures are from the Holy Ghost, and therefore whoso wisheth to understand them properly he must be enlightened with the grace of the Holy Ghost.³⁵

This same view is found in the *Theologia Deutsch*. “[L]et no one imagine that we can attain to this true light and perfect knowledge, and to the life of Christ,” writes the author of *Theologia Deutsch*, “by much questioning, or by listening to others, or by reading and study, or by ability and deep learning.”³⁶ This view of the irrelevance of learning to genuine Christian knowledge is echoed in Tauler’s assertion that a genuine knowledge of Christianity is “concealed from the learned teachers of this world.”³⁷

But if learning is irrelevant to genuine Christian existence, *knowledge* is not. “We are placed in this life,” according to Tauler, “not only to do the works, but also so that we may know, so that our works may grow out of knowledge, as fruit grows out of the tree. Therefore our work in this life is to gain more knowledge, and so to come nearer to God.”³⁸

III. Kierkegaard’s Exposure to the German Mystical Tradition

I’m not the first person to recognize mystical elements in Kierkegaard’s philosophy. The Slovakian scholar Peter Sajda has written three pioneering articles on this topic³⁹ and much of what I will say here concerning Kierkegaard’s exposure to the German mystical tradition I learned from Sajda’s excellent article “Kierkegaard’s Encounter with the Rhineland-Flemish Mystics.”⁴⁰

Kierkegaard's earliest exposure to mysticism was undoubtedly through the Pietist tradition in which he was raised. The German mystics, and, in particular, Johannes Tauler had a very strong influence on this tradition. Johann Arndt, for example, who is considered by many to be a forerunner of Pietism, was heavily influenced by Tauler. There are numerous references to Tauler, as well as many direct quotations from Tauler in Arndt's *Wahres Christentum*.⁴¹ Kierkegaard, in turn, admired Arndt and refers favorably to both Arndt and Tauler. There are 56 references to Arndt in Kierkegaard's authorship and 21 references to Tauler.⁴²

The influence of the mystics extends beyond Pietism. Martin Luther admired Tauler and the mystical work *Theologia Deutsch*. Mystical emphasis on subjectivity and the authority of inner experience was seen by many as precursory to the Reformation. Some of Kierkegaard's Lutheran sources, according to Sajda, "argued that the teachings of the mystics conformed to the [protestant] *sola fide* principle."⁴³

Kierkegaard's exposure to German mysticism was not limited to its transmission through theological works. Medieval German mysticism was popular among German idealist philosophers and was discussed in works Kierkegaard owned and read including Adolf Helfferich's *Die christliche Mystik*⁴⁴ and Hans Lassen Martensen's monograph: *Meister Eckhardt, Et Bidrag til at oplyse Middelalderens Mystik*⁴⁵

Nor was Kierkegaard's exposure to German mysticism primarily indirect, through its influence on the Pietists and German idealists. Kierkegaard owned a number of original works by mystics such as Tauler and Suso. He owned a copy of *Theologia Deutsch* as well as the aforementioned work by Martensen that included much original material from Eckhardt. Kierkegaard's library also included scholarly studies on mysticism that he read and commented upon.⁴⁶

I have relied, as I explained at the beginning of this section, on Sajda's account of Kierkegaard's exposure to the German mystical tradition. Sajda appears to believe, however, that the primary respect in which Kierkegaard was influenced by mysticism was his incorporation of the mystical notion of the "negation of the finite," or the "*via purgativa*," in his own account of "dying to the

self.” He asserts, for example, that “Kierkegaard’s reception of the Rhineland-Flemish mystics was aimed chiefly at the concept of the *via purgativa*,” and that “[f]rom among the three traditional stages of mystical theology (*purgation, illumination, union*)—which Kierkegaard knew from *Theologia Deutsch*—he focused primarily on the preparatory stage of purgation.”⁴⁷ I’ll argue, however, that the second and third stages, those of illumination and union,⁴⁸ are at least equally, if not more, important in Kierkegaard’s thought.

IV. Kierkegaard’s Religious Epistemology

Some mystics, observes Kierkegaard, “think they have a direct relation to God and thus will not acknowledge that all human beings have only an indirect relation ([through] the Church—[or] in the political domain, the state).⁴⁹ The view that one can have a direct relation to God is, of course, problematic for Christianity in that it would appear to make Christ superfluous. There is a sense according to Kierkegaard, however, despite this early reference to the contrary, in which human beings are directly related to God, a sense that is entirely consistent with the Christian tradition.

The first indication we have that Kierkegaard is a kindred spirit of mysticism is the fact that, to use Ames’ words, “he is not troubled by the question of the existence or reality of God.”⁵⁰ He takes these for granted. Kierkegaard appears to hold the view, in keeping with first the Church fathers and then the German mystics that human beings have something like innate knowledge that there is a God. Arild Christensen argues, for example, that Kierkegaard “emphasizes that God is present in human consciousness”⁵¹ and Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Johannes de silentio refers to human beings as having an “eternal consciousness” that he associates with the love of God.⁵² It would appear Kierkegaard believes the idea of God is built into human consciousness. Precisely *how* this is so is something he doesn’t directly address. It seems safe to assume that it is simply part of the way consciousness is constructed.⁵³ It might be associated with a person’s appreciation that his is a finite, or limited,

form of rationality, or it might be roughly equivalent to a kind of Schleiermachean feeling of absolute dependence.

“Eternally understood,” asserts Kierkegaard in *Philosophical Crumbs*, “one does not *believe* that there is a God, even though one assumes that there is. This is a misuse of language. Socrates did not have faith that there was a God. What he knew about God he achieved through recollection” (C, 153). This reference to “recollection” recurs in Kierkegaard’s journals where he observes that both proving that there is a God, and being convinced of this by proofs, are “equally fantastic,”

for just as no one has ever proven it, so has there never been an atheist, even though there certainly have been many who have been unwilling to let what they knew get control of their minds. ... With respect to the existence [*Tilværelsen*] of God, immortality, etc., in short with respect to all problems of immanence, recollection-applies; it exists altogether in everyone only he does not know it. (JP 3:3606.)

It makes sense that Kierkegaard would have felt no need to defend the view that the idea of God is included in the contents of human consciousness. This view, as we saw, is part of the earliest Christian orthodoxy. More importantly, in the context of the present project, it is part of the German mystical tradition.

I argue elsewhere that, for Kierkegaard, the idea of God, under certain circumstances, amounts to knowledge that there’s a God. Such knowledge is, as we saw earlier, a long way from specifically *Christian* knowledge. Some have argued that there is no specifically Christian knowledge according to Kierkegaard.⁵⁴ It’s clear, however, that he does believe there’s such knowledge. I’ve defended this claim in detail in my book *Ways of Knowing*. I’ll not attempt to recapitulate that argument here, but will provide only a sketch of the nature of Christian knowledge according to Kierkegaard, a sketch in a detail sufficient to make clear the similarity between Kierkegaard’s views to those of Eckhart and Tauler.

“*Everything Is New In Christ*,” observes Kierkegaard in his journals, “this will be my position for a speculative Christian epistemology” (JP 2:2277). Christian knowledge, for Kierkegaard, as for Eckhart and Tauler, is built on faith. Kierkegaard refers in the *Postscript* to what he calls “the certainty of faith” (CUP, 48). Yet he also claims that faith is a risky venture and if it is a risky venture, it would appear problematic to argue that a person could attain certainty as a result of it. “Risking,” Kierkegaard argues, “is the correlative of uncertainty, once certainty is there, risking stops” (CUP, 356).

The certainty of faith is accessible, however, only in the *moment* of faith and thus cannot represent a threat to faith itself. The instant a person ceases to believe in the sense that he ceases to be in the passion of faith, the certainty vanishes and to renew faith involves risk in the same sense it did the first time. Thus the certainty of faith, according to Kierkegaard, “has in it, at every moment, the infinite dialectic of uncertainty” (CUP, 48) not merely in the sense that the object of faith appears objectively uncertain, but also in the sense that faith itself is difficult to sustain.

But the certainty of faith is in no sense arbitrary. It’s a consequence of the believer’s contact with God’s infinite love in the moment of faith. Every moment of faith is characterized by certainty. Indeed, this certainty is, in a sense, indistinguishable from faith.⁵⁵ It’s tempting to conclude that certainty can be a product of faith that is original to Kierkegaard. A close examination of German mysticism reveals, however, that it is not. Eckhart also speaks of faith as producing “unshakeable certainty”⁵⁶ and Kierkegaard, again, was familiar with Eckhart’s thought.

Christian knowledge, for Kierkegaard, as for Eckhart and Tauler, is a product of revelation, and the specific revelation with which Kierkegaard is concerned can be characterized as an encounter with Christ, or as contemporaneity with Christ, as Kierkegaard expresses it in *Philosophical Crumbs*.⁵⁷ “Christ is the truth,” (PC, 205), according to Kierkegaard, hence to know Christ is to know the truth.

It appears, however, that in every instance where Kierkegaard refers to “knowledge” of Christ, the Danish expression is either “*Kjendskab*,” or some form of the verb “*kjende*,” rather than “*Erkjendelsen*,” or “*Viden*,” or their associated verbs.⁵⁸ There is even at least one place where Kierkegaard alters the then current Danish translation of the New Testament by replacing the expression “know” (*kiende*), in connection with the truth of Christianity, with “experience” (*erfarer*).⁵⁹ The reference is from his papers where he quotes John 7:17 as: “If anyone’s will is to do my father’s will, he shall experience whether the teaching is from God or on my own authority” (JP 2:1881).⁶⁰

The original Greek expression that was translated into Danish as “*kiende*” and then retranslated by Kierkegaard as “*erfarer*” is $\gamma \nu \omega \sigma \epsilon \tau \alpha \iota$ which comes from the Greek $\gamma \nu \omega \sigma \iota \varsigma$. Gnosis was used consistently both in ancient philosophy and in the writings of the Church fathers to identify what contemporary philosophers would call “acquaintance knowledge.” That is, $\gamma \nu \omega \sigma \iota \varsigma$, referred to knowledge that represented a kind of contact with the reality in question, as opposed to $\epsilon \pi \iota \sigma \tau \eta \mu \eta$, that referred to something more like an abstract or conceptual grasp of it. Kierkegaard’s substitution of “*erfarer*” for “*kiende*” is important in that it shows he interprets “*kiende*,” in the tradition of $\gamma \nu \omega \sigma \iota \varsigma$ as referring to a kind of acquaintance knowledge and provides us with a key to understanding an early journal entry where Kierkegaard asserts that “[t]he historical anticipation of and also the position in human consciousness⁶¹ corresponding to the Christian ‘*Credo ut intelligam*’ [I believe in order that I might understand] is the ancient *Nihil est in intellectus quod non antea fuerit in sensu* [There is nothing in the intellect that has not previously been in the senses]” (JP 2:1098). That is, Kierkegaard interprets propositional knowledge of what he calls “the truths” of Christianity and the product of an acquaintance with Christ.

A person meets Christ in the moment of faith. This meeting is what is meant by “knowledge” of Christ, hence acquaintance knowledge of Christ precedes Christian knowledge in the propositional sense, just as such knowledge, for Tauler, precedes “the power of distinguishing the Holy Scriptures

so that [one can] comprehend them in full truth.”⁶² To become acquainted with Christ is an experience that is related to the intellect in a manner analogous to the way *sense* experience is related to the intellect.

Experience, according to Kierkegaard, belongs to the realm of existence, or actuality, hence it cannot, in itself, be equivalent to knowledge (which is why, according to Kierkegaard, it cannot be deceptive). Experience becomes knowledge, or a candidate for knowledge, when it is brought into relation to ideality in the intellect. Hence Christian knowledge, in the propositional sense, is a *consequence* of, rather than, as some have argued, *equivalent* to, Christian experience.⁶³ “Knowing the truth,” argues Kierkegaard in *Practice in Christianity*, is not equivalent to being the truth, but is something that “*follows* of itself from being the truth” (PC, 205).⁶⁴

But if it is possible, according to Kierkegaard, to both *know* the truth and *be* the truth, then Sajda would appear mistaken in his assertion that “[f]rom among the three traditional stages of mystical theology (purgation, illumination, union) ... [Kierkegaard] focused primarily on the preparatory stage of purgation.” Yes, purgation, or dying to the self, is important in Kierkegaard’s authorship, but only as a means to the end of establishing the proper relation to the truth, which relation is a complex dialectic of illumination (i.e., *kendskab*), union, and further illumination (*viden/erkendelsen*), just as it is for both Eckhart and Tauler.

Much more work remains to be done on Kierkegaard’s relation to German mysticism, and indeed, on his relation to German thought more generally. It ought to be clear, however, from this brief examination of the influence of German mysticism on Kierkegaard that not all Germans, according to Kierkegaard, were “windbags.” Some had very important things to say, things which were influential on the formation of Kierkegaard’s own thought.

¹ J.S. Ferrall and Thorl. Gudm. Repp, *A Danish-English Dictionary* (Copenhagen, 1845), pp. XX-XXI. Emphasis in original.

² These quotations come from a passage in *The Sickness Unto Death*. Alastair Hannay, whose translation of this work is generally superior to the Hongs' translation, unfortunately appears to miss the humor of the passage in that he translates "I Mangel af at tale filosofisk, skal tale tydsk" as "if for want of a philosophical term, I may say it in German" (*The Sickness Unto Death*, tran. Alastair Hannay [London: Penguin, 1989], 126). A more literal and, I believe, accurate, translation is "if owing to an inability to speak philosophically, shall speak German." He's referring to himself in this passage, but is clearly poking fun at his contemporaries, such as Martensen, who often published their works in German and who appeared to believe that German thought was somehow inherently deeper than was Danish thought.

³ The wording here is taken from Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong's *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1967-1978). The reference, however, is to the Danish edition of Kierkegaard's papers: *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, eds. P. A. Heiberg, V. Kuhr, E. Torsting and Niels Thulstrup. 2nd ed. 16 vols. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968-1978. The Hongs' translation of Kierkegaard's papers will eventually be supplanted by a new English edition that is currently in production with Princeton University Press, not so much because the new translation is better than the Hongs' (see my review in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* Vol. 63, issue 02: 249-251) but because it will be a comprehensive translation which the Hongs' was not. The new edition will include references, however, to the Danish *Papirer* (as well as references to the new Danish edition of Kierkegaard's papers) so I have elected to include only those references here.

⁴ See, for example, the end of X⁶ B 128.

⁵ *Ways of Knowing: Kierkegaard's Pluralist Epistemology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

⁶ "Kierkegaard's Encounter with the Rhineland-Flemish Mystics: A Case Study," *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 2009: Kierkegaard's Concept of Irony*, eds. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Hermann Deuser and K. Brian Söderquist (Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 559-584.

⁷ Edward Scribner Ames, "Mystic Knowledge," *The American Journal of Theology*, vol. 19, no. 2 (April 1915) pp. 250-267.

⁸ *Ibid.* 250.

⁹ *Ibid.* 250.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 254.

¹¹ Ibid. 254.

¹² Ibid. 256.

¹³ Ibid. 261.

¹⁴ Ibid. 261.

¹⁵ 191c-d.

¹⁶ *Mysticism*, (Kindle loc. 10039-10042). See also Erwin Rohde, *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and the Belief in Immortality among the Greeks*, 8th ed., trans. W.B. Hillis (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1925), and James Adam, *The Religious Teachers of Greece* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), Lecture V, 92-114.

¹⁷ I had always been led to believe that of the two ancient thinkers, Plato and Aristotle, it was primarily the later who was important for medieval philosophy. Clement makes frequent reference, however, to Plato.

¹⁸ Slavatore R.C. Lilla, *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 118.

¹⁹ See, Strom. li. 10. 2 (ii. 118. 13-17).

²⁰ Henny Fiskå Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 151.

²¹ Irenaeus, *The Scandal of the Incarnation: Irenaeus Against the Heresies, Selected and Introduced by Hans Urs von Balthasar*, tran. John Sayward (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1990), p. 32.

²² Dr. Wilhelm Scherer, *Klemens von Alexandrien und seine Erkenntnisprinzipien* (München, 1907), p. 70.

²³ Ames, 261.

²⁴ Ames, 251.

²⁵ See "The Book of Divine Consolation," in *Meister Eckhart, Selected Writings*, tran. Oliver Davies (Penguin, 1994), 58.

²⁶ *Light Life and Love: Selections from the German Mystics of the Middle Ages*, ed. W.R. Inge, 1904. *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, Kindle ed., loc. 1699.

²⁷ *The Following of Christ*, tran. J.R. Morell (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1910), 30. *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, Kindle ed.

²⁸ *Selected Writings*, 36.

²⁹ *Meditations on the Life and Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, tran. anonymous (Dublin: Thomas Richardson and Son, 1875), 415. *Medieval Library of Mystical and Ascetical Works*, Kindle ed.

³⁰ *Selected Writings*, 224.

³¹ *Ibid.* 223.

³² *Ibid.* 129.

³³ *The Following of Christ*, tran. J.R. Morell (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1910), 46. *Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Enhanced Version*, Kindle ed. (p. 26 in German version).

³⁴ *Ibid.* 45 (p. 26 in German).

³⁵ *Ibid.* 48.

³⁶ "The Life of Christ," in *Light, Life, and Love*, loc. 1709-10.

³⁷ *The Inner Way: The Mystical Theology of John Tauler*, tran. Arthur Wollaston Hutton (London: Methuen & Co., 1901. *E-SaintLibrary.com*. Kindle ed., loc. 3984-85.

³⁸ *Ibid.* loc. 2134-36.

³⁹ "The Patriarch of German Speculation who was a *Lebemeister*: Meister Eckhardt's Silent Way into Kierkegaard's Corpus," and "A Teacher in Spiritual Diethics: Kierkegaard's Reception of Johannes Tauler," *Kierkegaard and the Patristic and Medieval Traditions*, ed. Jon Steward (Ashgate, 2008), 237-253 and 265-287 respectively, and "Kierkegaard's Encounter with the Rhineland-Flemish Mystics: A Case Study."

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *True Christianity* (Mawah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979. Book 1 was originally published in 1605. The remaining books were published between 1606-1610.

⁴² See *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*, eds. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff, Johnny Kondrup, Alistair McKinnon and Finn Hauberg Mortensen (Copenhagen:

Gads Forlag, 1997-present), Kommentar. Some of these references are explicit and others are allusions noted in the commentary to the most recent collected works of Kierkegaard in Danish.

⁴³ Sajda, “Kierkegaard’s Encounter with the Rhineland-Flemish Mystics,” 570. See also, Stenersen, *Udsigt over den Lutherske Reformation*, vol. 1, 202 and Rudelbach, *Christelig Biographie*, vol. 1, 54. These latter references are taken from note 56 of Sajda’s article.

⁴⁴ *Die christliche Mystic* (Gotha, 1842), vol. 1.

⁴⁵ Copenhagen, 1840.

⁴⁶ See Joseph Göres *Die christliche Mystic* (Regensburg and Landshut, 1836-1842), Martensen, *Meister Eckhardt*, Helfferich, *Die christliche Mystik*, and Suso’s *H., gennant Amandus, Leben and Schriften* (These references are taken from note 47 on page 569 of Sajda’s “Kierkegaard’s Encounter with the Rhineland-Flemish Mystics.”

⁴⁷ “Kierkegaard’s Encounter with the Rhineland-Flemish Mystics,” 583.

⁴⁸ It is important to acknowledge at this point that Kierkegaard’s notion of “union” differs from the traditional mystical notion in that one cannot actually become one with God, according to Kierkegaard. One does, however, as I argue in *Ways of Knowing*, come into contact with the eternal, unchanging truth in one’s encounter with God in the person of Christ in the “moment.”

⁴⁹ Pap. I A 168. June 6, 1836.

⁵⁰ Ames, 254.

⁵¹ Arild Christensen, *Efterskriftens Opgør med Martensen* [the confrontation with Martensen in the *Postscript*], *Kierkegaardiana* 4, 1962, p. 59.

⁵² See, for example, FT, 48.

⁵³ See, for example, SUD, 13; C, 153 and SV, XII, 285.

⁵⁴ Add reference.

⁵⁵ See Slotty’s observation that Kierkegaard “strongly emphasized the certainty [*Selbstgewißheit*] of belief” (Slotty, 70).

⁵⁶ *Selected Writings*, 24.

⁵⁷ See C, 138-139 and 167-168.

⁵⁸ See, for example, EUD, 325-326 and C, 136-137.

⁵⁹ The Greek is γνωσεται.

⁶⁰ I have altered the translation here slightly because the Hongs do not take account of the substitution of “*erfarer*” for “*kiende*.” The Greek term in question is *gnosetai*, which is related to the noun *gnosis*. In another reference from Kierkegaard’s journals and papers he translates the expression for “know” in the inscription over the oracle at Delphi, *gnothi seauton* as “*kjende*” which supports the view that Kierkegaard considered *gnosis* to be knowledge of the substantive, or acquaintance, sort.

⁶¹ I have altered the Hongs’ translation of “*Bevidsthed*” from “knowledge” to “consciousness” because the former is not an acceptable translation of “*Bevidsthed*” (see Ferrall-Repp, Molbech and Vinterberg-Bodelsen s.v. *Bevisthed*).

⁶² *The Following of Christ*, 48.

⁶³ *Contra Emmanuel*, 139.

⁶⁴ Emphasis added.

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