Søren Kierkegaard’s *Conclusion Unscientific Postscript* has provoked a lively variety of divergent interpretations for a century and a half. It has been both celebrated and condemned as the chief inspiration for twentieth-century existential thought, as a subversive parody of philosophical argument, as a critique of mass society, as a forerunner of phenomenology and of postmodern relativism, and as an appeal for a renewal of religious commitment. These new essays written by international Kierkegaard scholars offer a plurality of critical approaches to this fundamental text of existential philosophy. They cover hotly debated topics such as the tension between the Socratic-philosophical and the Christian-religious; the identity and personality of Kierkegaard’s pseudonym “Johannes Climacus”; his conceptions of paradoxical faith and of passionate understanding; his relation to his contemporaries and to some of his more distant predecessors; and, last but not least, his pertinence to our present-day concerns.

**RICK ANTHONY FURTAK** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Colorado College. His publications include *Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity* (2005) and *Rilke’s “Sonnets to Orpheus”* (2007).
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Contributors

CLARE CARLISLE is Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Liverpool. She is the author of Kierkegaard: A Guide for the Perplexed (2006) and Kierkegaard’s Philosophy of Becoming (2005). She has also published essays in journals such as Continental Philosophy Review, Contemporary Buddhism, and British Journal for the History of Philosophy. Her next book is entitled Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling: A Reader’s Guide.


RICK ANTHONY FURTAK is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Colorado College. His publications include Wisdom in Love: Kierkegaard and the Ancient Quest for Emotional Integrity (2005) and Rilke’s Sonnets to Orpheus: A New English Version, with a Philosophical Introduction (2007). He is currently working on a book about the moral psychology of the emotions.

ALASTAIR HANNAY is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Oslo. He is the author of Kierkegaard and Philosophy: Selected Essays (2003); Kierkegaard: A Biography (2001); and Human Consciousness (1990). He is also co-editor, with Gordon Marino, of The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard (1998). He has translated several of
Kierkegaard’s works into English, including *Fear and Trembling*, *The Sickness Unto Death*, and *Either/Or*, and he is a member of the editorial team for the multivolume series *Kierkegaard’s Journals and Notebooks*.

**Jacob Howland** is McFarlin Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tulsa. His books include *Kierkegaard and Socrates: A Study in Philosophy and Faith* (2006) and *The Paradox of Political Philosophy: Socrates’ Philosophical Trial* (1998). He has written numerous other essays about ethics, culture, and ancient philosophy.

**David R. Law** is Reader in Christian Thought at the University of Manchester. His publications include *Inspiration* (2001) and *Kierkegaard as Negative Theologian* (1993). In addition to many scholarly articles on Kierkegaard, biblical interpretation, and Lutheran and Anglican theology, he has also written about existential thinkers such as Jaspers and Heidegger. He is currently at work on a book that examines Kierkegaard’s creative recasting of the *kenōsis* doctrine.

**John Lippitt** is Professor of Ethics and Philosophy of Religion at the University of Hertfordshire. He is the author of the *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling* (2003) and *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought* (2000), and the editor of two books on Nietzsche. His articles have appeared in *Inquiry*, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, and the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, among other publications. His current work is focused on *agapē*, friendship, and the problem of self-love.

**Edward F. Mooney** is Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Syracuse University. His books include *On Søren Kierkegaard: Dialogue, Polemics, Lost Intimacy, and Time* (2007); *Selves in Discord and Resolve* (1996); and *Knights of Faith and Resignation* (1991). He is also the editor of *Ethics, Faith, and Love in Kierkegaard* (2008) and *Wilderness and the Heart* (1999), and the author of various other philosophical and literary publications. His latest book is *Lost Intimacy in American Thought: Recovering Personal Philosophy from Thoreau to Cavell* (2009).

**Paul Muench** is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Montana. His publications include “Understanding Kierkegaard’s Johannes Climacus in the *Postscript,*” in the *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook* (2007), and “Kierkegaard’s Socratic Point of View,” in *A Companion to Socrates* (2005). His work has also appeared in *Kierkegaardiana* and the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. 
M. G. Piety is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Drexel University. She recently translated Kierkegaard’s *Repetition* and *Philosophical Crumbs* for the Oxford World’s Classics series. Her articles on Kierkegaard and the philosophy of religion have been published in such periodicals as *Faith and Philosophy, History of European Ideas,* and the *Times Literary Supplement,* among others. Her forthcoming book is called *Ways of Knowing: Kierkegaard’s Pluralist Epistemology.*

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Standard abbreviations are employed throughout this volume for the following Kierkegaardian texts. For other editions cited, and for works by other authors, see the bibliography and the footnotes to individual chapters.

**IN ENGLISH**


IN DANISH

PAP  

SKS  
Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn et al., 
by volume and page number, and (in some cases) by entry 
number.
Søren Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ascribed to a pseudonymous author named “Johannes Climacus,” is the source of the notorious claim that “truth is subjectivity.” That alone has provoked a variety of divergent interpretations of the work as a whole, from the time of its publication in February 1846 until the present day. Yet the *Postscript* has been both celebrated and condemned under many other descriptions: as the chief inspiration for twentieth-century existential thought, as a subversive parody of philosophical argument, as a prelude to later phenomenology, as a critique of mass society, as a forerunner of postmodern relativism, and as a testimonial for Christianity conceived in either theologically conservative or radically progressive terms. For a book that sold only about fifty copies during the first few years after its publication, it has caused quite a stir in the long run.

The *Postscript* was regarded by Kierkegaard as a culminating work — although he later came to view it as more of a turning point in his authorship — and, as a result, it resembles a sort of “container into which all of the important ideas he has ever had must be crammed.” Philosophers have appropriated and opposed various claims endorsed in the *Postscript*, which seems more like a philosophical treatise in form and content than perhaps any other work in Kierkegaard’s corpus. Yet the reader of the *Postscript* will also encounter a dizzying range of material that is seldom found in canonical works of philosophy: personal anecdotes by a fictional narrator who interrupts himself with frequent exclamations; rhetorical devices such as the part in which Johannes Climacus “reviews” Kierkegaard’s earlier works as an outsider with curiously similar interests; a hilarious multi-page footnote containing twenty examples of comic incongruity; and stories of escaped lunatics, large green birds, highway robbers in disguise, and self-forgetful people who wake up to find themselves dead.

1 Hannay, *Kierkegaard: A Biography*, 278.
The term “unscientific” (or uvidenskabelig in Danish) indicates that the book is *not* a work of academic or scholastic philosophy. This promptly sets it apart from the kind of *Wissenschaft* pursued by a number of German idealists and their Danish acolytes. Johan Ludvig Heiberg and Hans Lassen Martensen are prominent among the latter, although the *Postscript’s* critique of philosophy that aims for an inappropriate type of scientific rigor is applicable to much of the modern philosophical tradition from Descartes through Hegel, and hardly irrelevant to philosophy in the present day. Although no blogs or websites kept track of philosophical fashion in Kierkegaard’s time, his age did have its trends and its prevailing ways of doing philosophy. As Kierkegaard saw it, this included the tendency to favor an impersonal, detached approach to philosophical questions, one that he regarded as wholly out of place for issues that pertain to human existence. His relation to most of the leading philosophers of recent times is polemical, although the *Postscript* does pay tribute to Kant (CUP 462–463) and takes a point of departure from Lessing (CUP 53–60). Even such heterodox thinkers as Jacobi and Hamann are portrayed by Kierkegaard’s pseudonym as having fallen short of kindling the intellectual fire that he is trying to light. As for what philosophy *would* look like if it were to be reoriented as Johannes Climacus advises, the prototypical point of comparison is Socrates, for reasons that will be explored by several contributors to this volume.

Not least among the bewildering features of the *Postscript* is its very last section, in which Kierkegaard, speaking in his own voice, takes responsibility for the texts he has published under other names (including this one). He explicitly requests that any quotations from these writings should *not* be assigned to Kierkegaard himself, but to the respective pseudonyms. One point of contention among readers of the *Postscript* has been whether, and how, to obey this request. Almost all of the contributors to the present volume follow Kierkegaard’s dictate and accept that Johannes Climacus is the author of the *Postscript*, as earlier generations of readers generally did not—yet the question of what follows from this remains unsettled. Climacus could represent a side of Kierkegaard himself, in which case his views might overlap with Kierkegaard’s own, even if there is more to Kierkegaard than what Climacus has to offer; or, by contrast, Climacus could be a straw man invented to defend a flawed position or to pursue an impossible project.

In any event, if Climacus is not *exactly* to be identified with Kierkegaard himself, then what are we to make of his commentary on Kierkegaard’s other writings, or his description of religious faith? Many have taken the
Postscript's account of “Religiousness A and B” as an authoritative lens through which Kierkegaard's own religious writings ought to be interpreted, while others have argued more recently that this simply cannot be done. This kind of issue, it would seem, can only be settled by looking at the text itself and comparing it to Kierkegaard’s other writings. In the few places where Kierkegaard does make potentially helpful remarks about how he understands the task of the Postscript, his words are cryptic enough to require further interpretation. For instance, in an 1849 journal entry, he laments that the Postscript has led to much “confusion” since it is assumed to be the source of a “new doctrine,” whereas what the text actually contains is “personality.” If we find ourselves wondering how the personality could be embodied in a philosophical text, or how it could be associated with the apprehension of the truth, our best resource for deciphering these enigmas is likely to be the Postscript itself.

Regardless of how we construe the authorial status of Johannes Climacus, one thing is clear: he gives voice to many worries about the tendency of abstract thought to lose sight of the reality from which it has abstracted. Too frequently, he claims, philosophers adopt a view from nowhere when reflecting upon conceptual questions, even when their questions have ethical or practical relevance. It is “truly difficult” to penetrate one’s existence with a thoughtful awareness while remaining present in life (CUP 258), and we are commonly all too eager to avoid this kind of difficulty. Yet philosophy then becomes a travesty of itself, rather than living up to its name as the love of wisdom. Even worse, in spite of all of the data and information that surrounds us, we can be utterly lacking in our conception of what it means to be human. It is all right to explore theoretical fields that bear no relation to existence, but that does not exempt us from having to make sense of our lives, and the Postscript reminds us of the urgent and continuous need to do this. And it warns us to steer away from the realm of abstract, speculative thought that is populated by unrealities.

Kierkegaard’s own reaction against those who would aspire toward complete systematic knowledge was predicated on a number of disagreements with them; it included such ideas as that all of our beliefs involve some

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2 Among the contributors to the present volume, Edward Mooney has argued that we ought to downplay the importance of Religiousness A and B: see Mooney, On Søren Kierkegaard. Taking a more extreme view, Michael Olesen has argued that Religiousness as portrayed by Climacus is inconsistent with the religiousness presented in Kierkegaard’s upbuilding discourses: see Olesen, “The Climacean Alphabet.”

possibility of error, and that the most intricate and complex subject matters do not always lend themselves to highly stringent methods of study. Today, he might say that in order for our intellectual culture to focus more adequately on human concerns, it would need to jettison the presumption that the scientific answer is always the most accurate one, no matter what question is being asked. If we are concerned about truth in the library or the laboratory, while testifying in a court of law or when professing beliefs during a liturgical service, then we should also care about the kind of truth that actually orientations our life on a daily basis. This kind of humanistic truth is essentially subjective and uncertain, according to Johannes Climacus, in a sense that no brief remarks could hope to explain. For now, however, here is one instance that might illustrate what Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous author has in mind.

Let us assume that there is a real difference between someone who lives with God in the world, on the one hand, and someone whose life is godforsaken, on the other. If there is — and Kierkegaard himself certainly believes so — then we might think this difference would have to do with some correlation, or lack thereof, between each person and an objectively existing divinity. What the Postscript asks us to consider is the possibility that there is a real difference here, but not of the sort that we had guessed: the world of the religious believer is not the same as that of the one for whom nothing is sacred, but not in a way that can easily be accounted for in our standard vocabulary. From a Kierkegaardian perspective, affirming our role as world-disclosing beings is not a matter of “constructing” reality without any constraints, but it does require us to rethink just how deeply life as we know it is inflected by our own subjectivity. As for the notion of doubting in order to find a solid foundation for true beliefs, which was very popular in Kierkegaard’s academic climate, he says that this is no more sensible than lying down in order to stand up straight.

Because of its emphasis on the subjectivity of the individual human being, as opposed to transparently “objective” truth or that which is established by the human community, the Postscript lends itself to misreadings that have prevented it from being more fully appreciated. So we hear it said that “the self for Kierkegaard is an objectless inwardness,” which turns away from others and withdraws into its own private isolation. Yet in the Postscript, what we find is not at all an appeal for introspection but an invitation to attend to our whole cognitive and affective outlook on life, as it

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4 On how philosophers after Kierkegaard must turn toward a more “unscientific inquiry” that would also be a more human one, see Rosenzweig, The Star of Redemption, 7–8.

5 Adorno, Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic, 27.
informs our engagement in the world. The kind of knowing highlighted by Johannes Climacus is based upon character and linked with moral agency: if he is talking about ethics, it is not in any narrow sense of the word; if he is talking about knowledge, it is an aspect or a type of knowledge that usually falls outside the domain of epistemological analysis. The Postscript outlines a form of passionate and personal reasoning, and it tells us that we must be appropriately disposed in order even to feel the force of existential questions, much less to attain truthfulness with respect to our most important concerns.

The Concluding Unscientific Postscript, then, confronts us as a quasi-philosophical work that insists on a personal and idiosyncratic style: at the same time that it immerses us knee-deep in the bizarre and incomparable world of Kierkegaard’s writings, it leaves us unsure about whether we are meeting Kierkegaard himself or whether he is hiding behind the text, paring his fingernails in masterful Joycean style. Indeed, if we can be sure of anything with respect to this infinitely rich and difficult book, it is that no one angle or interpretive slant will reveal the whole truth about it. Accordingly, readers of this collection are introduced to a plurality of approaches to the Postscript— and what better way could there be to get into a multifaceted work, which will always exceed any description of it that can be given? The chapters that follow deal in diverse ways with such hotly debated topics as the tension between the Socratic-philosophical and the Christian-religious; the identity and personality of Johannes Climacus, his literary career and how he is affected by an overheard conversation (along with what he learns from it); his conceptions of paradoxical faith and of passionate understanding; his relation to his contemporaries, and to some of his more distant predecessors; and, last but not least, his pertinence to our present-day concerns. As any attentive reader of Kierkegaard’s Postscript will see, its immense potential to transform our way of thinking has hardly yet been realized.

Cf. Mooney, On Søren Kierkegaard, 184n.
About two years after the publication of Philosophical Crumbs, also known as the Fragments, a second book authored by Johannes Climacus appeared. The title of the new book reflected both its great length and his delight in being provocative – Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs. A Mimic–Pathetic–Dialectic Compilation. An Existential Contribution. What does it mean that the Postscript, published in 1846, is explicitly presented (in its title) as a “postscript” (Efterskrift) to the Philosophical Crumbs of 1844? What is a postscript and what does it do? As a hypothesis to be tested, consider that when I add a postscript to a letter I have just written, it means that I think I left out something important – something I remember after I have finished signing (or even sending) the letter that I think still needs to be conveyed. The postscript is an after-thought, in a sense, but it still serves to append something that I think cannot be left unsaid. It may serve to emphasize something that was implicit in the letter, like “PS, I love you.” Or it may provide some critical information that was not implicit in the letter – e.g., “PS, did you know that the party has been changed to Tuesday?” This latter PS imparts crucial information that I did not mention in my letter. The PS might also serve to qualify in a crucial way something that I did say in the letter – e.g., “PS, don’t take what I said above as a criticism of your brother.” Adding a postscript means that I have decided that I do not want to leave the letter as it was.

I will argue in what follows that, however successful Philosophical Crumbs may have been on its own terms, Kierkegaard later judged that it could not be allowed to stand as it was. The recognition that it needed to be importantly qualified may well have been precipitated by the thinking and writing that followed the publication of Crumbs;¹ as well as by Kierkegaard’s

¹ One of the major themes in CUP is anticipated in The Concept of Anxiety, where, at the end of Chapter III, Haufniensis writes: “the greatness of a man depends simply and solely on the energy of the God-relation in him, even though the God-relation finds an altogether wrong expression as fate” (KW 8: 109–110). This seems to differ strikingly from the historically specific understanding of
The “Socratic secret”

decision to bring his authorship to a close. In particular, I suggest that the book, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, contains both a quasi-sequel to Crumbs (which elaborated some claims effectively made in Crumbs) and a postscript to Crumbs that provided a new and crucial supplement to Crumbs. That “postscript” within the book Postscript is found in Part Two, which constitutes the bulk of the work. Although some aspects of Crumbs become more finely grained in the part of the Postscript that is a “sequel,”2 the point of the “postscript” part of the Postscript was to provide something new. This supplement involved not only a more appreciative take on Socratic subjectivity, where Socrates is carefully distinguished from other philosophers, but, more radically, the presentation of Socratic subjectivity as a necessary preliminary to genuine Christianity. I suggest that whereas in Crumbs Socratic subjectivity was presented as an alternative to the non-Socratic (Christian) position, the Concluding Unscientific Postscript reveals them in a positive relation. That is, the “postscript” within Postscript corrects the “either–or” presentation of Crumbs by introducing the importance of a specific sort of “both–and” (which nonetheless differs from “mediation”).

POSTSCRIPT VERSUS SEQUEL

Climacus provides important guidance for reading the Postscript when, in his introduction, he (in effect) distinguishes between the postscript and a “sequel.” He refers back to his suggestion in Crumbs of a possible “sequel,” a sequel that would clothe the formal non-Socratic position in its “historical costume” (KW 7: 109), but he tells us now in Postscript that the promise was already “fulfilled” in Crumbs itself (which, he says, “anyone who has read through the first part attentively” could have inferred from the earlier work), so “essentially, there is no sequel” (CUP 12–13). Alternatively, he says both that such a sequel could be fulfilled by mentioning the single word “Christianity” (CUP 18), and that Part One, on the objective problem of Christianity’s truth, is “the promised sequel” (CUP 18). That is, the sequel, if there is one, is found only in the short section that constitutes Part One. All of these claims point in the same direction – namely, to the priority Climacus places on Part Two, which constitutes the bulk of the lengthy

faith in Crumbs. Moreover, CUP incorporates several themes from the Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions; in particular, the theme of appropriation and subjectivity found in the Preface to those discourses and throughout the three of them culminates in the claim that “the person is fully as mad who states a correct opinion if it has absolutely no significance for him” (KW 10: 99–100).

2 For example, notions of immanence and the absurd.
Postscript. Whether or not Part One really deserves to be called a “sequel,” it is clear that the “postscript” proper, found in Part Two, is not any kind of “sequel” but rather a “renewed attempt” to discuss, or “a new approach” to, the “problem” presented in the Crumbs (CUP 18).

Climacus sees himself as responding to the failure of others to engage “the problem” that was “posed” in Crumbs – namely, “Can there be a historical point of departure for an eternal consciousness; how can such a thing be of more than historical interest; can one base an eternal consciousness on historical knowledge?” (CUP 16). This issue, he insists, has been not advanced, but rather suppressed (CUP 13), by either scholarly erudition or rhetorical eloquence or systematic philosophy’s sleight-of-hand in offering the conclusion it cannot produce (CUP 14–16). But when, at the end of Part Two, Climacus reverts back explicitly to the distinctiveness of Christianity in relation to its historical center, he notes that “this is what the Crumbs essentially dealt with; I can therefore make constant reference to that work and express myself here more briefly” (CUP 470). A little later he adds, “As mentioned, it was with this dialectic in particular that the Crumbs dealt” (CUP 477), so he can now briefly “summarize it even more succinctly” (CUP 477). In other words, that issue had been essentially addressed in Crumbs. Although the Postscript adds more detail to the notions of “sin,” the “absurd,” and the “offense” already introduced in Philosophical Crumbs, the discussion of the specific difficulty raised by the historical dimension of Christianity takes up only relatively few pages of this 531-page book (namely, Part One, “The objective problem,” and the section on “The dialectical aspect” in Part Two). The “sequel” is not a critical supplement to Crumbs.

**POSTSCRIPT AS SUPPLEMENT**

Thus, the point of the Postscript is not the sequel. The point is the postscript. What is it that cannot be left unsaid then, or left said as it had been said in Crumbs? In what way is Part Two, “The subjective problem” (minus the section on “The dialectical aspect”) a candidate for a genuinely “new approach”? The first five chapters of Part Two explore the generic nature of subjectivity – what it means to exist humanly. Of these five, the first two chapters (Section One) are an indirect approach to subjectivity via a discussion of four theses possibly attributable to G. E. Lessing, and they

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3 As we shall see later, there is no contradiction between the phrases “renewed attempt” and “new approach”; it is a “renewed attempt on the same lines” (the comic, humor, parody, satire), while the “new approach” refers to the crucial difference between the two works.
frame things in terms of a dialectic of communication and a dialectic of existence. The next three chapters (in Section Two) are a response to the question, “How subjectivity must be for the problem to appear to it” (CUP 107). Their titles are remarkably similar: Chapter 1, “Becoming subjective”; Chapter 2, “The subjective truth, inwardness; truth is subjectivity”; Chapter 3, “Actual, ethical subjectivity; the subjective thinker.”

In other words, whereas the issue discussed in the “sequel” concerns the distinctive problematic of a historical religion, the issue in the “postscript” is the way in which Christianity has been misunderstood because people have “forgotten what it is to exist and what inwardness means” (CUP 203, emphasis in original). As Climacus puts it: “I now resolved to go back as far as possible, so as not to arrive too soon at the religious mode of existence, to say nothing of the specifically Christian mode . . . If one had forgotten what it means to exist religiously, no doubt one had also forgotten what it is to exist humanly; and so this must be brought out” (CUP 209).

Climacus’ concern with what it is to be an existing individual is dictated by his recognition that it is impossible to understand what it is to be a Christian if one does not know what it is to be an existing individual. Still, it is the concern with generic subjectivity that constitutes the bulk of Part Two’s nearly five hundred pages.

This imbalance between Parts One and Two, and the claim that the section on Christianity can be brief because it had already been dealt with in Crumbs, support the suggestion that Part Two is intended to do justice to what was covered only briefly in Crumbs. The bulk of Crumbs explored the non-Socratic account of faith, whereas the Socratic version was presented in very short compass – a few pages sketched out the formal position on the immanence of truth and a very minimalist picture of inwardness was presented. It is not surprising that the postscript would have emphases that are directly inverse to the emphases in Crumbs. The postscript takes a step back to examine more fully the Socratic account before it takes two steps forward to look again at the distinctively Christian account. Or more precisely, Climacus takes two steps back – and lingers. Climacus undertakes a total revisioning of the Socratic position which, now seen in contrast to both Platonic and Hegelian speculative philosophy, is shown in its richness and depth. This remarkable appreciation of the possibilities of Socratic inwardness is perhaps also attributable to the fact that, in his intended last word, Kierkegaard needed to give generous credit to an achievement

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4 It is not simply a question of quantity of pages, since the Introduction points to the priority of Part Two by its comments on the limitedness of the “sequel.”
(human subjectivity) that he now conceded was “so strenuous for a human being as always to be task enough” (CUP 466).

THE HEART OF PART TWO – GENERIC SUBJECTIVITY

Section Two (“The subjective problem, or how subjectivity must be for the problem to appear to it”) takes up and develops Climacus’ earlier references to Socrates as a prism to explore “the subjective problem,” for his “only comfort is Socrates” (CUP 135). The first three chapters return continually but indirectly to the four theses found in Section One (on Lessing), expanding on the dialectic of communication and the dialectic of existence, and considering in detail the condition in which one must be if one is even to recognize the import of the issue of Crumbs. Each of the three chapters circles back to what precedes it, and there is a great deal of overlap, but it is possible to see different foci: as a rough approximation, I suggest that Chapter 1 focuses on subjectivity as the ethical; Chapter 2 focuses on subjectivity as truth; Chapter 3 focuses on subjectivity as the concrete paradox of existence.

Chapter 1 is a prolonged tribute to the “eternal validity of the ethical” (CUP 119). It begins by claiming that an understanding of subjectivity is found only in the activity of becoming subjective. What is important about subjectivity is not what we can say about it, but how we engage in it – subjectivity is a “task” (CUP 108). Recalling his earlier connection between striving “infinitely” and our condition of “becoming” (CUP 77), and his norm, “Let us be human beings” (CUP 97), Climacus concedes that while there is a sense in which we are each a human being, each “a so-called subject of sorts,” we all still need to learn how to be “what one is through having become that” (CUP 109), as well as “what it is to live” (CUP 122). This task of becoming subjective, becoming a subject, an existing human being, either “is” or “should be” “the highest task” that we have (CUP 111, 132–133, 137), and it is a task for a lifetime (CUP 136, 150): “For a human being it [that is, “being a single individual”] is the only true and its highest meaning” (CUP 124–125). Moreover, this task is identical with becoming ethical: “The ethical is and remains the highest task set for every human being” (CUP 126).

The ethical “as the absolute is infinitely valid in itself” (CUP 118); “the ethical is absolutely and in all eternity the highest” (CUP 124). Climacus notes that our “eternal consciousness is only in the ethical” (CUP 124) and

5 Socrates is introduced early on (CUP 70, 74, 75, 78).
that “only in the ethical is there immortality and an eternal life” (CUP 128). Subjectivity is a matter of passion (CUP 109–110) and faith is the highest passion: “God is not something external but the infinite itself” (CUP 136); moreover, “freedom, that is the magic lantern [which] when man rubs it with ethical passion God appears before him” (CUP 115).

Chapter 2 engages us in a consideration of the difference between truth considered objectively and truth considered subjectively. It presents the task of subjectivity as being “in the truth” and so presents truth in “essential” (ethical and religious) matters as something in which we exist.

Chapter 3 places subjectivity in the new-yet-old perspective of the paradoxical form of the existing concrete human being. The question that runs through the chapter – “For what is an individual existing human being?” (CUP 298) – cannot be answered abstractly, because we do not live in the “fantastic medium pure being” (CUP 254). We are supposed to exist, not to abstract from existence (CUP 263–264). Climacus begins §1, “Existing; actuality” (CUP 252), by explicitly referring to Hegel’s Logic (CUP 252n) and criticizing “everything” Hegel says “about process and becoming” (CUP 257n). Whereas the earlier critique of Hegelian mediation was that it precluded “decision,” this time mediation is faulted for precluding concreteness and “paradox.” Climacus appeals instead to “another kind of dialectic, namely, the Greek or the existence-dialectic” (CUP 259). The inadequacies of “abstract” thinking, or “pure” thinking, are many: “abstract thinking is sub specie aeterni, it disregards the concrete, the temporal, the becoming of existence, the predicament of the existing individual due to his being a composite of the temporal and the eternal situated in existence” (CUP 252). He offers a striking example – “abstract thinking thus helps me with my immortality by killing me off as a particular existing individual and then making me immortal” (CUP 253). The point of the discussion of “truth” in Chapter 2 is here repeated – it is important to be “in” the truth: “pure thought, for someone existing, is a chimera when the truth is to be existed in” (CUP 260). Truth is not something you can have, like an apple; it is something in which to exist – and “what the ethical demands of him is that he be infinitely interested in existing” (CUP 264).

Sections 3 and 4 of this chapter recapitulate the dialectic of existence: namely, the “task,” “form,” and “style” of “the subjective thinker” as the contemporaneity of the particular elements of subjectivity. The notion of “paradox” emerged implicitly in Climacus’ earlier claim that “truly to exist, that is, to permeate one’s existence with consciousness, at once eternal as though far beyond it and yet present in it, and nevertheless in the course of becoming – that is truly difficult” (CUP 258). That is, Sections 3
and 4 elaborate the theme of the concretely paradoxical existing human being, who at the same time combines negative with positive, the comic with pathos. We are a “monstrous contradiction” (CUP 293). Climacus had earlier used this very phrase (uhyre Modsigelse) in explicating Lessing’s second thesis (CUP 69). We are many things, we have many sides – and they can be at odds. It is interesting that Climacus begins, not with the usual trio of thinking, feeling, acting, but with another trio, when he writes: “As far as existence goes, thinking is by no means superior to imagination and feeling but of the same order” (CUP 291). The general character of the ethical task is not to elevate either thinking or feeling or imagination at the expense of one of them – no, “the task is equal proportions, simultaneity, and the medium in which they are united is existing” (CUP 292). Finite and infinite, positive and negative, comic and pathetic: the subjective thinker embodies paradox. In sum, “imagination, feeling and dialectics with passion in the inwardness of existing are what are required for a subjective thinker” (CUP 293). It is a “mistake” to make “one-sidedness” into “the whole” (CUP 292); both “one-sidedness” and “all-sided” abstraction are defective – the aim is to gain concreteness in our many-sidedness. We must exist in a variety of dimensions simultaneously, coordinately – “in existence, it is a matter of all moments being present at once” (CUP 291). Thus, “ethics concentrates on the individual, and ethically it is the task of every individual to become a whole human being” (CUP 290).

Climacus understands “the difficulty” of the task of becoming “a whole human being” in terms of the need “to understand the greatest opposites together and understand oneself existing in them” (CUP 297); the difficulty is to hold together opposites (CUP 299). In abstraction things can be understood successively or combined in thought, but to understand oneself the existing individual has to hold opposites in combination in concrete existence – that is, not mediating or resolving them into a synthesis, but maintaining them as distinctive elements with a tension between them. Climacus admits that this is “difficult”: “to see the comic and the tragic in the same thing and at the same time,” “to think one [thing] and have its opposite in you at the same time, joining it in existence,” “to have the one mood fully and richly and also have the opposite, giving word and pathos to the one while subtly slipping in the opposite” (CUP 297). If a Hegelian annulment of contradiction were possible, the thinker would have “ceased to exist” (CUP 291). The task of existing is one demanding artistry. The subjective thinker must become an “existing work of art” (CUP 254). Foreshadowing Nietzsche, Climacus insists that we must live with “style”: “The subjective thinker’s form, the form of his communication, is his style.
His form must be as many-sided as the oppositions that he holds together” (CUP 299). The dialectic of indirect communication parallels the dialectic of existence. The subjective thinker “must have the poetic, the ethical, the dialectical, the religious at his disposal” (CUP 299). In sum: “To exist is an art. The subjective thinker is aesthetic enough for his life to have aesthetic content, ethical enough to regulate it, and dialectical enough to master it in thought” (CUP 294).

These three chapters on subjectivity, along with the two chapters that preceded them, make up a significant discussion of generic subjectivity—what it is to be a human being. They are followed by what looks like a turn away from generic subjectivity to the problem of Christianity again, since the title of Chapter 4 is “The problem of the Crumbs,” but this turns out to be only a brief interlude.

**PATHOS AGAIN**

After a brief section (Section One, CUP 303–323) that reorients us to the historical issues of *Crumbs*, we are turned, rather surprisingly, in Section Two, to the subject of “The element of pathos” again. This lengthy discussion of “pathos” (CUP 325–465) focuses on various expressions of “existential pathos” (CUP 325), exploring again “what it is to exist” (CUP 333). If, as Climacus says now, “passion is precisely the tensing in the contradiction” (CUP 324), then the first reference to human being as a “contradiction” in the section on Lessing (CUP 69) and the discussion of human being as a “contradiction” in Chapter 3 (CUP 293) have already pointed to pathos, but they did not as yet delve into the character of the pathos. That is, while the earlier discussion of ethical subjectivity addressed the form of the subjective thinker, the form of the ethical subject, now we find incredible detail about the various deepening expressions of existential pathos. The categories of resignation, suffering, and guilt that are the “initial,” “essential,” and “decisive” expressions (respectively) of existential pathos refine the notion of subjectivity. The persistent metaphor is one of deepening subjectivity.

This section on pathos is the culmination of all the earlier attempts in Part Two to highlight “inwardness” and “passion,” and it marks a return to the generic human subjectivity of the preceding chapters. We realize that Chapter 2 had highlighted how “subjectivity culminates in passion” (CUP 193), “the passion of the infinite” (CUP 170), and how “inwardness at its highest in an existing subject is passion” (CUP 167). We realize that the activity of “joining together” which was so prominent there involves
passion – the moment of passion is the closest we come to being “in two places at once” (CUP 168). Because it is a matter of holding things together, “passion, precisely, is subjectivity at its highest” (CUP 168). Chapter 3 had insisted on “passionate inwardness” (CUP 269): “Existing . . . is impossible without passion” (CUP 260); being infinitely interested is the “utmost subjective passion” (CUP 255); existing is being infinitely, passionately interested – “actuality is an inter-esse” (CUP 263) – in the dynamic in-between place.

The task is to try to be in two places at the same time. The task is to hold together, to join together in existing. The activity of becoming generates passion, involves passion, requires passion. Becoming is a pathos-filled activity. Absolute respect for an absolute end is shown by a willingness to renounce our absolute relation to relative ends, our recognition that we cannot “include” an absolute end among our various other ends, even as the highest of them. It is to reorient ourselves by deliberately taking up a different attitude toward relative ends. Infinite passion for the infinite is appropriate: it takes passion to apply all one’s energy toward the absolute while one lives in, and cannot be indifferent to, relative ends.

The section on “The element of pathos” (CUP 325–465) is over six times longer than its counterpart, the section on “The dialectical aspect” with its Appendix (CUP 470–493). Although it is true that there are references to Christianity throughout the Postscript, it is striking that any explicit discussion of Christianity proper is extremely short compared to the discussion of ethical subjectivity and ethical-religious subjectivity.

**THE POSTSCRIPT’S “NEW APPROACH” — THE REASSESSMENT OF SOCRATIC VALIDITY**

In between the section on pathos (A) and the section on the dialectical aspect (B), Climacus inserts a short discussion that may well be the heart of the postscript. This discussion, entitled “Intermediate Clause between A and B,” is the site of radical claims that do something other than merely elaborate Crumbs (CUP 465–470). Climacus identifies the subjectivity he has been exploring as “religious” subjectivity, the religion of deepening inwardness, or “Religiousness A,” and he goes on to make the following claims.

- “Religiousness A must first be present in the individual before there can be talk of becoming aware of the dialectical B. When the individual relates to an eternal happiness in the most decisive expression of existential pathos, then there can be talk of becoming aware of how the dialectical
in second place (secundo loco) knocks him down into the pathos of the absurd" (CUP 466).

- “before there can be talk even of being in the position of becoming aware of it [that is, “what is essentially Christian”] one must first exist in religiousness A” (CUP 466).
- “if religiousness A does not enter in as terminus a quo [limit, or point, from which; point of departure] for the paradoxical religiousness, then religiousness A is higher than B” (CUP 467).

The bulk of Part Two has been an account of normative subjectivity, and it now culminates in the radical new suggestion that Religiousness A is a sine qua non condition of Religiousness B. Part Two thus far constitutes an exploration of the “Socratic secret” (CUP 33) in such a way that it gives a totally new perspective on it – namely, the religion of inward deepening in immanence is a sine qua non condition for the paradoxical religiousness of Christianity.

These claims radically qualify Crumbs in an important sense, and are distinctive of a “new approach” to the issue in Crumbs. This is fully recognized by Climacus. By identifying the “subjective issue” with the Socratic issue (CUP 122n-123n, 135), the “Socratic wisdom” (CUP 172), and the Socratic “merit” (CUP 173, 174), he knows that he is doing something in the Postscript that might seem at odds with what he had done in Crumbs, and he takes the time (in a long footnote) to admit that Crumbs had not done justice to the Socratic secret of subjectivity (CUP 173–174n). He calls our attention to the difference between the Socrates of Crumbs and the Socrates of the Postscript by remarking on an “anomaly regarding the set-up of the Crumbs” that was the result of his “not wanting straight away to make the matter as difficult dialectically as it is” (CUP 173n).

Since the point in Crumbs was to radically distinguish between philosophy and an imaginative construction that coincided with a religion of revelation, Climacus thought that the contrast between the two positions would be clearer if he simply lumped together Socrates, Plato, and Hegel. The contrast would then be a simple one – between objectivity and subjectivity, or between immanence and revelation. He had wanted to “protect . . . against confusion” and to avoid complications (173n) so he kept things simple.

Because he was emphasizing the concepts of recollection and immanence that were common to Socrates and Plato, Climacus did not feel the need to distinguish between them more clearly, and it was easier just to keep Socrates as the representative of the philosophical position, with all its abstraction and speculation. The Crumbs’ attempt to introduce the
contrast between the religion of immanence and the religion of revelation had been satisfied with putting speculation, abstraction, recollection, and immanence all under one rubric, whose philosophical shorthand was “the Socratic.” Although the earlier work had actually mentioned Socrates’ awareness of the paradox of being a duplex human being, as well as the paradox of being a temporal being relating to an eternal happiness, it had done this in passing, encompassing the whole under the monolithic rubric of speculation and immanence. The job of making the qualitative difference between the two positions unmistakably clear precluded attention to the nuances of Socratic subjectivity. To have “correctly portrayed” this would have unduly complicated things for the reader (CUP 174n).

But Climacus emphasizes “the importance of distinguishing between Socrates and Plato on this score” – namely, “Socrates is constantly taking leave of” the thesis that all knowing is recollecting “in order to exist”; to pursue “recollection and immanence” is “the Platonic,” whereas “accentuating existence, which contains the category of inwardness, is what is Socratic” (CUP 173n). He concludes, “This basically puts Socrates ahead of all speculation” because he has the “truth as paradox” (CUP 174n). crumbs had failed to note that, “but for the very reason that Socrates is in this way ahead, if correctly portrayed he acquires a certain analogical similarity to what in the experiment is described as ‘truly’ going beyond the Socratic: truth as paradox becomes analogous to the paradox sensu eminentiori [in a more emphatic sense]; the passion of inwardness in existing becomes analogous to faith sensu eminentiori” (CUP 174n). In one sense, “the definition in the crumbs of what truly goes beyond the Socratic remains unchanged,” since the difference between the two positions remains “infinite” (CUP 174n); Socratic subjectivity is still within immanence. But the “Socratic secret” that inwardness is more valuable than objectivity had to be revisited, and it became the job of the postscript to embody a reevaluation of the “Socratic” alternative and thereby provide an important supplement to crumbs. In the “sequel” we simply learn more about the issue of crumbs (this is done in the Introduction, the section on orientation to crumbs, and the section on “The dialectical”). But the postscript tells us something new – namely, that the initial story presented the two elements as if they were mutually exclusive, and that was misleading, because although they are qualitatively different, they are positively related to each other. The Socratic position has a richness and depth that had not been explored in the initial story. Moreover, what makes Part Two a genuine supplement to crumbs is that it announces for the first time the indispensability of Socratic subjectivity and explores the positive relation between A and B.
The “Socratic secret” had presented a sharp contrast between two positions – the Socratic position (we have the truth within us) and the non-Socratic position (we are in untruth, having forfeited the truth through sin). They were presented as alternatives – either the Socratic position was true or the non-Socratic position was true. The “thought-project” introduced the seminal question: “Can the truth be learned?” (KW 7:13); this was a question about both what truth is and how we gain it. Climacus stipulatively defined “learning” as something that involves the introduction of something radically new – we do not learn, in this sense, when we are reminded of something; recollection is not a case of learning. The question whether the truth can be (must be) learned or whether humanity possesses it innately is important, because it amounts to the question whether self-knowledge equals knowledge of God or whether there must be a revelation of God by Godself that cannot be produced by oneself: “In the Socratic view, every human being is himself the midpoint, and the whole world focuses only on him because his self-knowledge is God-knowledge” (KW 7:11); my relation to the Socratic teacher “cannot concern me with regard to my eternal happiness, for this is given retrogressively in the possession of the truth that I had from the beginning without knowing it” (KW 7:12). In other words, either we possess the truth innately or we do not; either we eternally have the condition or we need to be (re)given the condition; either we are free or we are bound; either the teacher is human or the teacher is divine; either we need only recollection or we need revelation. Climacus’ assumption is that these are exhaustive alternatives, and in a footnote he explicitly connects the expression of the “Greek idea” with modern speculative idealism (KW 7:10n). The “Moral” (KW 7:111) claimed that the goal was not to decide which alternative was true, but only to show how different the two positions were.

Crumbs had employed a perspective from which these positions had two different starting points – truth versus untruth as a starting point. It had emphasized the qualitative difference between the Socratic and non-Socratic by describing human beings at a point in time at which both positions could not be true. The approach in Crumbs was to consider the matter in a temporal progression, seeing each possibility as a successive moment. The Postscript, on the other hand, adopts a “new approach” by emphasizing the positive relation between the two kinds of subjectivity. This is not to deny that there was an appreciation of Socrates even in Crumbs. Crumbs announced the “profundity of Socratic thinking” (KW 7:11) before the Postscript brought the “Socratic secret” to the foreground. Still, the bulk of Crumbs focuses on the alternative to the Socratic – although each of
the first three chapters begins with a brief reference to a Socratic position, they basically develop the non-Socratic, and the remainder of the book is entirely on the non-Socratic. Although he presented Socrates as recognizing the existential paradox that was the human animal as well as the notion of the passion of thought seeking “its own downfall” (KW 7: 37), Climacus had a major stake in emphasizing the qualitative difference between the Socratic paradox and the absolute paradox, between the Socratic unknown and the Christian “absurd.” Despite Climacus’ appreciation of the Socratic sensitivity to existential paradox and the validity of the Socratic relation between one human being and another, the accent of Crumbs fell heavily on the qualitative difference between Socratic and non-Socratic, and the bulk of Crumbs developed the non-Socratic. The ratio of Socratic to non-Socratic is reversed in the Postscript, and while Socratic subjectivity remains qualitatively different from the Christian, it is now seen as indispensable.

THE CHARACTER OF THE POSITIVE RELATION BETWEEN A AND B — THE BREAK WITH IMMANENCE

The claim that existing in Religiousness A is a *sine qua non* condition of being open to Religiousness B means that the relation between them is positive, but this positiveness can be interpreted in two different ways. First, Religiousness A could be just a jumping off point for B, something that is left behind when one moves on to B. Second, Religiousness A could be a continuing impetus within B, something that remains in play within one’s Christianity; just as the aesthetic was claimed by Judge William in *Either/Or* to be preserved and transfigured in the ethical, so Religiousness A is preserved and transfigured in Religiousness B. At stake in the difference between the two interpretations is the possibility that within Religiousness B there is the lived co-presence of the Socratic in a heightened subjectivity. The question is whether in Postscript the Socratic alternative, in addition to being retrieved and explored in more detail, is now reevaluated, so that it is no longer seen as an alternative. In other words, the question is whether the “either—or” of Crumbs is radically qualified by a “both—and” in the postscript. One could say that it amounts to the age-old controversy about

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6 See KW 7: 49–110 (the Appendix, and Chapters iv and v).
7 Climacus acknowledged that Socrates was right in seeing the Socratic midwifery relation as “the highest relation a human being can have to another” (KW 7: 10), but this “true relation between one human being and another” did not preclude the possibility that a “divine point of departure” might still be necessary.
whether grace perfects nature or whether grace destroys nature and replaces it with something else.

Climacus’ insistence on the qualitative difference between A and B is clear:

Religiousness A is the dialectic of taking to heart; it is the relation to an eternal happiness that is not conditioned by a something, but is the dialectical taking to heart of the relation itself, conditioned alone, that is, by the taking to heart. Religiousness B . . . or the paradoxical religiousness . . . or the religiousness that has the dialectical in second place, does, on the other hand, posit conditions, in such a way that they are not inwardness’s deeper dialectical taking to heart, but a definite something which more closely defines the eternal happiness . . . not by defining the individual’s appropriation of it more closely, but defining more closely the eternal happiness itself, though not as a task for thinking, but precisely as paradox, as repulsing, for there to be new pathos. (CUP 465–466)

It seems clear that one must suffer the inward deepening essential to Religiousness A – the pathos of resignation, suffering, and guilt-consciousness – before one could ever be open to the possibility of a qualitatively different inward deepening. Unless one already knew what it was to exist in pathos-filled subjectivity, one could not even recognize the possibility presented by the story of the God-Man. Yet the question remains whether Religiousness A must be left behind when one exists in B – whether A and B are mutually exclusive. Another way of phrasing this is to ask what becomes of such claims as “your eternal consciousness is only in the ethical” (CUP 124) and “the ethical is and remains the highest task set for every human being” (CUP 126) when we have made the transition to Religiousness B – are they superseded, or are they still in play?

Support for the reading in which Socratic subjectivity exists within Christian subjectivity is found in claims like the following. Climacus writes that “every Christian has pathos as in religiousness A, and then this pathos of singling out” (CUP 489, my emphasis). This suggestion of a mere additive relation is clarified by his claim that Religiousness A “is not the specifically Christian religiousness. On the other hand, the dialectical part is only decisive in so far as it is put together with the pathetic for there to be a new pathos” (CUP 465, my emphasis). Moreover, “specific to Christianity is the dialectical in the second place, only not, be it noted, as a task for thinking . . . but a relating to the pathetic as an incitement to new pathos” (CUP 468, my emphasis). Christian pathos is a “sharpening pathos” (CUP 489). The claim that “existence is paradoxically accentuated” in Christianity (CUP 477, my emphasis) fits perfectly with the idea that sharpened pathos is an operation on Socratic pathos. This accentuation is a heightening and
a deepening: “the religious is quite rightly the existing inwardness, and religiousness *heightens* according to the *deepening* of this determinant in it, and the paradoxical-religious becomes the last” (CUP 479, my emphasis).

Support, however, for reading the indispensability of A as a mere jumping off point, a point at which the qualitative difference involves a rejection of A in order to exist in B, is indicated in Climacus’ formulation of the transition in terms of a break with “immanence.” Climacus writes: “If the individual is paradox-dialectical, *every remainder of original immanence annihilated and all connection severed*, the individual placed at the very edge of existence, then we have the paradox-religious” (CUP 479, my emphasis). He emphasizes the break with immanence, suggesting that “the paradox-religious *breaks with* immanence and makes existing the absolute contradiction, not within immanence but *against* immanence” (CUP 480, my emphasis); “every communication of immanence by way of recollection through going back is cut off” (CUP 490). His reference back to *Crumbs* echoes this perspective of opposition: “Religiously, there is no disciple and no teacher... Paradoxically-religiously, the teacher is the god in time, the disciple a new creation” (CUP 480; trans. modified). He insists that “Christianity will not be content to be an evolution within the total category of human nature” (CUP 468).

Climacus’ formulation of Religiousness B in terms of a break with immanence raises the question what “immanence” means, and what it is contrasted with. If the “singling out” (CUP 489) of Religiousness B is “against” immanence (CUP 480), and if “every remainder of original immanence [is] annihilated, and all connection severed” (CUP 479), what does this mean for our humanity? Is human nature so corrupted that it must be annihilated? Climacus insists that “the religious A comprehends the contradiction as suffering in self-annihilation, although within immanence” (CUP 480), as well as that “if the individual is dialectically defined inwardly in self-annihilation before God, then we have *religiousness A*” (CUP 479). Moreover, “this paradoxical inwardness [of B] is the greatest possible, for even the most dialectical determinant, if it is still within immanence, leaves as though a possibility of escape, of a jumping aside, of a withdrawal into the eternal behind it; it is as if not everything after all had been staked” (CUP 479). If even “self-annihilation” and “the most dialectical determinant” can remain within immanence, and are not yet the break with immanence that constitutes Religiousness B, then what kind

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8 The claim that “Within the paradox-religious, *between persons* religiousness A holds true” (CUP 480, my emphasis) seems to exclude it from holding true in any way within the relation between persons and God.
of break is it? Is Religiousness A a jumping off point that is left behind, superseded? If immanence means the locus for human subjectivity, then the break with immanence means a break with our humanity, our embodiedness, our concreteness – is this what is implied? Are the resignation, suffering, and guilt experienced in Religiousness A left behind with the transition to B?

Climacus suggests what “immanence” means to him when he makes the following contrast: “in the religious A the eternal is ubiquum et nusquam [everywhere and nowhere] but hidden by the actuality of existence; in the paradox-religious, the eternal is at a definite place, and precisely this is the breach with immanence” (CUP 478–479, my emphasis). Immanence means the ubiquity of the eternal. The original situation of immanence always allows a retreat into the eternal. When that retreat is blocked, because the eternal is no longer everywhere and equally immanent, there is a break with immanence: “There is no immanent underlying kinship between the temporal and the eternal, because the eternal itself has entered time and would establish the kinship there” (CUP 480). That is, if the eternal itself comes into time, in a historical incarnation, then we need to negotiate the historical implications. If we face that paradox, then we cannot escape back into the eternal, but must either reject the paradox or be pushed more deeply into subjectivity.

Immanence, in other words, for Climacus, does not refer to “actuality’s existence” (CUP 478) as contrasted with the eternal; original immanence is the ubiquity of the eternal, a world of homogeneity with the eternal. The understanding of existential pathos as a progressive deepening that marks the existing human being implies that the humanity of the person is not supposed to be left behind – the break with immanence cannot mean that. It means an even deeper subjectivity. The transformation is a function of absolute engagement with history. So the idea of a break with immanence does not mean that Religiousness A is left behind, superseded by something entirely new. The break with immanence is a break with the original immanence of the eternal, not a break with our own historical embodiedness, not a leaving behind of the subjectivity of resignation, suffering, and guilt. It is not a break with human existing, but an accentuation of human existing. If Religiousness B breaks into ethical subjectivity, that subjectivity must remain in place to be broken into. Climacus suggests that by “ethically accentuating existing,” Religiousness A “prevents the one existing from remaining abstractly in immanence, or becoming abstract by wanting to remain in immanence” (CUP 480). The sharpened pathos of sin-consciousness does not
leave behind the pathos of guilt-consciousness, but sharpens the pathos of guilt-consciousness, transforms it rather than replaces it. When pathos is sharpened, the original pathos is not annihilated.

A New Question — the Same Question

I have suggested above that one kind of relation between the Postscript and Crumbs is that Postscript changes the apparent “either–or” between Socratic and non-Socratic found in Crumbs to a kind of “both—and,” an existential dialectic — that is, that the ethico-religious subjectivity of Religiousness A is not left behind when one becomes a Christian, but is part of “the work of inwardness in becoming and continuing to be a Christian” (CUP 509, my emphasis).9 In other words, Climacus’ polemic against mediation and the “both—and”10 which is so prominent in the Postscript nevertheless reveals a model of subjectivity that can appropriately be called a model of “both—and.” One example of this difference between Crumbs and the Postscript is found in the way that Chapter 2 of Part Two in the Postscript takes Crumbs’ contrast between truth and untruth as opposites, and re-presents it through the exploration of the way in which subjectivity is both truth and untruth, and truth again (CUP 179).11 We are asked to think about the possibility of a Greek existence dialectic — a joining or holding together that is expressed in being lived together. Socratic subjectivity is held together with a consciousness of sin that generates a deeper subjectivity: “Specific to Christianity is the dialectical in the second place . . . a relating to the pathetic as an incitement to new pathos” (CUP 468). Joining sin and forgiveness together with eternal happiness is the qualitative specification that marks Religiousness B. The theme of joining together, of holding together — which is the difficulty of existence — is at the heart of religious subjectivity, because it is at the heart of ethical subjectivity. Climacus’ whole motivation was to reawaken people who had forgotten “what it is to

9 One could argue that Crumbs presents the first level of contrast (objectivity/speculation versus subjectivity), while Postscript represents a second level of contrast (between two modes of subjectivity). One could say that Crumbs is predominantly an account of the dialectical, whereas Postscript is predominantly an account of pathos; although each text includes both, the accent is decidedly different. Finally, the whole project of a thought-experiment distinguishing two main ways of understanding the locus of truth is very different from the passionate outpourings that we find in Postscript.

10 See, e.g., CUP 336, 337, 341–342.

11 “Subjectivity, inwardness, accordingly, is truth. Is there now a more inward expression of this?” (CUP 174). “There is no more inward way of saying that subjectivity is truth than when subjectivity first of all is untruth and yet subjectivity is truth” (CUP 179).
live as a human being” (CUP 214) – surely, we are not asked to forget that when we become Christian.

But the maintenance of Religiousness A within Religiousness B (which guarantees that Religiousness B does not become a spiritualized escape to another world) is not easy to imagine. The “postscript” raises the question of how to think of a “deepening” of human subjectivity that is not an “evolution.” The difficulty is to think such a sharpening (intensification, deepening) of pathos – one in which pathos is preserved and transfigured – without eliminating the qualitativeness of the transition. The difficulty is to think of a qualitative transition that does not imply radical discontinuity. In the Postscript this is specifically addressed in terms of making sense of the notion of preserving and transfiguring Religiousness A within Religiousness B, given the language about the loss of or break with immanence. The difficulty is to think a qualitative transition without the annihilation of what precedes it. Climacus is here reengaging the tension found first in Either/Or, and then in Fear and Trembling – namely, the tension between a qualitative difference between the spheres and a lived harmony of them. It is a difficulty that Kierkegaard is repeatedly addressing in the authorship – how to imagine an existential “both–and” that is not a reductive mediation.

Nothing I have said above denies the richness and elegance of Crumbs, or intends to diminish its importance in Kierkegaard’s authorship. Nor does it deny that the category of “either–or” is a valuable one for certain purposes. I agree with the admirers of Crumbs that it contains much of “philosophical significance” and that it is not “less subversive of philosophical expectations” than is the Postscript. But I disagree with the conclusion that “the Postscript is not an addendum to the Crumbs – the provision of essential elements missing in that text – but a restatement or representation of it.” I also disagree with the claim that “neither the topic nor the tone, neither the content nor the form, of the Postscript attempts anything that is not attempted in the Crumbs.” The very richness of Crumbs is a good reason to think that the Postscript is not a restatement of it. Although it is a “renewed attempt in the same vein” as Crumbs (i.e., the vein of humor, satire, parody, the comic revealed in Climacus’ report on the misleading review of Crumbs), Climacus’ announced goal of a “new approach” is borne out in Part Two of the Postscript, which is a “renewed attempt” to present what is distinctive about Christianity through a “new approach” to Socratic subjectivity, or equivalently, a “new approach” to Christianity through

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13 Ibid., 2.
14 Ibid., 3.
15 Some things are actually clearer in Crumbs, including the moral relevance of offense at the Paradox.
a reassessment of Socratic subjectivity. This new approach adds something qualitatively new to the discussion of Socratic subjectivity located in *Philosophical Crumbs*, something that could not be left unsaid.\(^{16}\)

\(^{16}\) Climacus had claimed in *Crumbs* that “once the condition is given, that which was valid for the Socratic is again valid” (KW 7: 63). This may have merely meant that in Religiousness B the Socratic was valid again between human beings, or it may have anticipated the idea that there is a lived tension in Religiousness B’s sharpened pathos. In any case, the working out of this lived tension awaited the *Postscript*. 
Chapter 2

Kierkegaard’s Socratic Pseudonym

A Profile of Johannes Climacus

Paul Muench

The subject of this report is a fictional character and so-called pseudonymous author, one Johannes Climacus, a self-described “humorist” who is “thirty years old” and was “born in Copenhagen” (CUP 520). Only known relative, father, deceased (CUP 135). Possible physical features: “medium in height, with black hair and brown eyes.” Pastimes: “loafing and thinking”; “subjective author” of two books, Philosophical Crumbs (or Fragments) and Concluding Unscientific Postscript, both edited by S. Kierkegaard (CUP 156, 158). Philosophically notable characteristics: has an “ardent enthusiasm” for Socrates (KW 7: 111); seems to endorse the view he attributes to Socrates that being a philosophical “midwife . . . is the highest relationship a human being can have with another” person; has claimed with respect to his own development and philosophical undertakings that the “only one who consolo [him] is Socrates”; may himself be a Socratic figure, perhaps representing Kierkegaard’s “idealization of the Socratic within the context of nineteenth-century Danish Christendom.”

Obtaining an understanding of Climacus has proved difficult; he remains under surveillance. The following (provisional) report includes an overview of Climacus’ two works and the two therapeutic, experimental stances he

The author of this “report” would like to thank David Berger, Bridget Clarke, Rick Furtak, and K. Brian Søderquist for their comments on an earlier draft.

1 Cf. CUP 16. Kierkegaard, by comparison, was 32 when the Postscript was published in 1846. If Climacus was 30, this means that he was 28 when Philosophical Crumbs was published in 1844. On the significance of Kierkegaard’s use of pseudonyms, see especially CUP 527–531.

2 See PAP vi b 40:26. This is a draft of the Postscript, cited in the Hong’s “Supplement,” KW 12: 49.

3 Hannay translates the title of Climacus’ first book, Philosophiske Smuler, as Philosophical Crumbs, as does Marilyn Piety in Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs.

4 KW 7: 10; SKS 4: 219 (trans. modified).


adopts in relation to his readers (together with a few orienting observations about Climacus); a brief examination of Kierkegaard’s unfinished manuscript *Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est*; and a more detailed account of Climacus’ diagnosis of what he thinks has gone wrong in Christendom and how this relates to his decision to become an author.

**CLIMACUS AND HIS TWO BOOKS**

Climacus’ first book, *Philosophical Crumbs*, is a rather slender volume that hypothetically investigates the difference between a Socratic conception (broadly construed) of the individual’s relation to the truth and a Christian conception (though the latter is not identified as “Christian” until the very end of the book).⁷ Throughout the body of *Crumbs*, Climacus experimentally adopts the persona of someone who is “ignorant” of Christianity, pretending in the process that the Christian conception he sketches is “a whimsical idea of [his] own” (KW 7: 9, 109).⁸ In the preface Climacus calls this work a “pamphlet” and denies that it makes “any claim to being a part of the scientific-scholarly [videnskabelige] endeavor” that modern philosophers have undertaken, notably Hegel and his followers (KW 7: 5).

Climacus’ second book, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, is a kind of sequel to *Philosophical Crumbs* in the form of a postscript (though at over six times the length of the original work it is not a typical postscript). Climacus also calls this work a “pamphlet” and, together with his use in the title of *uvidenskabelig* (unscientific, unscholarly), again seems to be trying to designate his books as somehow different in kind from the systematic philosophical treatises that are the norm of his day.⁹ The *Postscript* is a multifaceted work that has a number of different aims. Climacus claims that the short first part of the work (CUP 19–50) constitutes “the promised

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⁷ Cf. CUP 304–305. The non-Christian conception should only be “broadly construed” as Socratic since, while it is tied to Socrates in *Crumbs*, it is also characterized by appeal to what is usually taken to be a Platonic notion, namely the theory (or myth) of recollection that Socrates invokes in the *Meno* (81a–e). For Climacus’ purposes in *Crumbs*, the chief idea is that according to the Socratic conception an individual (perhaps with the help of a philosophical midwife) can discover the truth within herself or himself through the use of her or his own faculties, whereas on the Christian conception an individual has lost this capacity by having become a sinner. Climacus distinguishes more finely between Socrates and Plato with respect to recollection in the *Postscript*. See especially CUP 173–175.

⁸ Cf. CUP 237. The experimental stance that Climacus adopts in *Crumbs* is discussed in “Climacus’ Socratic Method”; see also “Understanding Climacus,” 436–438.

⁹ CUP 6; SKS 7: 12 (trans. modified). Hannay translates “Piece” (in modern Danish “pjece”) as “piece”; following the Hongs, “pamphlet” has been used in this report.
Kierkegaard’s Socratic pseudonym

sequel” to Crumbs, while the longer second part (CUP 51–526) is “a renewed attempt on the same lines” as his first book; he also claims, however, that this second part of the book represents “a new approach to the problem of the Crumbs” (CUP 18, emphasis added; cf. CUP 11, 12). While in Crumbs Climacus develops the Christian outlook without mentioning Christianity by name (except at the end of the book), in the Postscript he explicitly raises Christianity as a topic at the start and experimentally presents himself as someone who is seeking to answer the question, appropriately cast in the first person, “How can I, Johannes Climacus, become a Christian?”10 In raising this question as he does, in a context in which “all the others [imagine that they] have faith already as something given, as a trifle they do not even think very highly of,” Climacus acknowledges that his activity may appear to be a kind of “madness” (CUP 18, emphasis added; cf. CUP 307). At the same time, he maintains that by posing things in the first person, though the “problem concerns only [him by himself],” if this is “properly posed, it will concern each in the same way” (CUP 18).11 The experimental, Socratic stance that Climacus adopts in the Postscript is the very stance that Kierkegaard draws attention to in The Point of View and On My Work as an Author (and later claims, in “My Task,” that he himself has adopted in relation to his contemporaries).12 Kierkegaard maintains that if one is to engage those who are under the illusion that they already are Christians (even as their lives are governed by “aesthetic or, at most, aesthetic-ethical categories”), then “it must be done indirectly, not by someone who loudly declares himself to be an extraordinary Christian, but by someone who, better informed, even declares himself not to be a Christian” (KW 22: 43).13 He singles out Climacus as his principal example of someone who adopts this stance: “The one who introduced the issue [of becoming a Christian] did not directly define himself as being Christian and the others as not being that; no, just the reverse – he denies being [a Christian] and concedes it to the others. This Johannes Climacus does” (KW 22: 8n).

While Philosophical Crumbs principally consists of Climacus’ therapeutic engagement of a particular kind of reader, the Postscript has much greater

10 See, e.g., CUP 16–17, 520. The experimental stance that Climacus adopts in the Postscript is discussed in “Understanding Climacus,” 438–439. On the need to help reacquaint readers with hearing the first-personal “I” see, e.g., CUP 262. See also JP 1: 656; PAP viii B 88 and JP 6: 6440; SKS 22, NB11:223.
11 The importance of employing the first-personal “I” will not be directly addressed in this report.
ambitions. In this work, in addition to employing a second experimen-
tal means of therapeutically engaging his readers, Climacus presents his
diagnosis of what he thinks has gone wrong in Christendom. In the pro-
cess, he provides his readers with an account of how he became an author
(thereby anticipating the several accounts that Kierkegaard will later write
about himself and his larger authorship); critically responds to a review
of his first book and provides his own conception of *Crumbs* and how
he thinks it ought to be read;\(^4^4\) and develops both an account of indirect
communication (which helps to explain how he conceives of his different
means of engaging his readers) and a conception of philosophy that he
ties to the ancient Greeks and to Socrates in particular.\(^4^5\) While his own
philosophical endeavors seem opposed to the modern, Hegelian style of
doing philosophy,\(^4^6\) Climacus does seem to want to tie what he is doing to
this ancient Greek approach to philosophy, where, on his view, the chief
result obtained by a thinker is not a written work but a particular kind
of life: “in Greece a thinker was not someone leading a self-effacing exis-
tence who produced works of art, but was himself an existing work of art”
(CUP 254).

Climacus has many facets, exhibiting both a capacity for rigorous think-
ing and a propensity to use irony and humor. He characterizes himself
as a “dialectician” who shares with earlier thinkers from antiquity a “pas-
sion for distinctions” (KW 7: 108, 91; see also CUP 411–412). This means
that in general he should be expected to be philosophically rigorous when
he discusses and defines concepts. Writing in response to the publication
of Martensen’s *Dogmatics*, Kierkegaard seems to endorse this picture of
Climacus: “My most popular book is more stringent in definition of con-
cepts, and my pseudonym Johannes Climacus is seven times as stringent
in definition of concepts” (JP 6: 6449).\(^4^7\) At the same time, despite the fact

\(^{4^4}\) Frederik Beck, review of *Philosophical Crumbs*, *Neues Repertorium für die theologische Literatur und
Climacus’ critique of Beck’s review appears in a long footnote in the *Postscript* (CUP 230–232).
This footnote is discussed in “Climacus’ Socratic Method,” 144–147; see also Conant, *“Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein,
and Nonsense,”* 204–207.

\(^{4^5}\) Climacus characterizes the alternative, Socratic conception of philosophy as a “more simple-minded
philosophy, propounded by someone existing for the existing” and which “will especially bring the
ethical to light” (CUP 103).

\(^{4^6}\) While the Hegelian manner of doing philosophy, with its attention to world history, may shed light
on the development of human culture, Climacus maintains that it does not provide individuals
with resources for trying to understand themselves in the midst of their unfolding, unfinished lives:
“That is why a Hegelian cannot possibly understand himself with the aid of his philosophy; he can
understand only what is past and finished. But someone still living is surely not dead” (CUP 257;
SKS 7: 280, trans. modified).

as the matter entails” (emphasis added).
that he is “not without a certain dialectical dexterity,” Climacus is bound to strike first-time readers as quite unlike most philosophical authors they have encountered (CUP 524). Both in his personal presentation and in his manner of writing, Climacus remains an elusive yet stylistically intriguing figure. He is someone who frequently employs irony and humor in his writings while also insisting that this is not incompatible with the deepest seriousness. In fact, he seems committed to upholding an ideal that he attributes to the German thinker Gotthold Lessing, that of combining “jest and earnest[ness]” in one’s writings and written self-presentations, so that it is “impossible for a third party to tell which is which – unless the third party [knows] it by himself” (CUP 58; cf. KW 7: 72). According to one of Kierkegaard’s other pseudonyms, Anti–Climacus, this is to employ a type of indirect communication:

It is indirect communication to place jest and earnestness together in such a way that the composite is a dialectical knot – and then to be a nobody oneself. If anyone wants to have anything to do with this kind of communication, he will have to untie the knot himself.\(^\text{18}\)

Climacus connects the use of irony specifically to ethical matters: “If someone says . . . that the only means I possess are a little irony, a little pathos, a little dialectic, my reply would be: What else should someone wanting to present the ethical have?”\(^\text{19}\) Humor, in turn, has a special connotation in the Postscript (and Kierkegaard’s writings more generally) and is held to be concerned with religious matters (see, e.g., CUP 420–424, 461–464).\(^\text{20}\) While Climacus frequently appeals to Socrates as his chief example of someone who employs irony to help illuminate the ethical, he calls himself a humorist and so invites his readers to treat him as someone who serves an analogous role with respect to the religious.

Because Climacus assigns such philosophical importance to irony and humor and because his writings frequently exhibit these literary devices (and the existential stances he associates with them), readers who seek to

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\(^{18}\) *Practice in Christianity*, KW 20: 133. Anti-Climacus is Kierkegaard’s Christian pseudonym. On the prefix “Anti” in his name, which the Hongs claim signifies not “against” but “before” (indicating “a relation of [higher] rank”), and his relationship to Climacus and the other pseudonyms, see, e.g., KW 20: xii–xiii and KW 22: 6. Kierkegaard claims that existentially speaking he would place himself “higher than Johannes Climacus, lower than Anti-Climacus,” but also seems to identify with both of them, as though they each represented in ideal form a part of his own personal nature: “There is something inexplicably felicitous in the antithesis: Climacus–Anti-Climacus, I recognize so much of myself and my nature in it that if someone else had invented it I would believe that he had secretly observed my inner being” (JP 6: 6433; SKS 22: 130, NB11:209 and JP 6:6532; SKS 22:1361, NB14:430).

\(^{19}\) CUP 128; SKS 7: 142–143 (trans. modified).

\(^{20}\) See also Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought*; Söderquist, “Irony and Humor in Kierkegaard’s Early Journals.”
understand him and his two books will thus be faced with interpretive demands that are not normally encountered when reading more standard philosophical prose (akin, perhaps, to some of the difficulties involved with reading one of Plato’s dialogues). In a draft of a lecture on indirect communication that was never delivered, Kierkegaard seems to acknowledge that readers have found it difficult to appreciate the manner in which his pseudonymous works combine earnestness and jest:

The really right kind of earnestness, especially as regards ethical communication, would certainly appear to most people to be jesting...I np s e u d o n y m o u s b o o k s published by me the earnestness is more vigorous [than can be expressed in this lecture], particularly in those passages in which the presentation will appear to most people as nothing but jest. This, as far as I know, has not previously been understood at all. (JP 1: 656)

The difficulty of making judgments about works that combine earnestness and jest may help to explain why there have been such radical disagreements about what to make of Crumbs and the Postscript, together with their elusive fictional narrator/pseudonymous author. Like Socrates, Climacus comes across as someone who combines a dialectical rigor with an unusual, often elusive sensibility that keeps attentive readers on their toes.

THE CORRUPTION OF A NAÏVE JOHANNES CLIMACUS BY SPECULATIVE PHILOSOPHY

Before turning to consider Climacus’ account of how he became an author and his diagnosis of what’s gone wrong in Christendom, it may be helpful to distinguish him from a figure who appears in Kierkegaard’s unfinished manuscript Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est.22 This text is thought to have been written circa 1842–43, and so prior to the 1844 publication of Crumbs and the 1846 publication of the Postscript. While this work is sometimes taken to provide a sort of “intellectual biography” of Climacus, C. Stephen Evans rightly notes that “we have no real basis for assuming that the subject of [De Omnibus] is identical with the author

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21 See Muench, “Understanding Climacus,” on two competing ways in which Climacus has been conceived.

22 KW 7: 113–172; PAP IV b 1:103–150. In this report this text will be referred to as De Omnibus. On dating this manuscript, see SKS k18: 369 and KJN 2, 11:288. For a thoughtful reading of how this work might be read to anticipate issues that arise in Crumbs, see Howland, “Johannes Climacus, Socratic Philosopher,” in his Kierkegaard and Socrates, 10–27. See also Stewart, “Kierkegaard’s Polemic with Martensen in Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est,” in his Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered, 238–281.
Kierkegaard’s Socratic pseudonym

of Philosophical Fragments,” or the Postscript.23 It is true that there is a character that appears in this work who is named “Johannes Climacus,” but he is quite unlike the Johannes Climacus who is the subject of this report. One danger of tying De Omnibus to Climacus’ writings is that one may be tempted to read these later works through the lens of this manuscript and its particular concerns. The Johannes of De Omnibus is called “a young student” by the manuscript’s unnamed narrator, someone who is “now in his twenty-first year” and who is “ardently in love . . . with thinking” (KW 7: 118–119). His name is associated in the text with the Greek monk of the same name from late antiquity (c. 525–616 CE) who wrote The Ladder of Divine Ascent.24 The activity that the young Johannes appears to enjoy more than anything is going up and down the rungs of the ladders of thought that he constructs: “It was his delight to begin with a single thought and then, by way of coherent thinking, to climb step by step to a higher one, because to him coherent thinking was a scala paradisi . . . this up-and-down and down-and-up of thought was an unparalleled joy . . . for his whole life was thinking” (KW 7: 118–119, 123).25

Though Kierkegaard did not complete the adventures of the young Johannes, his plan seems to have been to create a character who “thinks that to philosophize is not to talk or to write but in all quietness to do honestly and scrupulously what the philosophers say one should do.”26 Young Johannes sets his sights on the thesis “de omnibus dubitandum est” (everything is to be doubted) and decides to spend however long it takes to “think it through,” resolving not “to let go of it” prior to this “even though it were to cost him his life” (KW 7: 131). Kierkegaard thus seems to conceive of the young Johannes as a character who will naïvely try to follow the dictates of modern philosophy and suffer the consequences accordingly:

The plan of this narrative was as follows. By means of the melancholy irony, which did not consist in any single utterance on the part of Johannes Climacus but in his whole life, by means of the profound earnestness involved in a young man’s being sufficiently honest and earnest enough to do quietly and unostentatiously what the philosophers say (and he thereby becomes unhappy) – I would strike a blow at [modern speculative] philosophy. Johannes does what we are told to do – he actually doubts everything – he suffers through all the pain of doing that, becomes cunning, almost acquires a bad conscience. When he has gone as far in

23 Evans, Passionate Reason, 9.
24 The title is Klimax tou paradeisou in Greek; Scala paradisi in Latin. See, e.g., SKS K17: 488–489; Evans, Passionate Reason, 8–9. The surname “Climacus” is a Latinized form of the Greek term for ladder, klimax. Hence in English young Johannes (or Climacus himself for that matter) might be called “John Ladder.”
that direction as he can go and wants to come back, he cannot do so. He perceives
that in order to hold on to this extreme position of doubting everything, he has
engaged all his mental and spiritual powers... Now he despairs, his life is wasted,
his youth spent in these deliberations. Life has not acquired any meaning for him,
and all this is the fault of philosophy.  

While it is certainly possible to maintain that there is some sort of family
resemblance between the 21-year-old Johannes who falls victim to modern
philosophy and the pseudonym of 28 or 30 who is encountered in Crumbs
and the Postscript, it is important that the young Johannes’ vulnerability
to corruption by speculation not be allowed to color how Climacus’ own
relation to philosophy is conceived. If, as has been suggested, Climacus
is a Socratic figure, then it is to be expected that he will not be similarly
vulnerable to corruption but instead, through having obtained what he
calls a certain “dialectical fearlessness,” will turn out to be someone who is
in a position to combat the corrupting influence of this manner of doing
philosophy (CUP 14).  

He is someone who, like Socrates, may even be
able to help the young Johanneses of his day (cf. CUP 274).

In De Omnibus the story of the young Johannes and how he becomes a
victim of modern speculative philosophy is a means by which the unnamed
narrator seeks to combat this manner of doing philosophy. While
Climacus employs different, more Socratic means in his two books, the
target remains the same: Hegelian-style modern philosophy. That this
common target is forever joined in Kierkegaard’s mind with the words
“Johannes Climacus” can perhaps best be seen by examining an early
passage from the journals, dated January 20, 1839: “Hegel is a Johannes
Climacus, who does not storm the heavens like the giants by putting moun-
tain upon mountain, but  

climbs aloft [entrer] by means of his syllogisms.”
Here the emphasis is on Hegel and his potentially blasphemous desire
to obtain entry into heaven through speculative thinking. The phrase
“Johannes Climacus” does not function as a name but rather helps to
pick out the concept “is a Johannes Climacus” (cf. “Senator, you’re no
Jack Kennedy”). If Hegel is a blasphemous Johannes Climacus, the young

28 Hannay’s translation omits two sentences that include a later reference to “dialectical fearlessness.”
See KW 12’: 14; SKS 7: 23 (lines 31–32).
29 In the Postscript Climacus considers on multiple occasions a scenario remarkably similar to the one
envisaged by Kierkegaard for De Omnibus and suggests that depicting such a scenario might provide
an “indirect assault” on Hegel’s philosophy by means of a kind of “satire” (CUP 259–260). See also,
e.g., CUP 161, 213–214.
30 KJN 1, DD:203; SKS 17: 277 (trans. modified). On the nautical connotations of “entrer” see SKS
K17: 489.
Johannes of *De Omnibus* might be characterized as a further instance of this concept, a naïve Johannes Climacus who suffers from having placed his trust in speculative philosophy. By contrast, the subject of this report, noted pseudonymous author of *Crumbs* and the *Postscript*, might be characterized as a third instance of this concept, a Socratic Johannes Climacus.

**CLIMACUS DISCOVERS HIS TASK**

Of all Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms, Climacus is the only one who shares with Kierkegaard a desire to develop an account of his authorship and to explain to his readers why he, Johannes Climacus, began writing and why his works take the peculiar form that they do. In the *Postscript* he describes “two events in [his] life that made [him] decide to be an author” and also recounts the circumstances surrounding the publication of his first book. These moments within the text appear at the end of two chapters in Part Two of the *Postscript* and in an appendix to the second of those chapters, and are set apart from the rest of the text by being written in the past tense (CUP 155–158, 197–210, 210–251). In seemingly stepping back from his therapeutic engagement of his readers and speaking more directly about what he has been doing and why, Climacus follows the example set by Socrates in Plato’s *Apology*. Unlike most Platonic dialogues where Socrates is portrayed as in the midst of questioning and refuting the one he is speaking with, in the *Apology*, as part of his defense, Socrates characterizes in more general terms how he became a philosopher and why. In doing so, he draws attention to his aim of making people aware of their ignorance (where they think they know things they do not) and why this activity of being a “gadfly,” which has made him quite unpopular, might be understood as being divinely sanctioned. Socrates’ remarks are offered to help the jury better understand him and his philosophical activities. Climacus’ autobiographical, diagnostic remarks can play a similar role in helping to bring him and his own philosophical activities more clearly into view. Accordingly, the remainder of this report will be focused on these remarks.

The first time that Climacus takes up the topic of how he became an author, he begins by noting that “it is now about four years since [he] got

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31 Cf. Burgess, “Kierkegaard’s Climacus as Author.”
32 PAP vi b 83:2 (draft of the *Postscript*, cited in KW 12: 104).
33 See especially *Apology* 20c–24b; 28b–31a.
the notion of wanting to try [his] hand as an author” (CUP 155). Since the Postscript was published in 1846, this seems to refer to 1842 (which is about when Kierkegaard probably first began writing Either/Or), and it means that two years will elapse after this event before Climacus will publish his first book, Philosophical Crumbs, in 1844. Climacus draws attention to the fact that the event in question took place on a Sunday while he sat smoking a cigar in front of a café in Frederiksberg Gardens. Readers are thereby alerted to the fact that the subject is not spending his Sunday at church or doing quiet penance at home, but is out on the town and visibly enjoying himself in public.35 He adds that this has been his “usual” practice (CUP 155). Climacus describes himself as a kind of perpetual graduate student, someone who “had been a student for a half-score of years,” and while he denies that he has ever been “lazy” he does admit that all of his activity has been “a sort of brilliant inactivity” (CUP 156, emphasis added). Over the years his normal practice has been to read a great deal and then spend the rest of the day “loafing and thinking, or thinking and loafing,” without ever having much to show for it (CUP 156). In case his readers aren’t quite yet settled in their opinion of him, Climacus adds that the principal reason that he hasn’t been more productive is because he has been held “constantly in check” by what he calls an “inexplicable persuasive power”; he says this “power was [his] indolence” (CUP 156). The subject thereby marks himself as a loafer, a non-productive good-for-nothing who appears to be religiously suspect.

At the same time, Climacus finds himself surrounded by people who have made it their personal mission to benefit the age. Speaking to himself, he observes:

Wherever you look about you . . . in literature or in life, you see . . . the many benefactors of the age who know how to do favors to humankind by making life more and more easy, some with railways, others with omnibuses and steamships, others with the telegraph, others through easily grasped surveys and brief reports on everything worth knowing, and finally the true benefactors of the age, who by virtue of thought make spiritual existence systematically easier and yet more and more important – and what are you doing?36

After momentarily having his reflections interrupted by the need to light a new cigar, Climacus suddenly has the thought that he too “must do

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35 There was a “law of Sunday observance” in Copenhagen at the time (CUP 522; SKS 7: 562, trans. modified). According to the SKS commentary, this law set the closing times of stores and forbade loud, noisy activities, especially during times when Church services were being held. See SKS 87: 376.

36 CUP 156; SKS 7: 171 (emphasis added, trans. modified).
Kierkegaard’s Socratic pseudonym

something.” But what? Since his “limited abilities” will keep him from being able to “make anything easier than it has become,” he concludes that he “must, with the same humanitarian enthusiasm as the others, take it upon [himself] to make something more difficult” (CUP 156–157)!

He points out that there might be a real use for this sort of thing since, when all of society’s benefactors are seeking to make things easier, there remains “one possible danger”: that things will become “altogether too easy.” Climacus thus claims that he “conceived it as [his] task to create difficulties everywhere.”

Having impressed upon his readers that he is a loafer who has never really amounted to anything and having tied this to his indolence, Climacus seems to want to convince them that in fact this is all for the best. Far from making him an object of scorn, his being an indolent loafer is actually a good thing! Not only has this helped to ensure that there is at least one person who has the time to work against the tendencies of the age, but this very condition may also help him to address his “embarrassing situation [of] having accomplished nothing” (CUP 157). To help illustrate this, Climacus introduces the following rather Socratic image:

When at a banquet, where the guests have already overeaten, someone is intent on having more courses brought on, another on having an emetic on hand, it is surely true that only the former has grasped what it is the guests demand. But I wonder if the latter might not also claim to have reflected on what their demand could be.

With this image, a distinction is introduced between what people may say they want (e.g., having things made “easier”) and that which might actually be conducive to their health. While Climacus’ initial portrait of the age seemingly draws a contrast at his own expense between the benefactors (especially the “true benefactors of the age, who . . . make spiritual existence systematically easier”) and loafers such as himself, the image of the banquet invites readers to rethink this situation, to examine more closely whether those who are being celebrated as benefactors are in fact the ones who are willing to serve the next course to a populace which has “already overeaten,” while those who refuse to do so, those who may even be trying to make things more difficult, turn out to be the true benefactors. Climacus thereby invites his readers to consider whether he might be a loafer, as he puts it in the preface to Crumbs, both “out of indolence, ex animi sententia

37 CUP 157; SKS 7: 172 (trans. modified).
[by inclination], and for good reasons.”

His readers are also in this way alerted to the real possibility that what they are in the habit of conceiving of as earnest and serious may actually be contributing to an unhealthy condition, while what can at first strike them as frivolous and ridiculous may in fact be an expression of a task that is directed at what is truly needed.

Climacus Returns to the Topic of How He Became an Author Toward the End of the Next Chapter of the Postscript (CUP 197–210). At the end of the first episode, he had concluded that his task was to make something difficult, but what precisely he was to make difficult was left unspecified. Two months have passed and a second momentous event takes place, also, as it happens, on a Sunday. The scene is a graveyard: “the garden of the dead” (CUP 197). It is “rather late in the day, towards evening,” and Climacus is there “contrary to [his] usual practice.” He does not explain why he has gone to the graveyard, instead offering his readers his reflections about the “eloquence” of the dead and his praise for “the one living who outwardly relates as a dead man to his inwardness” (CUP 197–198).

The mood established is reflective and somber, perhaps a bit too somber for such a jesting narrator. The subject reports that while he was at the graveyard he had occasion to observe two figures standing beside a fresh grave, “an elderly man with chalk-white hair and a child, a boy of about ten,” who is his grandson; the recently deceased is the boy’s father and the old man’s son (CUP 198). Climacus claims that in the “transfiguring glow of the evening the old man’s dignified figure assumed even more solemnity, and his voice, calm and yet emotional, enunciated the words distinctly”; while speaking to his grandson, occasionally he would pause, “his voice choked with weeping, or the mood coming to a halt in a sigh” (CUP 199). Two things occupy the old man. First, he is concerned for the child and tries to impress upon his grandson that even though he no longer has anyone “to cling to except a no man... who himself longed to leave the world, there is “a God in heaven” and a savior in “Jesus Christ.” At the same time, he is grieving over the loss of his son, who he thinks had lost his faith despite (or as a result of) “all his wisdom” (CUP 199). The old man doesn’t want his grandson to suffer the same fate and so finds himself trying to warn him of a “wisdom

39 KW 7: 5; SKS 4: 215 (emphasis added; trans. modified).
40 The term “inwardness” appears throughout Kierkegaard’s corpus and pertains to the individual’s inner life, notably concerning the ethical and religious aspects of a person.
which would fly beyond faith, . . . a seeming mainland which to the mortal eye might look like a certainty higher than faith.” He stresses that for the believer “this mirage . . . of eternity in which a mortal cannot live, but in which, if he gazes into it, he loses his faith” is something above all to be “feared” (CUP 199).

Climacus informs his readers that he immediately understood the old man’s concerns, in part because his earlier studies had also “led [him] to discern a dubious relation between a modern Christian speculation and Christianity,” though he admits that prior to this event this “dubious relation” had “not occupied [him] in any decisive way” (CUP 202). Not only does he believe that the old man has been wronged but he is especially moved by the old man’s inability (given his apparent lack of higher education) to explain how exactly his son’s “wisdom” had corrupted his faith:

The venerable old man’s sorrow over losing his son, not just in death but, as he understood it, still more terribly through speculation, moved me profoundly, while the contradiction in his position, that he was unable to explain how the enemy force operated, became for me a decisive summons to find a definite clue. The whole thing appealed to me like an intricate criminal case in which the very complex circumstances made pursuit of the truth difficult. This was something for me.

In response to the old man’s sorrow and his situation, Climacus resolves to try to get to the bottom of things. Yet, in announcing his resolution, he shifts away from the pathos he has been cultivating, describing his thinking as follows: “You are after all tired of life’s diversions, you are tired of girls that you love only in passing, you must have something that fully occupies your time. Here it is. Find out where the misunderstanding between speculation and Christianity lies. This, then, was my resolution” (CUP 202).

In first characterizing his resolution in relation to the moving story of the old man and then in more comic terms, Climacus seemingly complicates what exactly to make of this resolution. Is it genuine? Or perhaps merely a whim? At any rate, readers are reminded yet again that this is an unusual philosophical author, one who requires that they remain alert and engaged if they are to understand him and his writings.

The subject claims that upon making this resolution he did not speak to anyone about it. Even as his studies were “now put in more definite
order” and he “tried through [his] own reflection to pick up a clue to the ultimate misunderstanding,” he claims that what repeatedly helped him to keep from transforming his “deliberations into erudite learning” was how “the venerable figure of the old man hovered before [his] mind.” All three figures of this story in fact seem to have significance for Climacus and help to structure his activity as a writer and thinker. The grandfather represents a traditional religious simplicity that seems under threat, while the young man, who is in effect the murder victim in this “criminal case,” serves as a warning to readers about what can happen to a person who becomes too taken up with speculative philosophy (cf. the young Johannes of De Omnibus). The grandson represents the future generation. If he is to retain his religious faith, he will need help. Tradition, as found in the grandfather, will seemingly not be enough. He seems to require something more if he is to protect himself from the corrupting influence of speculation, especially if, like his father, he is drawn to philosophy. What he may need more than anything is the assistance of a Socrates or a Climacus.

With respect to himself and his understanding of his own task, Climacus claims that one result of this encounter in the graveyard was that he “acquired a more specific understanding of [his] own bright idea that [he] must try to make something difficult” (CUP 202). In particular, he comes to conceive of his task above all as one of making it “difficult” to become a Christian: “[W]hen culture and the like have managed to make it so easy to be a Christian, it must surely be in order for the single individual, according to his poor ability, to make it difficult, if he nevertheless does not make it more difficult than it is” (CUP 322).  

**CLIMACUS’ DIAGNOSIS AND THE NEED FOR INDIRECT COMMUNICATION**

Having discovered a task and having resolved to try to determine how an involvement with speculative philosophy may have led to the spiritual death of the old man’s son, Climacus reports that after “many failures” he traced the source of this problem to what he takes to be a more general tendency of the age: “in the end it became clear to me that the deviation of speculation . . . might lie much more deeply in a tendency of the whole age – might lie in the fact that, due to the quantity

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45 See also, e.g., CUP 231, 320, 466, 494.
of knowledge, one has forgotten what it is to exist and what inwardness means.”

Climacus both identifies a condition to which the age is prone, a condition of forgetfulness, and points to what he takes to be the source of this condition, a large “quantity of knowledge.” As he later puts it, because people “know too much” they have forgotten something (CUP 230). Perhaps the most natural way to take this claim is that people are overwhelmed by so much knowledge that they wind up forgetting some of it (a kind of modern-day information overload). But Climacus seems to have in mind something different. He joins Kierkegaard in distinguishing between aesthetic capacities, which concern objects and require the subject to be disinterested, and ethical and religious capacities, which concern the subject employing these capacities and require her or him to be interested (either in oneself and one’s relations with other human beings, or in a divine Other). It is important to keep in mind that the term “aesthetic” has a much broader connotation in Kierkegaard’s writings than that which only pertains to objects of beauty. Aesthetic capacities are held to be appropriate for apprehending a range of things, including pleasure, objects of art, natural objects, and objects of the intellect (including, for example, mathematical objects). Climacus’ basic diagnosis seems to be that people have fallen into the habit of one-sidedly exercising their aesthetic capacities, leading them to neglect themselves and those parts of a person’s nature that involve the use of ethical and religious capacities. Having fallen into the habit of approaching the world in a disinterested fashion, as though it were merely an objective realm to be known, people have lost track of the subjective realm of action and inwardness. A condition of knowing too much, aesthetically speaking, seems to foster a condition of ethical and religious forgetfulness.

Climacus complicates this picture, however, by seeming to allow that, in a setting where people are awash with (aesthetic) knowledge, these habits of thought spill over into the ethical and religious realms. It is not simply that, because they are in the habit of approaching things in a disinterested fashion, they have lost sight of what can come into view only if it is approached in an interested fashion, but they also seemingly come to know a lot about the ethical and religious even as they fail to make proper use of this knowledge in their individual lives. Climacus maintains, for example, that, with respect to Christianity, people have become so knowledgeable

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about it that it no longer readily makes an impression on them: because the “Christian truth” has become “common knowledge,” it has gradually “become such a triviality” that a “primitive impression” of it is acquired only with difficulty (CUP 230n-231n).

Here Climacus relies on a distinction between what might be called mere knowledge of an ethical or religious truth and action-generating knowledge. It might seem that since ethics and religion are inherently practical in nature, it simply makes no sense to attribute knowledge to someone whose life nevertheless does not reflect what that person supposedly “knows.” Instead of affirming, however, that such a person must be entirely lacking in knowledge about the ethical and the religious, Climacus maintains that in such a case the individual’s relationship to what he knows is such that this knowledge fails to make an appropriate, action-motivating impression on him. As the pseudonym Anti-Climacus puts it, people may know how to “expound” abstractly about the ethical and the religious even though this knowledge “exercises no power” over their lives (KW 19: 90). In such a situation, according to Climacus, what a person knows is best characterized as something that he knows “by rote.”

Climacus seems to think that modern speculative philosophy is a striking example of this larger tendency of the age. While he does not object to abstract philosophical reflection per se, since it too has its appropriate applications and objects of inquiry (see CUP 49, 64), he does draw attention to how the proper exercise of the speculative philosopher’s aesthetic capacities results in his “losing himself in objectivity, vanishing from himself” (CUP 50). This may be appropriate when one seeks to illuminate and comprehend a given object, but it is not appropriate for reflecting about a subject, namely the individual herself or himself qua ethical and religious agent:

[F]or the speculating philosopher the question of his personal eternal happiness just cannot arise, for the very reason that his task consists in getting more and more away from himself, and becoming objective, thus vanishing from himself and becoming speculation’s contemplative power. (CUP 49)

This can have particular consequences for ethics and religion; by regularly engaging in speculation, speculative philosophers may fall out of the habit of attending to themselves and conceiving of themselves as practical agents. One result of abstraction, according to Climacus, is that it “removes that in which the decision lies: the existing subject” (CUP 247; emphasis in

49 CUP 222; SKS 7: 240 (trans. modified).
original). By doing philosophy in this way the individual “forgets” herself or himself, effectively losing sight of herself or himself as an ethical and religious being (CUP 268; cf. CUP 121).

Climacus reports that after he came to the conclusion that “the misfortune of the age is . . . precisely that it had acquired too much knowledge and forgotten what it is to exist and what inwardness means” (CUP 217), he also concluded that to write about this he would have to employ an “indirect” form of communication: “When I had grasped this, it also became clear to me that, if I wanted to communicate anything on this point, the main thing was that my exposition be in the indirect form” (CUP 203). Notice that Climacus seems to think that he will be able to communicate with readers who suffer from this condition of ethical and religious forgetfulness only if he employs a non-straightforward manner of writing. That is, if he is to remind his readers of what has been forgotten, he will have to find a way to get around or past their present habits of thought and their current appetite for knowledge. This means, in his view, that his writing must be given a non-didactic form and not come across as providing his readers with yet another thing to know: “[A]bove all it must not be done didactically . . . If this is imparted as a piece of knowledge, the recipient is led to the misapprehension that he is getting something to know” (CUP 209). One other thing worth noticing about this passage is that it is a pseudonym who concludes that he must make use of indirect communication. So while Kierkegaard’s use of pseudonyms may be one means of engaging in indirect communication, there are presumably other means of indirection that are available to the pseudonymous authors themselves.

50 See also, e.g., CUP 217, 230.
52 Cf. PAP vi B 40:45 (draft of the Postscript, cited in KW 12: 62) and PAP vi B 40:39 (draft of the Postscript, cited in KW 12: 60).
53 On indirect communication, see “Climacus’ Socratic Method,” 140–143.
54 This is one of the oddest yet most interesting stretches of text within Kierkegaard’s body of writing, in which Climacus, one of Kierkegaard’s fictional characters, provides his readers with a kind of overview of Kierkegaard’s entire corpus prior to the Postscript, discussing both Kierkegaard’s edifying speeches and each of the earlier pseudonymous works. This is the first attempt within Kierkegaard’s writings to identify an overriding aim or point of view for the authorship as a whole, and in The Point of View Kierkegaard calls this “a section with which [he] would ask the reader to become familiar” (KW 22: 31).
arrived at the diagnosis that people had forgotten what it is to exist and what inwardness means, he then “resolved,” as part of his attempt to help remind them of what had been forgotten, “to go back as far as possible, so as not to arrive too soon at the religious mode of existence, to say nothing of the specifically Christian mode” (CUP 209). His desire not to arrive “too soon” at what will become one of the central topics of inquiry in both Crumbs and the Postscript is indicative of his more general sense that when it comes to the ethical and the religious (and the specifically Christian) there seems to be massive conceptual confusion in his day and the frequent running together of different terms and categories: “Just because in our age people know only too much, it is easy enough to confuse everything in a confusion of language, where aestheticians adopt the most decisive Christian religious categories with intellectual wit, and priests use them thoughtlessly in bureaucratic formalisms that are indifferent to the content” (CUP 226; cf. CUP 215, 304–305).

Climacus reasons that “if one had forgotten what it is to exist religiously, no doubt one had also forgotten what it is to exist humanly” (that is, ethically). In order to avoid terminological confusion, he thinks it would be appropriate to “start from the ground” and first portray the difference between an individual who solely employs aesthetic categories and an “individual human being who is existing on the strength of the ethical” (CUP 210, 213). He thinks that he first ought to define the inner life and the nature of inwardness in more general terms, and make clear what role this plays in the different stages of human development. That way, when he arrives at a closer examination of Christianity itself and the precise nature of what it is to exist as a Christian, he will hopefully be able to help prevent further conceptual confusion: “Christianity . . . is inwardness, though note well, not just any inwardness, which was why the preliminary stages had to be firmly insisted upon – that was my idea” (CUP 236–237). In fact, he claims that by the time of the publication of Philosophical Crumbs, “the determining of existence-inwardness had come to the point where the Christian-religious could be brought out without immediately being confused with all manner of things” (CUP 227). Thus it is one of Climacus’ philosophical aims to help his readers to obtain a greater conceptual clarity about ethical and religious concepts and their proper employment.

If in reading the previous paragraph one is struck by the similarity between the point at which Climacus said he planned to begin his task (contrasting a life governed by an aesthetic life-view with one governed

by an ethical life-view) and the plan of Kierkegaard’s first pseudonymous work *Either/Or*, this would not be off the mark. In fact, Climacus claims that before he was himself able to act on the first phase of his task, lo and behold, out came *Either/Or*:

The task was set, and I foresaw that the work would be protracted enough... What happens? There I sit and out comes *Either/Or*. It did exactly what I had wanted. The thought of my solemn resolution made me quite wretched. But then I thought again: you haven’t promised anyone anything, and seeing it is done anyway, all is well.56

But, as he tells it, things get worse for this budding philosophical author. He claims that “step by step, just as [he] wanted to begin the task of carrying out [his] resolution by working, out came a pseudonymous book which did what [he] had wanted to do.”57 Not only does Climacus claim that he is forever “intending to do” what the other pseudonymous authors end up doing (so that he himself is repeatedly always arriving “too late in regard to the doing”), but he also maintains that it is only by reading what the other pseudonyms have written that it becomes clear to him what his own intentions are:58

There was something curiously ironical in it all. It was just as well I had never talked to anyone about my resolution, that not even my landlady had seen any sign of it in me. For otherwise people would have laughed at my comic situation, for it is certainly amusing that the cause I had resolved to take up prospered though not through me. And that it indeed prospered was something I was persuaded of from the fact that whenever I read one such pseudonymous work, what I had wanted became clearer. I became in this way a tragicomically interested witness of the productions of V. Eremita and other pseudonyms. (CUP 210–211)

While Climacus seems to go out of his way to bring the comic into relief in this section of the *Postscript* (exhibiting in the process the extent to which he may even possess a certain “genius” for the art of loafing), he also makes a number of substantive observations about these works and what he thinks their aims are (CUP 156). Whatever one makes of his discussion of these individual works, one thing that does not vary throughout this discussion is his basic diagnosis. He frequently reminds his readers that it is his view that (i) people suffer from a peculiar kind of forgetfulness (a forgetfulness concerning ethical and religious existence and inwardness), and that

56 CUP 210; SKS 7: 228 (trans. modified).
57 CUP 210; SKS 7: 228 (emphasis added; trans. modified).
(2) this condition of forgetfulness is tied to their knowing too much.\footnote{Climacus appeals to this diagnosis at least once during his discussion of each of the pseudonymous works.} He has acknowledged that the other pseudonymous books may have been written for reasons that he, as “a reader,” has not been able to detect (CUP 211). At the same time, he remains convinced that they are “also significant for [his] little crumb of production” and so can be understood as part of his task of making it difficult to become a Christian. In this sense, Climacus treats the other pseudonymous books above all as “moments in the realization of the idea [he] had conceived but from which [he] was ironically exempted from realizing” – at least, that is, until he somehow manages to find the wherewithal to write Crumbs and later the Postscript.\footnote{CUP 226.}

This concludes the present report. Agents remain on the case.
CHAPTER 3

Johannes Climacus’ revocation

Alastair Hannay

REASONS FOR REVOKING

On page 522 of *Postscript*, Johannes Climacus says that everything he has said up until then is to be “understood in such a way that it is revoked.” On the preceding page he describes the book as “superfluous” (CUP 521). This must come as a surprise to most readers hardy enough to have reached that point. Could this be a further twist to the self-advertised humorist’s playful mood? In whatever way we grasp them, the humorist’s words suggest that if we have understood him – but perhaps also his humor? – we should not be surprised. Taking a chance on at least this remark being serious, that means that if we had really understood him up to this point we should have been expecting a revocation, or at least suspecting something of the sort; the greater our surprise, the less we have understood.

A playful and sometimes acerbic irony characterizes Climacus’ gargantuan book. More than merely a decorative interpolation in the text, the irony more often has the feel of a default mode into which the author relapses whenever the (often very long) bouts of serious discussion are over. This underlying tone of irony is also in evidence here: Climacus suggests a parallel with the Catholic *Imprimatur*: “in Catholic books, especially from former times, one finds at the back a note informing the reader that everything is to be understood conformably with the doctrine of the holy universal mother church” (CUP 522). We know that the *Imprimatur’s* message was that we have a work that is *not* to be withheld from view. It was a stamp required to prevent the lay public being exposed to heresy, and of course to assure readers that here was something they could safely assume not to be heretical. Revocations were quite another matter; they had to be *extorted* once a view contravening acceptable doctrine (such as Galileo’s defense of the heliocentric theory in his *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* [1632]) had somehow escaped the censor.
If the suggestion is that we have been let in on some heresy now about to be withdrawn, the quite nice irony would be that with cases like that of Galileo the real truth lay with the heresy. But then if \textit{Postscript} claims to speak truly of truth, why revoke it? Not, surely, from any realistic fear Kierkegaard might have entertained of being found guilty at the court of Hegelian orthodoxy. Even in its heyday Hegelianism didn’t exercise that kind of power, and by now that heyday was over. As Kierkegaard himself remarks one year after \textit{Postscript}’s publication, even if “the System” was all the talk at the time when the pseudonyms were focusing on the “single individual,” at this time it was no longer in fashion; Hegelianism was not what the times demanded.\footnote{“The Single Individual’: Two Notes Concerning My Work as an Author,” in \textit{The Point of View}, KW 22: 118–119.}

Of course, if what \textit{Postscript} says were not supposed to speak truly of truth there would be little reason to read it, other than, say, out of curiosity or for amusement. However, it would be a joke in bad taste to tell the reader this at the very end and not present the work for what it is at the outset. The placement of the revocation can make even a sceptical reader guess that the author, whoever he is, has had some serious purpose in mind. We note that it is as an “additional notice” that Climacus compares his revocation to an \textit{Imprimatur} (CUP 522), and he himself observes that revoking a book is not the same as the book not having been written. That remark can be linked to one of Kierkegaard’s own; in commenting on the overemphasis that had been placed since publication on \textit{Postscript}’s humorous aspect, he wrote in his journals: “The reason why \textit{Concluding Postscript} is made to appear comical is precisely that it is serious.”\footnote{KJN 6, nb13:61.}

The revocation can easily be confused with a phenomenon that Climacus and Kierkegaard both share with many another writer with something to impart. I refer here to a continuous though not often remarked tradition of diffidence about publication common to many philosophers. Among those giving clear expression to it we find Descartes. He defended his choice of “meditation” as a form for conveying his thought, rather than philosophical disputation “or the theorems and problems of a geometer,” by saying that he could show “by this very fact that I have no dealings except with those who will not shrink from joining me in giving the matter attentive care and meditation.”\footnote{Reply to Objections II, in Descartes, \textit{Meditations on First Philosophy in Focus}, 103.} Such reservations are neither untypical nor unexpected. Karl Marx opens \textit{Das Kapital} more curtly by saying “I assume a reader who is prepared to make some effort,” and in the preface to his
Philosophical Investigations Ludwig Wittgenstein famously admits that it is
with “doubtful feelings” that he is making his remarks public: “It is not
impossible that it should fall to the lot of this work, in its poverty and in
the darkness of this time, to bring light into one brain or another – but, of
course, it is not likely.”

Something similar is evident in a not uncommon unwillingness among
philosophers in general to confront criticism on the grounds that critics
typically fail to see the point. This is almost to imply, contrary to all official
philosophical principles, that if only they did see the point they would find
nothing to which to object. In the Catholic Church prior to the Imprimatur
being “added,” a Nihil obstat (there is nothing in the way) was required, a
verdict given by someone with clerical authority working with the author
to make sure no doctrinal heresies remained. It is not unknown for some
quite famous philosophers, no longer facing the need to satisfy a censor
but only an editor, to take over the role of censor themselves, curbing
any debate that threatens to spread the heresy that they may be wrong.
Diffidence can lead to paranoia.

To revoke a work may well be interpreted as an attempt to cut off
debate, a refusal to stand there and defend it. But then, in the present
case, you may ask: how can a pseudonym be expected to defend it anyway?
There is no guarantee that he will reappear, and indeed in this case it
is made quite plain that we have his last word. But we can object that
just as any expectation that Climacus should stand by to parry objections
contravenes the idea of pseudonymity, so too does pseudonymity con-
travene the idea of philosophy as a communicative enterprise. Climacus
may leave us with copies of Postscript in our hands, puzzling over its rich
contents, but being no more than a fiction he has no door on which
any of us hoping to carry matters further can knock. Discussion can only
be carried on in the uncontrolled free-for-all of secondary literature and
commentary.

That means, however, that even if Postscript were not revoked no one
would be able to take its author to task personally for his arguments or
definitions. But if to obtain his self-censoring ends the pseudonymous
author needs only his pseudonymity, he has no need of a revocation. So,
pseudonymity being all that is required, why does he insist on it all the
same? We are forced to conclude, following this line of attack, that it is the
revocation that is superfluous rather than the book.

Without yet leaving the issue of pseudonymity, that thought can lead to another, namely that Climacus’ revocation is bound up not with pseudonymity per se but with something implicit in him being the pseudonym he is. Let us approach this possibility stepwise.

First it has to be said that the above remarks on philosophical diffidence are not entirely beside the present point. There is sufficient evidence pointing toward Kierkegaard as being more than normally sensitive to criticism, some might say even pathologically. But quite apart from personal considerations, we can attribute a quite normal diffidence due (as with both Descartes and Wittgenstein) to the unusual and innovative nature of his writing. Indeed he appears to have anticipated misunderstanding from the very start, as witnessed in his first published postscript, appended innovatively enough to the preface of From the Papers of One Still Living. It reads: “Postscript for readers who might possibly be the worse off for reading the preface: they could of course skip it, and skip so far that they skipped over the dissertation too, which wouldn’t matter.”

He seems here to be saying: take it or leave it. Or not even that, but: if you don’t like the sound of it then don’t trouble yourself with it at all. This defensive flippancy could be just another way of saying: if you are unable, or refuse, to see the point, don’t bother with it and forget you have read this too. This kind of remark can bring to mind the image of the mischief-maker pressing (or in pre-electric days pulling) the doorbell and dodging out of sight before the owner answers. There is certainly some entertainment value in that, a malicious amusement at the inconvenience caused, and delight in the thought of the frustration incurred by not being on hand to be answerable. But in the authorial context of Kierkegaard’s first book, a readiness to take flight can be quite seriously a matter of new or unfashionable thoughts. The writer’s hope is, with these, to capture the attention of some few sympathetic readers, but he does not trust the reading public in general, and least of all reviewers, to grasp what he is getting at. This would be particularly so when the critical target of the book is, as in this case, a well-known and already well-established author, namely Hans Christian Andersen.

In fact, the preface to which that postscript is appended suggests something more. It talks of a desire to be “free.” It also mentions an alter ego, a kind of alien influence working from outside, as though the work of forming ideas here were due to someone or something else. It is as though

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6 From the Papers of One Still Living KW 1: 14.
Søren Kierkegaard felt himself not entirely responsible for what he had penned in this short (ninety-page) “dissertation.” This intriguing thought may point in either or both of two directions to be crystallized later: divine guidance on the one hand and the alter ego of pseudonymity on the other.

Near the end of the preface Kierkegaard says that, having come so far, he feels “bound” here by the “fixed form” of a treatise. This could be an apology to his late mentor Poul Martin Møller, from whose ideas Kierkegaard freely borrowed and whose inspiration was exactly that he eschewed the treatise form. But there is still more. “To feel free,” he says, he will personally take it all back “into the womb,” there letting it “subside once more in the twilight from which it emerged,” perhaps to reappear in a “regenerated form.” Meanwhile, however, having committed himself to this fixed form, he concludes that it is one over which, in the here and now, he has taken personal command: “Onward, march. The watchword is: What I wrote, I wrote.”

The impression left by that preface is that, having committed himself there to the treatise form, Kierkegaard is unable to take back what he has written in it. You might say that for reasons of a performative nature he cannot revoke it, at least not without some form of ceremonious “I was wrong to adopt it.” But this can also be put in another way, saying now that he cannot revoke it, precisely because it was he who wrote what he wrote. Yet the fact that Postscript’s author is a pseudonym means that in this later case the treatise form can be left to Climacus, the necessary regeneration of the idea in its more appropriate form coming later, though not necessarily from Kierkegaard himself, and of course not now from the preceding pseudonyms either.

This makes sense insofar as Climacus had already been invented as someone who knows about treatises (see the unpublished De Omnibus Dubitandum Est, a piece that Kierkegaard himself describes as an attempt at some speculation on his own part, though here again not exactly in his own hand). Here then it is up to Climacus, not Kierkegaard, to say “Onward march,” while his inventor stays in the background reserving the right to let the topics gestate and be regenerated in other forms.

But Postscript differs significantly from the earlier work in other ways that may have us question its status as a treatise or even having the form of a treatise. From the Papers of One Still Living is a didactic and dismissive review of a novel. It focuses thematically on the notion of a life-view,
something that Kierkegaard claims this novel and its author’s work in general lacked. The remarks in the preface can be understood as admitting that life-views do not lend themselves to didactic tracts; they should really be livingly conveyed through literary means more in the vein of Poul Martin Møller. It is not an altogether wild thought that the pseudonymous series beginning with *Either/Or* is in its entirety a recasting in more appropriate forms of the topic of that little early treatise.

However, *Postscript* with all its eccentricity is, to say the least, no ordinary treatise. The difference between it and the earlier work may even lead one to consider the possibility that this work too should be read as itself a regenerating way of dealing with life-views, in contrast to a conventional treatment of that topic in the form of a treatise. If we take this line, then of course the pseudonymous treatise that would have tackled the topic in the form of a dissertation has still to be written.

Nevertheless, there is quite a lot to suggest that *Postscript* is indeed at least some kind of treatise and, so far as it goes, meant to be read as such. The work certainly throws light on the concept of a life-view, and especially late in Chapter 4, on “The problem of the Crumbs,” it deals with life-views in a very treatise-like way (CUP 361 and following). It would, however, be a serious distortion of the contents to pick on life-views as being the focal topic. Presupposed by the discussion of these is the general topic of subjective thinking, the theme that opens the main and operative Part Two. Here we are led to take it that it is only through thinking subjectively that life-views of the kind that have emerged in the pseudonymous works prior to *Postscript* can be grasped as a progression under the new heading of “becoming a Christian.”

*Postscript* is of course very far from being a piece of subjective thinking itself; through a haze of irony and humor that might be taken to gesture in the direction in which subjective thinking belongs, the attitude it calls for in the reader initially is of a conventionally objective kind. We might think of the revocation then on the following lines. The subjective thinking it talks about objectively is thinking by, and reflexively about, each thinking subject and therefore has to be done without books of instruction. If able to grasp this message, we see that in elaborating upon what becoming subjective requires, it never gets to the true topic itself. Accordingly, neither writing a book like *Postscript* nor acknowledging the truth of what it says is the kind of thing *Postscript* is really about. A subjective thought remains entirely the subject’s own, however many subjects may happen to share it. The point of the revocation, in this light, is not that *Postscript* itself should return into the womb, its topic to be recast in some other form, since its
“idea” is nowhere to be found in its text. Or if “idea” is a term reserved (perhaps too conservatively) for what is thought objectively, then we might say that what Postscript is about transcends the realm of ideas, which means that the ideas it develops must be left behind.

Seen in this light, the revocation is a progressive step. What it implies is that once the text is forever out there, and being (perhaps forever) read, it is to be forever revoked in order for the idea to assume its properly living form in the womb of the single reader’s self-understanding. The reason for withdrawing the work is then in a way two-layered. The inappropriateness of the treatise form leaves open a prospect of giving the work (its topic) a more appropriate form. But in addition, the more appropriate form is to be provided by the individual reader.

This indicates a need to establish some version of Socratic distance between reader and what has been read. We might think of this as working in the direction of the limiting case of revocation exemplified in the figure of Socrates, whose great achievement in this respect was not even to have written anything. Falling rather disgracefully short of this ideal himself, we can see Climacus backing off and even taking his work with him. He can hardly deny having written something, but in the “Understanding with the Reader” appended to his conclusion he goes to some pains to indicate that he doesn’t really regard Postscript as a publication. Consider the following comment on publishing.

To write and give out [publish] a book when one doesn’t even have a publisher who could get into a financial fix if it does not sell, is indeed an innocent pastime and amusement, a permissible private enterprise in a well-ordered state that tolerates luxury, and where everyone is allowed to spend his time and his money as he wishes, whether it be in building houses, buying horses, going to the theatre, or writing superfluous books and having them printed. (CUP 522)

Yes, the book is “out there” all right, but it is still somehow part of Climacus’ private domain. In spite of his enormous literary effort, by stretching the normal conventions of publication to the point of infringing their performative implications, Climacus may be seen to be trying to keep his Socratic record as clean as his own project allows.

HUMOR AND NONSENSE

Note how, in these attempts to explain the revocation, so far no specific part has been offered to humor. Its role hitherto has been a secondary one: it was suggested that it might be an indicator as to where the true topic or
task lies. But it could also be just something the real author finds it hard to resist and has no reason to exclude. After all, it can lighten the reader’s load even if it is not to be taken seriously itself, and why should humor of all things be taken seriously?

Several commentators have, quite to the contrary, understood humor to be the key to the revocation. There is even a tradition that reads Postscript in its entirety as a deliberate joke, or placing it in its polemical context, as an elaborate demonstration of how not to answer its own question of how to become a Christian. According to Louis Mackey, Climacus’ definition of truth as subjectivity is a “satire on definition.”

Taking the definition seriously is to fall for a ruse, rather in the way those interviewed on hidden camera programs are taken in by the interviewer. The absence in the later writings of crucial Climacan notions such as “the paradox” and “absurdity” is sometimes produced as evidence in support of this view, though we note that as an explanation of why Climacus revokes Postscript this assumes an uncharacteristic interference on Kierkegaard’s part in the thought processes of his pseudonym. One version of the proposal is voiced by Mackey when he says that to “read [Postscript] as a philosophical treatise...is nonsense.”

Henry Allison is more specific. Having “attempted to find within the Postscript a relatively straightforward while albeit bizarre argument for the ‘subjective truth’ and uniqueness of the Christian faith,” he concludes that “viewed as such it is a colossal failure.” Allowing Kierkegaard to be too clever a thinker for the failure to be inadvertent, Allison infers that the work must be intended as a “perverse parody” and “the doctrinal content of Postscript...regarded as an ironical jest, which essentially takes the form of a carefully constructed parody of the Phenomenology of Mind.” The deliberate failure of its hopeless project is one that any sharp-minded intellectual will see, for in fact Postscript makes no provision for distinguishing Christianity uniquely as the one absurdity among others in which the believer should continue to believe.

If Postscript were indeed an attempt to fix the criteria required for readers to be sure that their faith was authentically Christian, Allison’s conclusion (that the work is a deliberate demonstration of the impossibility of such an argument) would be plausible. But, whatever faults there may be in Climacus’ arguments and definitions, Climacus himself makes it clear that providing a subjective criterion of Christian truth is just what he is

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9 Mackey, Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet, 192.
10 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 290; see also 318.
Johannes Climacus’ revocation

attempting. But that the criterion is of Christian truth is a presupposition of the search, namely Climacus’ own provisional acceptance of the articles of Christian faith. In asking what is required of being a Christian, he assumes accordingly that his reader already accepts certain basic components of this faith. These include a theology of creation and the doctrine of the God-Man. The question he asks is how the individual is to approach these objects of belief, and the core of the answer is given in the fourth and longest of Postscript’s chapters in Part Two. It is by means of a combination of pathos and dialectic that the individual arrives at a point where, if their antecedent faith in creation and Christ is to be sustained, then it is under conditions that prevail at that point that their Christian faith becomes true faith.

Climacus ends his chapter by carefully defining the form of consciousness proper to the Christian’s “break with the understanding” (CUP 477–488). In his presentation it is the God-Man that generates the extra that makes faith authentic. If it were a matter of establishing criteria able to pick out one absurdity among others, this would be a clear case of begging the question; but isolating one nonsense among others is not Climacus’ project. The fact that the paradox of the particular nonsense that is Christianity is made to unfold in ways that are due to specifically Christian claims is consistent with the overall project of putting would-be Christians right about their faith. In that case, whatever disparity there may be between Postscript’s form and the truths it attempts to convey, and whatever parody may in part be intended in Climacus’ language and train of thought, it is not through its being an extended joke that we will find in Postscript a reason for revoking his work.

Mackey, as noted, identifies the joke less stringently as Climacus taking Christianity to extremes that Kierkegaard later left in abeyance, something that the later non-reappearance of the notions of absurdity and the paradox may seem to support. The not altogether implausible implication can then be that Climacus was invented as a propagandist in order to undermine those who held to the other extreme, namely that Christianity is best understood in terms of pure thought.

An objection to this, however, is that to understand Postscript in this way we need to see the fictitious Climacus in the last pages of Postscript merging with the real Kierkegaard seen now as a cool strategist deploying his hit-man to dispose of opponents who only happened to get in the way of his project, whatever that was. But although Kierkegaard distinguishes sharply between himself and Climacus, leaving his “First and Last Declaration” unpaginated, the more obvious reason for this is that he wants
Climacus to stand while he, Kierkegaard himself, pursues his own path of self-discovery. The declaration’s closing prayer is that “no unseasoned hand meddles dialectically with this work but lets it stand as it now stands” (CUP 531). By “this work” he means the whole production, including of course Postscript. That Kierkegaard later disowned Climacus is always a possibility, but it seems clear that at the time he means the membrane between them to remain intact. The declaration comes immediately after the revocation and includes Kierkegaard’s famous acknowledgment of the authorship of the pseudonymous works (CUP 527–531). Since the revocation is not Kierkegaard’s so much the less reason, at least here, to suppose that Kierkegaard had in mind at that time any revocation of what Climacus says about absurdity and the paradox.

Whether he can be associated in some other way with the latter’s revocation of Postscript is another matter. But even if so, there is still no reason to pick out the claims specifically about absurdity and the paradox as those to be revoked. Less reason, too, therefore to suppose that in revoking the work Climacus himself has these claims about absurdity and the paradox specifically in mind — and almost no reason at all to take the revocation to be a revoking of these “exaggerations.” Furthermore, in his acknowledgment of the pseudonyms Kierkegaard makes a point of disowning personal responsibility for what they say. In that case, surely, the matter of revocation firmly remains to be discussed within Climacus’ own framework.

CLIMACUS AND WITTGENSTEIN’S LADDER

An alternative explanation of the revocation is that what Climacus says about absurdity and the paradox (though these form just a small sample of his topics) is itself absurd, that is to say nonsensical. Mackey himself suggests as much when stating that, “read as a philosophical treatise [Postscript] is nonsense.”13 He could of course mean this in the colloquial sense of (as he also puts it) “stupidly and hilariously wrong,”14 but here we shall focus on a version of the claim that has some added bite: the work is nonsensical in the technical sense of being devoid of meaning. If that were literally the case, there would be no need to appeal to some later disregard on Kierkegaard’s part of Climacus’ “exaggerated” claims; Postscript (or what may be identified as the operative parts of it, for instance most of Part Two) could be considered nonsensical on the basis of its own notions of what makes sense.

13 Mackey, Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet, 192. 14 Ibid., 183.
This brings Climacus within analogical range of Wittgenstein’s ladder metaphor.\textsuperscript{15} Wittgenstein’s \textit{Tractatus} famously describes its own core sentences as “nonsensical” (\textit{unsinnig}). It (or Wittgenstein while still in the \textit{Tractatus}) says that these sentences fail to conform to the conditions of meaningful content that the work quite explicitly says they are being used to state. Accordingly they are not really sentences at all but still in some way “elucidatory”; that is, anyone who understands them will see “in the end” that they lack sense. Having used them as a ladder to ascend to this realization, the understanding reader will see that the ladder is now to be thrown away.\textsuperscript{16}

The suggestion is\textsuperscript{17} that at least a considerable proportion of the propositions of \textit{Postscript} are also, and in their own way, nonsensical though nevertheless elucidatory, and that anyone able to see the light, that is, who understands the work, will see that they lack sense. Thus, “in the end” Climacus quite consistently throws the ladder away. Or in keeping with his text, anyone who has understood him will understand that the work is to be revoked.

The proposal has circumstantial support. Wittgenstein had himself read \textit{Postscript} and may even have borrowed the ladder metaphor from Climacus. Nor, of course, is it entirely incidental that the latter’s name has the connotation of ascending steps. The historical Johannes Climacus, known initially for his learning as Johannes Scholasticus, was an abbot of the sixth and seventh centuries CE whose later name derives from a work that he authored whose Latin title is \textit{Scala paradisi}, or heavenly ladder.\textsuperscript{18}

Readers may well wonder how a book they have just read with some reward and even pleasure can be nonsensical. How can a book be so entertaining and yet lack content? The explanation offered here in terms of nonsense seems itself to approach nonsensicality. We might dismiss it simply by saying: so much the worse for the terms.

The point may however be this: if there is anything nonsensical in these texts, it is due not to what they openly say to us, or, more cautiously, to what they seem to be saying (their locutionary content, as philosophers of language might put it), but to how we are to take, or take up, what they say or seem to say. The analogy with Wittgenstein’s \textit{Tractatus} could be as follows: just as that work’s elucidatory sentences enable its readers,
by describing an abstract or logical reality, to form an idea of what it takes
to describe (mirror, picture) reality but add nothing to our knowledge of
the world described, similarly *Postscript*, by providing a purely “negative”
dialectic for the subjective thinker interested in becoming a Christian,
offers nothing positive or substantial by way of assisting the reader in that
actual task, but does enable the reader to see why this must be so. Since
the discussion there is abstract in the way that all treatises or treatise-
like works are, its objective account of the “dialectic” undergone by sub-
ductive thinking on the way to becoming a Christian is unsuited to helping
the reader to regenerate the dialectic in its appropriate form, that is to say
in his or her own person.

It so happens that Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* also has a preface safeguarding
the author from ill-attuned readers. In it Wittgenstein admits that the book
may be understood only by “those who have themselves already thought
the thoughts which are expressed in it – or similar thoughts.” Although
by its very name a treatise (it became Wittgenstein’s dissertational thesis),
and despite its numbered paragraphs, the *Tractatus* is “no textbook.” Its
purpose would be achieved “if there were one person who read it with
understanding and to whom it afforded pleasure.”

This comes close to echoing Climacus’ work constitutes a radical
departure from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. It concerns a world of becoming,
while the latter claims to address the world of “everything that is the case.”

The truth that matters is subjective, it is that edifying truth which the final
sentence of *Either/Or* says is “truth for you” (see CUP 251), and therefore
belongs to a world that in real life is never simply the case. It is a world
where the individual is forever facing options both in small and in large
matters, the latter including the problematic option of facing this very
fact. This familiar existentialist motif is accented in Climacus by being
enframed within a theology of creation, a creation in which the human
being, or plainly “existence,” is given a vital part.

Interestingly, Wittgenstein seems to have acknowledged this disparity
and in his own mind had provided a place for the disanalogy within the
analogy. In his now famous remark to a publisher concerning the *Tractatus*,
he wrote: “My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all
that I have not written. And it is precisely this second part that is the
important one. My book draws limits to the sphere of the ethical from

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19 *Tractatus*, 3. The German (p. 2) translates more emphatically “is therefore no textbook.”

the inside as it were.” We might choose accordingly to see the (explicitly unscientific) Postscript as dealing with what cannot be said in the (scientific) language upon whose structure the Tractatus aims to throw light for its understanding readers.

There seems little point (and indeed, as indicated, it may be self-defeating) in seeking some theory of meaning that deprives any fair amount of Climacus’ sentences of sense. To say, on the other hand, simply that they lack “scientific” content merely repeats the obvious. Perhaps, then, we should be content with the uncomplicated thought already aired that the objective form of Postscript’s discussion is in some sense inappropriate to the kind of truth-finding that Climacus is out to elucidate. We might go so far as to say that it lacks content of the kind that subjective thinking acquires when actually engaged in.

Several commentators have taken this line. For Mackey, the “sense” of the nonsense (in his less technical sense) is its being designed to “force the reader back on his own resources and into the awful presence of the living God.” Postscript is a “funny book with [the] frighteningly sober purpose . . . of [leading] its reader down a broad and prodigal path of merriment to the brink of the bottomless pit of freedom and to surprise him with the absolute responsibility he bears for his own life.” This, for Mackey, is part of the project of “reconverting” philosophy into “its ancient form.” Allison sees Postscript as designed to stop people “theorizing, even in an ‘existential’ sense about Christianity.” Among the more recent commentators Edward Mooney makes a similar point in arguing that Climacus’ humor is analogous to the irony with which Socrates reduces his interlocutors to silence. We might say that Climacus intends to reduce his reader to a silence in which “in the end” the message of Christianity can be responded to in a purely personal way. Stephen Mulhall’s generalization usefully summarizes such readings when he suggests that Postscript’s task is to indicate that existential challenges are not to be converted into intellectual problems.

Yet saying that a life spent in abstract reflection is no way to respond to life’s challenges may strike us as too trite an excuse for snatching a text from under its reader’s very eyes just when he or she is about to finish it. For a better excuse, or a fuller explanation, I suggest that we refer to Postscript itself, and to what Climacus says about himself and his humor.

21 Letter to Ficker, in Prototractatus: An Early Version of Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 16. The German original, which contains no German equivalent of the word “sphere,” appears on p. 15.
22 Mackey, Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet, 192, 269.
24 Mooney, On Søren Kierkegaard, 192.
25 Mulhall, Faith and Reason, 50.
Climacus calls humor a *confinium* and he portrays it as a special kind of vantage-point. A *confinium* might be a border-line but it could also be a stopping place. He says its location is where ethics gives way to religion. Another *confinium*, namely irony, is located at the lower point where aestheticism gives way to ethicism. Humor and religion had occupied Kierkegaard over a long period of time. Journal entries from 1837 have him describing Christianity itself as “implicitly” humorous, by which he seems to mean not so much that it appears comical to outsiders as that it, itself, looks at life humorously. It does so from the point of view of hidden mystery, the humor in its truth remaining “hidden” in the mysteries instead of being revealed there. Thus although one may think of the humor in Christianity as being its inherent incongruity when viewed from common sense, the humor in Christianity can equally be seen in the other direction as making nonsense of common sense. Christianity is the life-view that “sees the most humor in worldly wisdom.”

Which way one looks at it depends on whether one is talking about Christianity in ordinary terms or is actively engaged as a Christian. Not being religious himself in the sense that he is investigating (as is shown by the very fact that he is investigating it), and with his life “in immanent categories” (CUP 378), Climacus nevertheless grasps what it is as opposed (to make a point of this distinction) to what it means to be (properly) religious. He is able, therefore, to see the comedy of those who adopt an ethical life-view yet think of it as religious though without having risen to the level of religion. It is a comedy visible from above where “above” can be the sphere of religion proper itself or, as with Climacus, closer to something like “above the fray.” Similarly with the comedy visible from above in those intellectuals who claim to have understood Christianity better than it understands itself, a group to which *Postscript*’s form or guise of a treatise seems especially well addressed.

In his own terms Climacus is not a Christian, nor, as we suggested, is his thinking of the kind that he tells us is crucial for becoming a Christian. Subjective thinking is a private and personal affair, involving silence as much as utterance, and whatever utterances it may give vent to cannot

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26 KJN 2, DD:2 and DD:6. By “professing its own wretchedness” while having the form either of a “noble pride” or of a “haughty isolation from the ordinary course of events (the historical nexus),” Christian humility is a polemic “against the world.” What makes Hamann Christianity’s most humorous representative is his self-induced Socratic ignorance: “forcing oneself down to the lowest position and looking up (that is, down) at the common view, yet in such a way that behind this self-degradation there lies a high degree of self-elevation.”
be deciphered directly. According to Climacus, a Christian proper, that is to say someone whose inwardness is of the kind called “hidden,” has no communicative reason to convey what from a common-sense point of view is the absurdity of Christianity. But in order to remain hidden he may use humor at its, and by the same token his own, expense as a cover or incognito. Bearing in mind that Climacus is nothing more than a fictional figure, to whom we can ascribe no more than what he himself says, we cannot surmise, as he jokingly suggests (CUP 429), that he might really be a Christian and his own jokiness just a façade. “He” is and remains a humorist, and as such a merely abstracted part of an existing human being able to engage in subjective thought.

Does the confiniun that Climacus represents form an essential part, an inter-stage as it were, in the progress from the ethical to the religious? If so, Climacan humor might be a kind of resting-place where one looks ahead at a new vision and, in its fresh light, back upon what has passed. The same may be said of irony in respect of the aesthetic and the ethical. That would make both confina rather like those parking places on scenic drives where one can stop and take a look at the view before driving on. You may feel refreshed, but the view itself is of no help to further progress. Alternatively, however, these confinia might be points of view from which travelers may acquire a new and critical sense of their own mores. In that case the pause would be part of the progress. Still another possibility deserves consideration: irony and humor as pervasive attitudes that straddle the border-lines to which Climacus gives these names. They could be border areas where tensions that are potentially edifying emerge between what lies ahead and what lies behind.

Even if left unanswered, these questions help to point the way to still another explanation of the revocation, one that captures what is plausible in the proposals already discussed, but has the additional advantage over those already in hand of both accounting for Climacan humor and doing so in a way that obviates the need to suspend our belief in the meaningfulness of his text.

The explanation is one suggested by Climacus himself when, in one among several other applications of the notion of revocation, he writes of humor itself as being a revocation. In *Postscript’s* “Conclusion” we read:

Humor is always revocation (of existence into the eternal by recollection behind, adulthood’s of childhood, etc., see above), the backward perspective. Christianity is the direction forwards, to becoming a Christian, and becoming that by continuing to be it. Without standing still, no humor, for the humorist always has plenty of time, seeing that he has the plenitude of eternal time behind him. (CUP 507)
Levity is part of life, but levity about Christianity is no part of the ongoing creation of Christian selfhood. Existence is where the faith that guides one is continually regenerated in uncertainty. Drawing attention to the comedy of one’s own beliefs can play no part in that project. Here Climacus says, whether we understand his point entirely or not, that the humorous attitude to Christianity is a reversion to thinking of the truth as already behind us, as though something to be recovered or repeated. Writing a whole book from such a perspective is to take time off from becoming. If humor revokes existence, “in the end” and in order to usher the reader back into existence the humorist must revoke the humor. Since in Climacus’ case humor is a confinium to which he himself is confined, it means that he too must be revoked. Having nothing else to offer us he can accompany us no further; from now on nothing he has written will be of any help.

That isn’t quite the same as saying it is all nonsense, but it sounds something like it in practice: in respect of the task it aims to elucidate, Postscript offers us nothing. But if we take a leaf from Climacus’ own book and distinguish between what the Postscript says and how we take what it says (see CUP 481), then we can face the fact that Postscript contains a vast amount of serious discussion, even plain asseveration, without having to call it nonsensical. That is just as well. Not only have we Climacus’ extended account of how a combination of pathos and dialectic leaves the (still) believing individual’s faith pointing in the right direction, there are numerous explanations of where the truth in such matters (which is also famously defined) is to be looked for, and with what form of interest or care, including footnote warnings about superstition and narrow-mindedness being the price to pay for ignoring dialectic (CUP 22n, 31n).

This suggests two things: the work stands for what it says or does and, whatever that is, new light will not be thrown on it by placing it in any perspective other than its own. What it “does” may be one or more of several things. Some will say that its own dialectic traces a progression in the opposite direction to that of the Hegelian tradition; it pushes the latter’s kind of truth-finding aside in favor of a subjective alternative that leaves readers ignorant but dialectically prepared for what they are really looking for. These might be those who, like Johannes Climacus himself, profess an antecedent interest in becoming Christians. But Climacus is more a polemical than a Socratic writer. He is not simply offering himself as an example, but targeting “presumptuous forms of the religious” (CUP 437). Although these include bourgeois forms of presumptuousness, they are more likely candidates for the Socratic treatment of what Kierkegaard
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later refers to as his “aesthetic production.” He says in the same place that the intention behind *Postscript* itself, a “dialectic compilation” as its subtitle says, was to show the way “back from the System, speculation, etc. to becoming a Christian.”

Thought of as both a maieutic and a polemical author, Kierkegaard can be seen to address two main audiences: on the one hand the clergy and its audience, the church-going public, and on the other the speculative philosophers. The “aesthetic” production targets the former while *Postscript* takes on the latter. The former audience reduces religion to a show while the latter swallows it up in pure thought. The church-goers, and possibly even the clergy, might be made to see the deficiency of their devotional ways once the aestheticism in these is brought to their attention by an author who, with the help of Socratic distance, can encourage them to extricate themselves, still within existence, from the “delusion that the aesthetic is the Christian.” Empathetically, and of course drawing quite heavily on his own resources, he joins them in the aesthetic and puts pressure on them to see what their religiousness should really amount to.

But this cannot be done with the other audience. Speculative Idealists have removed themselves too far from actuality for any recovery in this Socratic vein to be possible. Something more drastic than Socratic prompting is needed. Mackey talks of “a systematic destruction of all the idols of the System that come between man’s want and God’s abundance.” That just about captures it. In the terms offered in our own discussion, the distance is not Socratic; it is the distance of humor, even ridicule. It takes the reader out of existence in order to enjoy and learn from the comedy of a religiousness that, by turning human need and God’s abundance into topics of pure thought, is not religiousness at all.

**POSTSCRIPT**

Have we made heavier weather of the revocation than the topic merits or requires? If so, we are not alone. It has been part of my task here to take account of what others have said on the subject. Both I and they may have been making a mountain out of a molehill. There may be simpler explanations. Perhaps Climacus meant us to take the revocation as unceremoniously as some of the above suggestions would have us take the work itself.

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There are many possibilities, from revocation being simply a gesture of despair on its real author’s part (“Let’s call the whole thing off”) when contemplating the likely response of his readers as he nears the end, to its being a carefully inserted message saying that the book has nothing more to say than whatever it may have contributed to the reader’s subjective thinking in the course of the reading (“Don’t try dragging it out any further”).

But consider in conclusion one more possibility. In 1849, wondering whether he should resort to pseudonymity also in publishing his retrospective comments on his authorship, Kierkegaard writes in his notebook that, besides making things unnecessarily complicated for the reader, this would obscure the thought that the whole thing (his authorship) had been his own upbringing (Opdragelse). Might not this same thought have struck him earlier, this thought that all the energy he had put into his writing had not been simply or most profoundly an attempt to educate his contemporaries, but an odyssey in which he, the writer, was a traveler fighting his own way out of the petrified customs and thoughts of his time?

To someone as perceptive as Kierkegaard of his own and others’ motives, such a realization would have come quite easily. It would not be altogether surprising if it played a part in those closing pages, concluding, as they do, four-and-a-half years of back-breaking effort immediately following a crisis in his personal life. That the pseudonyms from Victor Eremita to Johannes Climacus are employed in working out Kierkegaard’s own salvation is not an alien thought, nor is it incompatible with the attribution of intentions of a more missionary kind, such as those ascribed by Mackey and Allison. We can even accept more grandly, as Mackey himself and more recently Edward Mooney suggest, that Climacus is trying at the same time to guide philosophy back into its ancient form, perhaps to usher it and ourselves onward into a new form. But underlying it all may be the self-edification of a single individual.

Postscript does give the impression of trying with, among other things, humor and satire to wrench people out of their customary ways of thinking, while at the same time confronting them with what they must face if they are to treat that time-honored topic, humanly essential truth and

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30 This too would be a departure from the Tractatus, about whose cryptic sentences Wittgenstein is said to have remarked that they should be read as chapter headings.
31 KJN 6, NB14:27: “But it is not necessary to publish them pseudonymously, not right to do so either inasmuch as the matter then doesn’t become simple enough . . . The category: that I myself am the one who has been brought up (opdragen), that it is all my own upbringing (opdragelse), is decisive enough” (emphasis added).
32 Mooney, On Søren Kierkegaard, chapter 1.
specifically the nature of Christian faith, in the way the topic properly
demands once it is understood. We may even feel that Kierkegaard’s own
later hope has been fulfilled: that his “discovery” of “the category of the
single individual” would be something for which posterity would thank
and remember him.³³ Suppose, however, that now, penning Climacus’
last pages, concluding a work that not only concludes but wraps up the
pseudonymous series of which it is itself the conclusion, Kierkegaard,
having taken his contemporaries to task, is struck by the thought that in
this activity it is first of all he himself who is being “brought up.”

Maybe, then, we should not exclude the possibility that the work is
being revoked on Kierkegaard’s behalf after all. Yet it may be cheating
to substitute “I, Søren Kierkegaard, born in this city” in the formula
of Climacus’ opening self-introduction (CUP 16). It is repeated in his
“Understanding with the reader,” where we read that “[i]n the seclusion of
the experiment, the whole book is about myself, solely about me” (CUP
520). Kierkegaard has admitted that a foray into dialectics under Climacus’
name had been part of his own career, and Climacus has of course had no
upbringing other than the one that Kierkegaard pens in his name.

The reference to “the experiment” is also relevant; it reinforces the
suggestion that Postscript is not so much a treatise to be discussed as a
thought experiment to be sampled. One good reason for revoking it and
for describing it as superfluous would be to indicate this fact quite generally.
When you reach the end, the sampling is over. Now it’s your move! Or
rather, now move!

³³ KJN 4. NB3:77.
Climacus reports a scene overheard, seen in a fugitive glance through leaves as he sat on a bench at twilight in “the garden of the dead,” a cemetery, most likely Copenhagen’s Assistens Kirkegård. The scene is the grief of a grandfather mourning at the grave of his son, and speaking tearfully of the meaning of that death to a ten-year-old boy, his grandson, now fatherless. The “garden of the dead,” as it is called, is not at the city’s center, but at some remove; not out in the wooded parklands, but nevertheless sufficiently alive with nature’s leafy shadows and open skies that Climacus can exalt in a kind of minor ecstasy over the coming of night – as if night were an invitation for a “nocturnal tryst,” a beautiful prelude to the more tearful tableau ahead. But what can the night tell us of mood, yearning, and heartache? Night beckons with the promise of a

tryst... with the infinite, persuaded by the night’s breeze as in a monotone it repeats itself, breathing through forest and meadow, and sighing as though in search of something, urged by the distant echo in oneself of the stillness as if intimating something, urged by the sublime calm of the heavens, as if this something had been found, persuaded by the palpable silence of the dew as if this were the explanation and infinitude’s refreshment, like the fecundity of a quiet night, only half understood like the night’s semi-diaphanous mist. (CUP 197)

The coming of night is only half-understood. For Kant, the sublime is only present in the half-understood power of ocean storms or present in the vast wonder of starry heavens, both beyond straightforward representation. Climacus gives us a downscaled but still tremulous gentle sublime, far from Sturm und Drang. He gives us the half-understood “semi-diaphanous
mist” of the night, the breathing, sighing, of a breeze, the “palpable silence of the dew.”

PART ONE: SETTING

THE GENTLE SUBLIME OF THE NIGHT

The Kantian sublime is an awesome occasion. One feels an initial humility, even fear and powerlessness, and then a recuperative sense of uplift – *How vast my consciousness*, to be viewing such energy and expanse! This uplifting moment before great storms or vast skies reminds us, as Kant has it, of our rational dignity.2 Climacus sketches a more gentle and intimate sublime, and one is left with a sense not of rational dignity but of restless repose. “What is the essence of night,” Schelling asks, “if not lack, need, and longing?”3 If an invitation to a nocturnal tryst foretells refreshment, troubles stilled, it is equally night’s “sighing as though in search of something.” We sense yearning, perhaps unquenchable thirst.

This is Kierkegaard’s anxious sublime.4 A twilight tryst is alluring, but no tryst is without anxiety – it might misfire or fail. The still breeze is “sighing as though in search of something” even as we sigh, anxious should the night provide nothing. The coming of dark in the garden of the dead is the coming of death, intimating, at best, “refreshment” half-seen. We yearn for the infinite repose of night, relief from self-torment and wounds. Replenishment is not promised as a savior seen through a glass darkly, as in a Christian salvation, but speaks as a comfort felt in the “silence of the dew,” sensed in a “semi-diaphanous mist.”

The “sublime calm of the heavens” opens toward “infinitude’s refreshment.” If this has a religious ring, it is mainly romantic. We know independently that the writer, one Johannes Climacus, is a self-described humorist, not quite a Christian (see CUP 520). This lyrical evocation of dusk is sandwiched near the center of an eccentric tome whose short title is *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.5 Yet its evocations of the night breeze and dew nevertheless bear comparison with the Christian evocations of nature that Kierkegaard provides in his eulogy to the lilies and the birds in the three discourses of 1849. Here, as George Pattison notes, nature “signals a kind

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3 Schelling, *The Deities of Samothrace*, 18.
4 See Pattison, “Kierkegaard and the Sublime.”
5 The complete title, in Hannay’s rendition, is *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs: A Mimic, Pathetic, Dialectic Compilation: An Existential Contribution*. I tend to prefer *Unscholarly* (or *Unacademic*) Postscript.
of transcendence” that evokes “the anxiety of self-relation.” The repose of a lily or a bird signals the contentment that humans yearn for but lack.

The “anxious sublime” is an anxious, restless relation of myself to myself, brought out (in this case) by the night breeze and mist. They only half-tell a story to a self that only half-knows its own incompleteness and need. This incompleteness means that both Kierkegaard and Climacus avoid any “naïve pastoralism,” Pattison’s term for untroubled expectations that a “lost plenitude of immediacy” will be restored. We are thrown into homelessness with no promise of intimacy without alienation. The sketch of the restless night instead instills what he calls “luminous [and] dark expressions of anxiety.” The cemetery’s luminous dark anxiety marks a restless night propelled (“urged”) by a restless soul, and an “echo” in the soul, as if the night itself were the source of unease. The anxious dark of the night and the dark of the soul implicate each other in mutual resonance.

LYRIC AND DIALECTIC

Our mise-en-scène is barely half-a-dozen pages, a condensed and powerful meditation on death and inwardness held in an atmosphere set by sky above and fresh grave below. A poet-philosopher on a cemetery bench considers his life and surroundings. The mood of a serene yet restless breeze offsets noisy city bustle and frantic distraction. The lyricism is not to be set aside as merely decorative.

As in Fear and Trembling (subtitled “a dialectical lyric”), there are lyrical displays among recurrent philosophical abstractions. Stepping beyond the terror of an impending sacrifice on Mount Moriah, we might consider dispassionately what is meant by a suspension of ethics. Stepping beyond the garden of death and a grief-filled outpouring, we might consider what is meant by the expression “truth is subjectivity,” or by “indirect communication.” Abstractions gain life from their shimmering settings and yet dialectical disquisitions are at least one step away. To leap immediately to

6 See Pattison, “Poor Paris!”, 128–129. The reference is to KW 10. Marcia Robinson steered me toward the tradition that takes God as luminous darkness, evident, for example, in Gregory of Nyssa or Ephram the Syrian. See Louth, The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition, 78–79.
7 Pattison, “Poor Paris!”
8 The scene appears almost accidentally, with little fanfare or warning (CUP 197–203). The mood, atmosphere, or attunement (Stimmung) for this lyrically dialectical meditation on death and inwardness fits the sense in which Heidegger uses this term (which is the same in Danish and German) to describe our being in the world.
9 I take the subtitle’s concatenation, “a mimic, pathetic, dialectic compilation,” to encompass the lyric within mime and the deep tragic feelings of pathos (or the “pathetic”).
dialectical formulations, and stay there, is to risk missing the animating surround. It is the setting of mobile and varying things that speak, the fluid settings, lyrically evoked, that give abstractions life, and from which dialectical formulas (at some risk) are removed. In the present case, the essential tableau includes the old man, his grandson, and Climacus, along with a fresh grave, an anxious night, and a screen of leafy boughs. And perhaps accompanying the speech and stage-sets that evoke the night, from the orchestra pit there floats a little night music to accentuate this anxious tryst with the infinite. In any case, the dark uncertainties of a romantic, proto-Christian faith are rendered as night’s yearning and as Climacus’ reciprocal response. For contrast, in *The Sickness Unto Death*, a soul- or self-relation arrives in austere abstraction, “a relation that relates to itself.”

Postscript can depict faith or “subjective truth” abstractly as “the objective uncertainty” held in “the most passionate inwardness” (CUP 171). The graveyard intimates this restless inwardness: “the night’s breeze . . . repeats itself, breathing through forest and meadow, and sighing as though in search of something, urged by the distant echo in oneself of the stillness as if intimating something” (CUP 197). The sighing of night reflects a sighing soul, and a sighing soul reflects the night breeze, both yearning for a rest signaled by silent dew. It’s not as though the physiology of anxiety caused the skies to spin, or the spin of the sky caused the brain to spin. It’s a matter of poetic fit, as lightning portends shock to the heart, and shock to the heart portends lightning.

**TAKING UP AND BEING TAKEN**

Climacus lingers for the dead to speak, awaiting whatever death speaks to him. He overhears a graveside address on how death disrupts the living, puts the dead under judgment, and warns the living to heed their lives. A warning sounds through shadows and leaves. Though not meant for him, the words of this elegy are taken by Climacus as addressed intimately to him. He is taken by them, and takes them up as his own.

Here we have what becomes a familiar existentialist term of art. “Appropriation” names his taking up these words (see CUP 171). The words float more or less anonymously from a graveside, but Climacus takes them in, making them his own. For good reason we can pause on “appropriation,”

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with its overtones of forceful and illicit seizure, as in “appropriation” (or stealing) of land or funds. Climacus intends an initial moment of being taken by something of moral or religious consequence, and then taking up with it. A love of beauty or truth, for instance, grasps or overwhelms me. I then take something urgent to heart. But I take to heart what steals my heart (not what I steal). What has captured one’s soul is then internalized or absorbed as one’s own. No single English word conveys this double movement, but if we retain “appropriation,” then we should say that I get appropriated, or that I appropriate what appropriates me.

The old man grieves for his lost son, newly buried. He fears for his son’s peace, for he was caught up in the illusions of philosophical speculation, believing like others of the intelligentsia that philosophical or historical speculation about faith could be a substitute for faith. Intellectual debate about Christianity is a work not of faith but of objectivity. Erudite engagement with Christianity may exhibit dialectical or analytical finesse, but is no advance over simple, untutored Christian faith. Someone lacking an analysis of faith can have faith, and someone with a perfect analysis can be an atheist – a humorist, say, who understands the available cure but won’t take it. The old man grieves at lacking learning enough to have warned his son that his soul was at risk. He knows in his bones that his son is disqualified from salvation. Climacus grieves at the old man’s having been denied a restful old age, so anxious he is for his son as he faces God’s judgment (CUP 199).

Why does the old man unburden his heart to the child – in this way, at this time? What of his duty to console the boy, help him through the trauma of having lost his father, especially now that he has neither parents nor other family to care for him, but only an old man, with limited years? Apparently the old man is less sensitive to the immediate pain of the child than to the urgent need, as he sees it, to warn him of his father’s perdition, and to ask for a promise from the child that he will resist the temptation of that seductive but dangerous path (CUP 200). Though he failed to save his son, he might save his grandson. In his anguish over his son’s perdition, the grandfather becomes insensitive to the grandchild’s pain. In his evident distress, he even demands a solemn oath.

**Call and Response**

This scene of inadvertent spying opens obliquely. Climacus reports, quite disarmingly, “What happened is quite simple” (CUP 197). Is it simple
to learn from the dead? A disingenuous beginning makes us lower our guard. Or perhaps we are meant to see that something “quite simple” can prefigure the extraordinary. The author simply sat on a bench, becoming inadvertently privy to a conversation. Yet that moment of overhearing was the moment to receive a vocation, a sense, as he says, of direction, or more forcefully, to receive a “decisive summons to come on a definite track” (CUP 202). He reflects to himself, “You are after all tired of life’s diversions, you are tired of girls that you love only in passing, you must have something that fully occupies your time. Here it is.” But this is perversely inept. A vocational summons that arrives only because flirtation loses its charm is no summons at all. Yet Climacus is right to set death next to vocation, even though he gets this comically out of focus.

Graveside weeping awakens a need for direction, but the earnestness of death does not fully prompt him to take life seriously. Climacus takes the voice overheard as posing a detective’s puzzle. He finds the riddle of death and vocation to be “something like an intricate criminal case in which the very complex circumstances made pursuit of the truth difficult” (CUP 202). But this cannot be right. “How should I live?” is an existential question, not a question of fact in a “who done it” mystery. The mystery of finding one’s path is not like solving an objective puzzle. Nevertheless, almost in spite of himself, Climacus stumbles on important truths.

He is flooded with emotion upon overhearing this graveside lament, and becomes neither a voyeur taking in someone else’s problems, nor a detective out to solve them. Pressed by death to show that his life has not become meaningless, he is struck by a “summons.” Having “a definite track” will be a partial answer to the challenge of death. Yet Climacus is too sophisticated to admit easily to being “swept away” by a mysterious passion. He compensates, accordingly, in a contrary direction. The mood of life-and-death urgency descends swiftly into comedy. Climacus drops the urgent mystery of his future into a police file. He sloughs off the anxious “whence and whither” of a call by switching his circumstance: it is now a matter of factual deficit, to be rectified by clues lit by a flashlight. Yet no bag of tricks, keen observations, or savvy detective’s deductions can erase this existential desert: “You are tired of girls that you love only in passing.” Luckily, he leaves this absurd detective analogy to turn to the man’s heartfelt lament. And he gets a bright idea about how better to occupy himself. He will devote himself to exposing the fraud that is abstract philosophy. This calling seems halfway between a summons to do something (to begin
anew), and a particular response and resolve (the path lies here rather than there).

Humor

There is more to say about the enigmas underlying the yearning of night, and behind words from the grave. But another issue looms. Before Climacus sketches much of this scene, he seems to disown in advance the possibility that he may receive a call. Here is the apparently self-shackling remark: “Even if a call was issued to him [the child], in following it I myself, however, am without any call” (CUP 196). Is he saying that, even if he knows that the grandfather’s admonition applies to him, he won’t take it as a genuine “call”?

Perhaps he means this: “Even if a call was issued [to the child], in following [the child’s call] I myself, however, am without any call.” This would be to insist on a philosophical point. A path genuinely my own is one to which I have been called, one that lifts me up, that embraces me. I might follow exactly in the footsteps of someone else who has received a genuine call. Acting in accord with their calling (however worthy my actions may be) is nevertheless not to have been called myself. Calls can’t be delivered by proxy (and they arrive by something like grace). It’s good if Climacus takes up a cudgel to expose academic philosophy, and better if that is his calling.

Here is another possibility. As we have mentioned, Climacus styles himself a humorist. He maps humor as a life-stage, or a border between life-stages. It stays just shy of religious faith, and so is more serious than a taste for jokes and good cheer. From its vantage, you see “the problem of life” accurately, and see what commitments are required in answer. But for all his insight, the humorist fails to make a requisite response. Climacus could see that for all who take themselves to be Christian, thus-and-so commitments are required. He could be wiser than an ethicist, for example, who sees Christian life as requiring only commitments to the morally conventional. Yet Climacus fails to commit as a Christian. Even taking up a polemical vocation will be merely heeding the grandfather’s admonition, merely doing another’s bidding. And polemicizing may be merely a new way to pass time. To my ear, this annoying vagueness about what he does and does not have by way of a call is the preemptive self-mocking that a humorist employs to disguise his dilatory wandering. A humorist might open a polemical attack, but that might not stand as good enough answer to a “decisive summons” (CUP 202).
Climacus is skittish about commitment. He’s most comfortable as an amused outsider even as he hints that he might be otherwise – say, as he’s moved by the scene he encounters. Could he be summoned to the vocation of humorist – called to announce the illness of the age and of oneself, and called not to do much about it? Could he engineer an exposé but still remain shy of accepting a religious cure? He could expose the illusion that philosophy goes beyond Christianity. Perhaps he is indeed “called,” to expose fraud but not to mend his own ways.

SUBJECTIVE SPACE SHARED

From an objective angle, “what happened” was simple: he sat down and overheard an intimate conversation by the fresh earth of a grave. No Heavens rained fire, nor Whirlwinds spoke, nor Ghosts rose from their graves. Yet by relating “the most affecting scene I have ever witnessed,” Climacus positions himself, at least for the moment, as a subjective thinker, one who is affected by grief and death and moved by their lyrical expression. As author of this great tome, a “postscript” laid out in multiple sections and chapters in over 500 dense pages, Climacus appears largely as an objective thinker, making a more or less objective case for the truth of subjectivity. But ever and again, as in this graveside scene, he slips into a confessional and witnessing mood. This places him within subjective space – not just describing it from without.

In the space of subjectivity, Climacus is subject to the intimations of the night mist, and to a sudden earnestness about the direction his life should take. Far from simple, what happened might display in but a few pages large pieces of what Postscript portends and declares by longer, dialectically quite intricate means. Readied by the yearning breeze, he becomes privy to the pleading words that will speak to his yearning. Hidden by trees, afraid to move lest he disturb the pair, Climacus takes in the graveside effusion, and takes in the words as addressed especially to him. Subjectivity includes the capacity to see and feel from the standpoint of other subjectivities. As Climacus confides, he is sequentially the old man who sees the ruse of philosophy pretending to surpass faith, the child who is overcome with the 

11 Note the parallel with Climacus’ revocation of Postscript as a whole: here the ‘revocation’ (of his calling, if that’s what it is) occurs before the story even gets started.

12 See Hannay’s discussion of revocation and Climacus as “humorist” in his contribution to this volume. There is another reason Climacus might downplay the commitment we’d expect if he’s been summoned to a vocation. It’s that he doesn’t want to report that here and now, objectively (as it were), we have an easily and straightforwardly identifiable “conversion” or “call.”
grandfather’s demand that he pledge his life in a direction opposite to his father’s, and the silent, invisible, but haunting corpse, testament to a life squandered (CUP 200).

The old man, hair chalked with age, engages a social space that links three generations and an invisible listener. This intersubjective field is activated by a dead son who prompts the inwardsness, true or false, of the old man, who then seeks to prompt a faithful inwardsness in the child, this concatenation of affect then prompting inwardsness (or its shadow) in Climacus. This ensemble of listening, speaking, and being moved shows that the space of inwardsness and subjectivity (in their varieties of authenticity) is at first blush solitary but ultimately social. Inwardsness corrects what Climacus calls an “unnatural form of interpersonal association” (CUP 203). Although Climacus admits he is an onlooker, a witness to a scene he observes at some remove, it would be a mistake to figure him as standing outside subjective space. He never steps back from the events he overhears the way an objective note-taker might, or someone gathering material for a play or a novel. He finds himself susceptible to the “fecundity” of a twilight that sighs and is “in search of something.” Subjectivity gives him the poetic tones he so lyrically conveys; inwardsness pervades this social space.

Climacus is wrapped in portents and persuasions of dew, in search of an animating meaning for his life. This is no place for observational stares that objectify the other, for the “masculine” glare that freezes, or for dispassionate reports. His is a place of subjective yearning – a place open to calling. Only a person well free from the seductions of indifferent, third-personal objectivity could find this place so richly promising. He waits “womanlike” for the infinite to enter, half-appearing in “the night’s semi-diaphanous mist” (CUP 197).

Much of the graveyard tableau with its gentle enigmas is familiar now, and less obdurate. Let’s move in for a closer look.

PART TWO: TANGLED ENIGMAS

RIDDLES IN SPEECH

Climacus finds the twilight speaking a riddle. But what is the riddle of twilight – or is it two or three riddles?

Evening’s leave-taking of the day, and of the one who has lived that day, is a speech in riddle. Its reminder is like the solicitous mother’s admonition to the child to

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13 I return to this enigma in Part Three below.
be home in good time. But its invitation, even if the leave-taking is innocent in being thus misunderstood, is an inexplicable beckoning, as though repose were to be found only by staying out for the nocturnal tryst, not with a woman but, womanlike, with the infinite. (CUP 197)

As evening says goodbye to the day, it speaks a riddle, something uncanny, incongruous. Climacus has more than one riddle in mind, but at the least he alludes to the enigma that night speaks while remaining silent, that the “palpable silence of the dew” is “the explanation.” This is a riddle known to the Psalmist:

The heavens tell God’s glory  
and His handiwork sky declares.  
Day to day breathes utterance  
And night to night pronounces knowledge.  
There is no utterance and there are no words,  
their voice is never heard.  
Ps. 19:2–4

There is neither voice, nor hearing, nor words – yet heavens tell, sky declares, day utters, night pronounces.¹⁴ His readers will remember this biblical verse as riddling speech. The heavens have inwardness and the capacity to speak expressively from the heart – and yet do not have inwardness or expression. Climacus then frames a convoluted riddle or enigma of farewells.

For evening to say anything is a riddle, but for it to say farewell quickly doubles the worry, for Climacus assimilates it to the farewell of a mother who bids her child goodbye. She releases the child even while warning her not to stay out too late, to come home in good time. As in a fairytale, she might say, “Beware the woods, where darkness comes early.” And where is the incongruous here? Why are these admonitions liable “to be misunderstood,” and why are they “innocent”?

A child needs the assurance of a safe return to a mother’s embrace and the bravery to venture into the dark, if she will. The riddling discordance is that the mother both hides and reveals the risk of there being no safe return, and the knowledge that for mortals there is always one final cancellation of safe return. The child ventures out, must venture out, with the mother’s blessing, but also with the mother’s reservations, her fears. The world welcomes and

¹⁴ This is Robert Alter’s translation. He comments, “The heavens speak, but it is a wordless language.” Alter, The Book of Psalms, 60. The New American Standard translation reads, “There is no speech, nor are there words; Their voice is not heard.” To smooth out wrinkles (and riddles), the King James Version reworks the text: “There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard” (my emphasis). I am grateful to Marcia Robinson, who heard the resonance between Psalm 19 and Climacus’ riddle. Perhaps when the people are deaf, their voice is not heard.
repels, offers adventure and delight no child should be denied, and offers terror and danger no child should suffer. The mother who says “farewell, return in good time,” delivers innocent good cheer, confidence that the child can set out on its own. Yet a mother is also in dread, and delivers a half-heard admonition: beware, return in good time.

Night says goodbye to the day – it says “take care” and “come hither” to all who have lived through the day, as if death said “take care” and “come hither.” Is a tryst with night a tryst with death? Answering the “come hither” of night (or death) is to gamble one’s vulnerability, as if a vulnerable woman were to answer the beckoning night, alone. One answers night’s invitation “womanlike.” To anticipate a tryst is not to prepare for battle but to yield to an invitation, as one would yield to love.

Themes of leaving and coming home, of coming into existence and perishing, preoccupy Climacus in Philosophical Crumbs, as well as in Repetition and Fear and Trembling. Day follows night, and for the most part there’s no riddle in that. Riddles are not always easy to spot, or to answer with tact: a reliable riddle is liable to be misunderstood, as most disquieting enigmas are. Sarah might bid Isaac “to return in good time,” hardly imagining the danger that awaits. Haunting riddles cloak Abraham’s farewell as he sets out toward the mountain. The young man in Repetition breaks off from his beloved yet yearns for her return. The child sets out, yet we fear that this move into darkness will bring evil or accident. Night bids day adieu, knowing it will return, but in Repetition we are reminded that Job must bid his happiness adieu, not knowing it will return, yet being ready to welcome it back – should it return (against all odds). A mother assures her child not to fear in the night, that it will awake in the morning, and when morning arrives, she bids her child adieu for the day.

Farewells are exchanged in the confidence that the sun will rise, that we will awake, that the world will return, that our friends will not enter the grave in the night – even as we know that a final farewell awaits, when there will be no tomorrow, when we will not awake, when the beloved will not return. Jonathan Lear remarks that a therapist must have a lively sense of death. In keeping with Climacus’ disquieting riddle of a mother fearfully holding yet bravely letting go in bidding her child farewell, the analyst knows that termination, and a respect for it, hangs over developing therapeutic

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15 Lear, Therapeutic Action, 54–57.
attachments. To “hold” a child’s (or analysand’s) anxieties is always also to anticipate the day when the child (or analysand) will depart to live in freedom. Good mothering, good mentoring, good therapy thus embody what Heidegger calls “being toward death,” an eye on termination that colors all action and thought prior to it. Climacus offers the unending riddle of farewells and the irrepressible hopes of return.

He avers that the mother is innocent in bidding her child goodbye with thoughts for her safe return, just as a weather reporter is innocent in saying “till tomorrow,” and the night, innocent in bidding day goodbye. The night is more or less innocent as it welcomes Climacus to the venture of a nocturnal tryst, to be remembered happily on the morrow. In contrast, no such innocent nocturnal tryst is offered the old man. He lives in dread, under an anxious sky. He knows in his bones that he must die, that his son has just died, that his grandson must live under the cloud of his father’s death and the cloud of his grandfather’s death, must live soon enough alone and lonely, though still only a child.

The man knows that he has no one to bid him to return in good time. He knows that it’s false that each farewell is merely a passing separation before the morrow’s safe reunion. Only faith helps him abide the enigmas of farewell (see CUP 197). Faith brings hope amidst abiding uncertainties, living through the half-innocent riddles of taking leave of the day, bidding adieu, or hearing an invitation to a nocturnal tryst. It echoes the more troubling and riddling perplexities behind questions Climacus had asked earlier in Postscript: What is it to die, or to marry, or to pray (CUP 138–152)?

A “tryst with the infinite” brings love and death in tow. Love and death are at the heart of the scene unfolding under the infinite night sky, as Climacus takes in the anxious love of a father for his dead son and takes in the grandfather’s love for his shaken grandson. Love and death are also at the heart of a mother who bids her child to return in good time and knows her child will one day not return. She keeps faith through uncertainty (or does not).

HEARING THE DEAD SPEAK

In opening his passage to the gentle sublime, Climacus takes in this place where people seek solitary communion with the dead. Here we find relief from the usual “see and be seen” of city streets, carriage paths, or church

interiors on a social Sunday morn. An individual vanishes among the trees, “not happy to meet and avoiding contact, since he sought the dead and not the living” (CUP 197). But Climacus cannot let go of his “dialectical” focus on the riddles of farewells. The visitors to Assistens Kirkegård come to say goodbye to their dead. Although Climacus has no particular grave to visit, the weight of his existence bears heavily. Perhaps he takes himself already to be dead, or nearly so, in which case he does have a grave close by. Can he commune with himself as one communes with the dead?

There is always in this garden, among the visitors, a beautiful understanding that one does not come out here to see and to be seen, the one visitor avoids the other. Nor does one need company, least of all that of a talkative friend, here where all is eloquence, where the dead greets one with the brief word placed on his grave, not like a clergyman who gives sermons on that word far and wide, but as a silent man does who says no more than this, yet says it with a passion as though the dead would burst open the tomb – or is it not strange to have on his grave “we shall meet again” and to remain down there? (CUP 197)

It’s puzzling that the night can speak without words, and it’s puzzling that the dead speak, when the dead “remain down there.” How can they be so eloquent as to burst from the grave, yet remain silent and still – only corpses? The dead say to the living, “we shall meet again!” – and the living agree. But does the visitor stand graveside, or will they meet in the grave? It is frightening enough that the grave meets me once, let alone vows to meet me again. Is it a warning that I am soon to be swallowed by death?

Climacus writes, rather opaquely, that “it is meaningless to say ‘another time’ because the last time is already past and there is no reason to stop taking leave when the beginning is made after the last time has passed.” I hear him as saying that of course we will revisit the dead, take leave of them again, even as this visit concludes. We resume visits despite the departure of those whom we visit. Climacus started with the grave’s farewell to the living. Now the focus is the living’s farewell to the dead. Perhaps all is parting and rebirth, leaving the departed and their return, farewell and “we shall meet again,” loss and repetition (“repetition” taken as a revelation

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17 A recent (2008) visitor’s guide has Assistens Kirkegård listed as “a popular place for people to take a stroll, look at the old graves and monuments, and to have a picnic. A flea market operates along its walls every Saturday from May to October. The yellow walls of the cemetery . . . [have] in recent years become the target of many graffiti painters.” Regine Olsen, Poul Martin Møller, Hans Christian Andersen, Niels Bohr, and the African-American jazz musicians Kenny Drew and Richard Boone are buried there.

18 Cf. Either/Or, KW 3: 42. I discuss the enigma of looking at one’s life from the position of having already died in “Transfigurations: The Intimate Agency of Death,” in Kierkegaard and Death, ed. Patrick Stokes and Adam Buben, forthcoming.
refiguring the past, bringing it alive in new ways, and reanimating the present). Visitors speak with their risen dead.

Each abyssal enigma marks an anomalous moment to be read in opposing ways. Each disrupts the stability of expected frames of reference, showing us a disturbing possibility. Our most ordinary linguistic frames of intelligibility, whether they be poetic or non-poetic, can become unexpectedly fluid and elusive, full of wonder and anxiety. We know in the case of the duck–rabbit reversible figure that a duck-world shifts incongruously to a rabbit-world. The riddle is that we see both, and know that both somehow exist simultaneously. The world aspects rabbitly, and then aspects duckly, and we know we must accept its capacity to aspect or reveal itself in each of these incompatible ways. The breeze aspects whisperingly, then as pure motion with no voice at all. In a more urgent and anxious riddle, the dead – my dead – both speak and don’t speak, both warn me to heed my life and then retreat to rest inert, voiceless as dust and bones.

IRONIES

A riddle creates a two-mindedness that resembles irony. Kierkegaardian irony is often the tension in our “existentially essential concepts” (those that pick out what should most matter to us). It’s a tension between our objective social status or routine behavior and our presumed aspirations or hopes. Irony says two things at once. I say “I’m a Christian (or Jew),” which might translate, “I go to church (or temple).” But these words are also haunted by shadows of failed aspirations. As I say “I’m a Christian” I think simultaneously, “But I’m not yet a Christian.” I would hear the irony in my words, and others might, even if I didn’t. Or I might say, “I’m not yet a teacher” (my aspirations are far from fulfilled) – yet know that by public, “objective” accounts I am undeniably a teacher. If Socrates is listening, he will hear irony. The mind oscillates between two possible hearings. For a spiritually alert audience, no matter what I say about who I am, there will usually be, and should be, some irony afoot.

19 See my introduction to Kierkegaard’s Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs, trans. M. G. Piety (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), and On Søren Kierkegaard, chapter 9.

20 Charles Larmore defines irony as two-mindedness in The Romantic Legacy. Jonathan Lear refines this, describing Kierkegaardian irony as accentuating the gap between a commonplace status and our highest aspirations: see Therapeutic Action.

21 The big exception here will be reporting my “file identity”: say, at tax-time, or at border crossings, where I report most impersonally my job or status. Then my identity has no personal, existential, or spiritual valence.
Irony attaches to identity avowals and also to broad evaluations of “the world” as we characterize particular happenings and our wide attunements. Something might be “not evil enough to be evil,” or “too evil to be evil,” thus evincing gaps in which irony can play. I might say “that doesn’t matter enough to matter,” or “that matters so much that its mattering is beyond words.” In subjective life – that is, human life – irony is ineluctable. The two-mindedness of irony, manifest in attestations and aspirations of identity, worth, and attunement, has striking parallels in the fluid many-sidedness of riddles.

NESTING RIDDLES

As a nest of intertwined riddles becomes more complex, it reveals ever-deepening ambiguities and enigmas. With the nesting (or stacking) of strands and layers of riddles, one’s inwardness becomes more disturbed, unsettled – even interrupted, disrupted, or unseated. If heavens speak or breezes whisper, this marks the first stratum of inwardness and riddle, occurring precisely when a speaking or whispering is sensed as the other side of an evident silence of heavens and breeze. One lives this dual-mindedness just as one lives Wittgenstein’s duck–rabbit as both duck and not duck, rabbit and not rabbit. Intertwined with silent heavens speaking is a second unsettling, a riddle of farewells, issued from nights, mothers, or the dead, boding promise of return and fear of death, renewal of good cheer and suffering of loss. In a poem that begins “My life closed twice before it closed,” Emily Dickinson concisely evokes this doubleness:

Parting is all we know of Heaven
And all we need of Hell. 22

Superimposed on these is a third stratum of riddle and inwardness, address from and to the dead. Farewells or partings include the dead. They speak and listen, note our visits – and simultaneously they are the epitome of silence, the mute nullity of dust.

There is a fourth enigma that emerges in the sociality–isolation of inwardness. A deepening of spirit or self seems the paradigm of my solitude, what Climacus can call my “hidden inwardness.” Yet Climacus notes that inwardness is both a self’s relation to itself and also its outward relation to others. To lose inwardness is to exemplify “an unnatural form of interpersonal

22 From #1732 of Dickinson’s Collected Poems.
Inwardness ties into my deepest passions, even as it reaches outward as the “natural form of interpersonal association.” A last riddle: teaching requires contact and withdrawal. Each spinning enigma is a tangle we can explore but not completely stop or straighten. Irony and riddle pervade our happy–unhappy fates.

PART THREE: INWARDNESS

INWARDNESS INTERPERSONAL

Alastair Hannay gives a welcome rendition of Kierkegaard’s epic existential compilation, marvelously true to the lively twists and turns of the text. His introduction notes the perils of translating the Danish Inderlighed as “inwardness.” As he puts it,

“Inwardness” is by no means a perfect translation of “Inderlighed.” As with Hegel’s Innerlichkeit, the sense is not that of inward-directedness [but of] an inner warmth, sincerity, seriousness and wholeheartedness in one’s concern for what matters, a “heartfulness” not applied to something but which comes from within. However, since “inwardness” has become a standard translation for Kierkegaard’s “Inderlighed” and in this sense even finds a place in the Oxford English Dictionary, it has been retained here. (CUP xxxviii–xxxix)

What is “inward” springs from the heart in expressive saying, feeling, or doing, is not “mere gesture” or pro forma. Heartfulness, wholeheartedness, escape shallow conventionality or perfunctory mimesis. Adopting what is “typically said or done” by others of my class, city, or family can pervade my relations to others, the world, or myself. Yet if I respond only as “one in my situation” would respond, then how can I be a person with heart in what I do, say, or undergo? I remain but a mimic.24

Letting wholeheartedness or heartfulness be translated as “inwardness” brings psychologists to picture introspection or inner-direction, and philosophers to picture Cartesian divides between private consciousness and public world.25 Yet in his graveyard meditations, Climacus sidesteps

23 Climacus asserts that a teacher wanting to impart objective results, and nothing more, assumes an “unnatural form of interpersonal association” (CUP 203). The true goal of imparting truths that matter is to impart to the learner a deepening of inwardness, exemplifying a natural form of interpersonal association. I return to this below.

24 Heidegger calls “inauthentic” a mindlessly saying or doing what “they,” or “one,” says or does; it is thus an abdication of one’s personhood (though the latter is not Heidegger’s term of art).

25 Hannay remarks that Climacus uses Invorteshed for inner-directedness, as opposed to heart-felt outer-directedness, Inderlighed (CUP xxxviii). Also, see his “Kierkegaard on Melancholy and Despair,” 152.
all of this as he brings quite another matter to center stage. The central issue is not metaphysical inner–outer distinctions, or consciousness–world divides, but the very human ways that, under the burden of death, we do and do not convey who we are to each other as we express ourselves interpersonally, and find ourselves in a world that nourishes or betrays us – or intimates unutterable wonder.

A most true “me” does not live in an isolated little box cut off from everything else. Subjectivity is not cut off from the world.26 What might seem like a divide is instead porous: Climacus engages the whisper of a night breeze and the muffled tears of his neighbor through the trees. Night infiltrates him and he responds. He all but enters the souls of a grandfather, a dead son, an abandoned child. Shrieking or weeping, when not done in mimicry or only for effect, also defies a barrier between Cartesian inside and outside.27 Climacus is rightly suspicious of “outward bawling,” not because pain is inescapably inner, and vocalizations outer. He is suspicious because “bawling” by adults in the public square is typically hackneyed hysterics covering over an absence of heartfelt suffering, an absence of wholeheartedness flowing toward others (CUP 220).

Earnestness, courage, or truthfulness reach toward “objects.” We are earnest about something, heartfelt with regard to something. Inwardness, as the locus of passion, is a mode of intentional and interpersonal relations – not at all an isolated something hidden within. It underscores reciprocity, a give and take of affect and emotion. The heavens offer heartfelt invitation, accepted or refused with heart. A grandfather’s deep grief completes itself in concern for another – who responds with heartfelt gratitude. Climacus awakens (“inwardly”) to vocation as he takes in a scene in a cemetery. The night air and another’s voice transform him, realigning his affects and commitments. The world pours into him; he parcels out a response that pours into the world. Taking in and parceling out presuppose interpersonal association. “Inwardness” is not metaphysically inner.

LEARNING, INWARDNESS

Night and grief frame a setting of instruction. The teacher of truth that matters, of essential truth, teaches to my “self-relation” and to my relation to others and the world. This teacher teaches by withdrawal and reservation. A teacher, in this sense, is not a skills trainer or drill instructor, but someone

26 A Hegelian inner–outer contrast fails, too, but in rather different ways.
27 Climacus hints that Fear and Trembling indulges too much in “bawling out” of the Moriah event (CUP 220).
who will impart inwardness, or heart. The riddle is that such truth is imparted by backing away, in the way that Socrates imparts knowledge by saying he has nothing to teach, or in the way Climacus says, at the end of the Postscript, that he revokes everything he has said. The grandfather that Climacus overhears teaches without talking directly to Climacus at all. The riddle is a tension between two truths: a teacher intervenes, coming face to face with his or her student; yet a teacher also teaches by absence, by disappearing behind a curtain.

There is something quixotic about this. When it comes to loves or affections, matters of death or marriage, “essential truth,” then direct address is ruled out. But why?

Direct address, as Climacus sees it, is too invasive and liable to overpower a student’s vulnerable “self-activities,” showing insufficient respect for them (CUP 203). An awakening soul is awakening from within, even as it opens outwardly. By assuming a direct relationship to the would-be learner – as if one’s wisdom could be poured directly into the skull of the learner – one details any hope of awakening a learner’s inwardness. Key to imparting wisdom is withdrawal or absence. The old man is “reserved” or absent with regard to Climacus. He is decidedly not reserved with his grandson. We have to keep in mind that it is Climacus who is learning here: we must attend to him as the beneficiary of wisdom, indirectly imparted. He grasps, yet the old man pours nothing into his skull. He learns by grasping the content of the grandfather’s plea: it’s a bad thing to waste one’s life on abstract system-building as if that is a viable substitute for wrestling with how one relates best to oneself and others. Climacus takes up an existential “how” linked to an appropriate objective “what.” Of course, this is wildly startling. How in the world can accidentally overhearing a sentimental address to an innocent, uncomprehending boy bring me to a life-altering revelation?

The teacher’s inwardness, Climacus reports, “is a respect for the learner precisely as one having inwardness in himself” (CUP 203). Respect for the inwardness of another means having reservations about tampering with it, and realizing that, in the long run, the other’s care for their own soul is their own business. A teacher who meddles assumes an “unnatural form of interpersonal association.” Helping another is approaching and backing off, and knowing when to do either. Something profound is in the air when grandfather addresses grandson, but the real teaching happens in Climacus’ overhearing. He confesses he has never heard such a moving scene. He learns from it, even as he worries about meddling in their business. But how do we learn from things in the air? And what are we to make of the
ill-mannered attempt of the grandfather to instill a sense of vocation in his grandson? Doesn’t respect dictate that he step back, forgo tampering with the inward “self-activity” of the child? Alas, his address is less like wisdom from Socratic reserve, and more like an upsurge of suffering – not teaching, but a cry of pain.

Why expect this to be intergenerational teaching? The old man is overcome by grief and hardly fit to be temperate or wise. This unrehearsed drama initiates the child into mourning. It is not, by the way, a practice that Socrates, who belittles weeping, would ever recommend; but inheritors of a biblical culture will hardly object to the idea that a child must be led to weep over the deaths of fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, friends and neighbors, kings and great leaders. If we grant further that a young child may have no natural desire to be led to this practice, then heavy-handed tampering may be partially excused.

Furthermore, urgency may trump the value of temperate reserve. The grandfather’s overwrought plea is colored by his awareness that he is old, running out of time, and addresses a child, who will soon be left without familial counsel. Flooding another with pathos would be inexcusable if not for this exceptional circumstance. There can be a suspension of protocols of respect, meant for adults in normal times. More alarming is the man’s demanding an oath. Can the child possibly understand the nature of the oath – or of the words he utters in compliance? He is to mourn a father and swear to forsake him. Oppositions between fathers and sons are the stuff of life, but here the demand amidst grief and devastation requires the child to gather himself and solemnly swear to disown the father he mourns.

Most likely the grandfather is inexcusably tampering, but Climacus is not tampered with. He finds his soul awakened by “words in the air,” indirectly. Can it be plausible that the old man has a “natural interpersonal association” with Climacus? But Climacus does not even exist for the grandfather. How can he respect the inwardness of someone he does not know? A student I don’t know may lurk in the back of my class, listening as if behind a screen. Perhaps Climacus lurks in that same way. Learners are often invisible to their teachers – after all, this is how we learn from authors long departed, or those we know only through books. We could say that Kierkegaard respects my “self-activity” despite our lacking face-to-face

28 We often ask children to promise (or apologize) long before they can have any real idea of what they are being asked to do. We initiate children into cultural forms in rather wooden ways, trusting that refinement, and “inner” understanding, will come later. Meanwhile, we can be content with more or less rote compliance. The art comes much later, and in degrees for most, and for some never.
It might be that I would be prevented from learning were I to meet him in person.

**TRUE OR FALSE**

We are cultural creatures. Families, neighborhoods, schools, places of worship, offer modes of expression that we absorb as inheritance. Kierkegaard learns the etiquette of the playground or street, of class relations, filial piety, and dissertation presentation. He inherits endless variations of what Climacus calls modes of “interpersonal association.” Even the cultivation of solitude can be framed as a mode of interpersonal association: I learn when such association is best suspended, or when it’s best to take oneself as one’s sole companion.

The fact that we inherit various forms of expression means that we can use or misuse that inheritance. It is not something merely thrust upon us as an inescapable burden. One can disown one’s inheritance, to a greater or lesser extent. One becomes less Danish if one leaves the country at age five and is raised in Paris speaking French, or if one loudly withdraws from participation in the state church, or mocks the King. Clearly being Danish (or not) is more than an objective public status. Being a Christian, or a professor, beyond certain objective marks, has a deeply evaluative and subjective dimension – a real or true professor will be a good professor, and we can argue about what that ideal entails. Being inward, too, has an evaluative dimension, and can occur in degrees. We can display the inherited outward signs of inwardness yet not be truly inward, just as we can display the outward signs of membership in the professoriate yet not be truly a professor.

While sitting in the garden of the dead, Climacus searches for the distinction between true inwardness in grieving and “just going through the motions.” There is a way to mimic the outward forms of grief that will be untrue to grief. He puts it this way: “inwardness [will be] untrue to the same degree as the outward expression, in countenance and mien, in words and assurance, is there, ready to hand for instant use” (CUP 198). Merely to grab at approved routines that a culture provides “ready to hand” for grief-expression will clearly fail as a true expression of grief. But to be true to grief or inwardness is to be true to something beneath “outward expression, in mien and countenance.” Good mimes are not

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29 In *On Søren Kierkegaard*, I interpret pseudonyms as devices to effect reserve and proper distance between writer and reader – for example, his “revocation” at the finish of *Postscript* functions to preserve a reader’s freedom.
expressing their own subjectivity but a public, inherited shadow of it. As if he were prompting Heidegger, Climacus denies that those “ready to hand” expressions of grief give us anything more than a shallow “everyday understanding of inwardness.”

Climacus does not say that outward expressions of grief — weeping, gesticulations, commonplace attestations of deep loss — are untrue “in themselves,” as it were. But he fears that we will take a momentary gushing of emotion as sufficient expression of grief. Deep grief is more than a momentary burst of gushing, weeping, and gesticulating. It is preserved, “not as an instant’s excitement and a woman’s infatuation, but as the eternal which has been won through death” (CUP 198). How does an “eternal” inwardness become “won through death”? To win the eternal through death is to die to the ephemerality of inwardness. A changeable love, a changeable grief, are “less true,” we might say, than their eternal counterparts. We grieve deeply at the loss of a child, not wishing to “get over” our grief as we “get on with our lives.” When he says that flashes of pathos are “feminine,” Climacus can’t mean that women have a monopoly on showing a burst of grief and then setting it aside. He invokes the stereotype to name a tendency toward immediate emotional outbursts. But he knows, too, that biological women can transcend womanish expressions of grief and that biological men are not always stoically controlled.

How does one preserve one’s inwardness past moments of evident weeping and gesticulating? It must go underground, as it were, become buried. “Praise be to the one living who relates as a dead man to his inwardness,” Climacus says. The dead do not well-up or gesticulate, or pound the table (CUP 142). But that one relates as a dead man to one’s inwardness does not mean there is no tumult of emotion to relate to, or that relating impassively to it, as a dead man, is a Stoic tactic used to become free of troubling emotion.

Climacus does not describe a Stoic ideal of eradicating excessive emotion, for what he requires is the sustained preservation of emotion. Whether we grieve outwardly for a day, a week, or a year, the time for outward

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Heidegger’s terms of art in Being and Time are largely borrowed from Kierkegaard. We have in English translation the “everyday” and “ready to hand,” “being toward death” and the “they,” “chatter” and “repetition,” living authentically (or in the truth), mood and attunement, individual resolve, and so forth. Climacus’ exploration of living toward death in the passage at hand is especially resonant in Heidegger’s subsequent discussion.
From the garden of the dead

From the garden of the dead

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demonstrativeness will pass. Then we enter the time when the very most
is at stake for its preservation. We don't want those who love us to "get
over" their love for us once we're out of sight. We want that love to
linger on, even become more powerful, despite not having ready at hand
vehicles of outward expression. Funerals happen once per person who dies;
if we still feel grief three years later, we can't redo the service to renew
our grief. Weeping all day works only for a while. Yet we don't want our
grief over the loss of a child to cease, even though the period for public
expressiveness has passed. The outward expression of our grief may subside.
It may disappear. In many cases, however, grief will not be forgotten but
be driven underground as deep inwardness.

The preservation and sustaining of felt-pain can be desirable, say as
the refusal to eradicate grief or an unrequited love. But to grant that is
to go counter to the Stoic ideal. Climacus mocks showy expressions of
"momentary" inwardness or devotion (welling up with tears each Sunday
in church, on call). But that is far from abjuring deepfelt emotion, or
the aim of sustaining it. Climacus characterizes deep or hidden inwardness
extending well beyond the moment of its appropriate outward expression in
this way: one preserves one's inwardness as "the eternal which has been won
through death." The timeliness of an emotion such as love, for instance,
might be the "eternity" of a mother's grief that remains decades after the
death of a child, a pain so entrenched as to have become a very mark of
her identity. We can imagine it sustained actively even as she allows its
outward marks to fade. As Climacus puts it: "It has always stung my shame
to witness another person's expression of feeling when he abandons himself
to it as one does only in the belief that one is unobserved; for there is an
inwardness of emotion which is befittingly hidden and only revealed to
God, just as a woman's beauty would be concealed from all and revealed
only to the beloved" (CUP 198). If deep emotion can be "befittingly hidden
and only revealed to God," then once again, whatever "outward reserve"
one exhibits is quite other than treating emotion as an unwanted intruder
to be evicted.

Avoiding public demonstration leaves room for expressing inwardness
in intimate settings: the old man weeps as he speaks alone to his grandson.

31 But perhaps it counters the "Stoic ideal" only as it is popularly (mis)understood. Rick Furtak argues
that the Stoics in fact reject emotion as an unwanted disturbance on the grounds that what emotions
reveal to us is not true (see his Wisdom in Love, 18–19). This means that a Stoic might be convinced
that there are truths revealed to us in moments of emotion, of passionate inwardness, and that such
emotions accordingly ought to be embraced by the true Stoic as giving access to truths: among
those truths, the truth that emotions do not just cloud or cover over truth but display it.
Some few, the grandson, and now Climacus, know the feelings he harbors, the true depth of his inwardness, so he is not utterly mute before mortals. Also, otherwise hidden grief can become unhidden in being revealed to God. Once again, inwardness is interpersonal association. Daily prayers or meditations can be expressions to another of restful inwardness. The limiting case of the truth that inwardness is interpersonal is the occasion when perduring affect arises outwardly for only one other, the other who is God. Inwardness moves outward, though the recipient of one’s revelations need not be one’s neighbor, priest, spouse, or friend.

**FINAL NOTE: ART AS SHIELD, LABYRINTH, AND REVELATION**

In a book of battles, riddles, and death, Homer pauses mid-stride to describe the making of the marvelous Shield of Achilles, on which a god engraves the many worlds of the book. Here, in *The Iliad*, art is shield and revelation.

In a book of dialectical battles and comic asides, Climacus–Kierkegaard pauses midway in a garden of death to engrave the many wondrous worlds of the book in a marvelous, miniature, lyrical dialectic. We have the strolling critic of Copenhagen, the false heaven of intellectualistic disputation, the true hells and redemptions of stricken fathers, and the worlds of only briefly innocent sons – the worlds of diaphanous mists and nocturnal trysts, and of the many tensed layers of the heart. Barely half-a-dozen pages, this miniature provides a vivid proof text for all that Climacus tells us elsewhere of truth and subjectivity, double reflection and indirect communication, confession of faith and its revocation, the inward recesses of the heart and its outward expression, the easy chatter of the classroom and the mystery of inheritance from star-crossed fathers, of farewells from anxious mothers, of receiving word from the risen dead and knowing the costs of a soul’s self-betrayal.

Here in the span of a hand we have the worlds of the *Postscript* engraved. Or, as in Hamlet’s *Mousetrap*, a play within a play to catch our conscience by surprise, and return us to the dark sufferings and smiles that are the wonder of life.

32 *The Iliad*, Book 18.
According to the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, the scandal of modern philosophy is not that it has attempted unsuccessfully to prove the reality of the objective world, but that it has failed to offer the kind of knowledge that “essentially relates to existence” (CUP 166). In other words, it does not promote or facilitate a mode of subjective thinking that would be appropriate for human beings in pursuit of wisdom. This complaint motivates the appeal for an alternative to modern speculation that dominates the central portions of the *Postscript*. Although this work takes issue with many recent trends in philosophy, it ultimately aims not to oppose philosophy but to renew the philosophical tradition.

**The Ancients and the Moderns**

Kierkegaard’s affinity for ancient philosophy is widely recognized. Both he and his pseudonyms often refer to the ancient Greeks as a point of comparison when disparaging more recent philosophers. As Louis Mackey has noted, Kierkegaard’s “rejection” of modern philosophy is inversely related to his “veneration for the Greeks,” and one major goal of his authorship is to reinstate a classical model of philosophical thought and practice.¹ This has less to do with any specific position defended during ancient times than it does with the spirit of ancient philosophy, as Kierkegaard quite correctly understood it. For the Greeks, philosophy was primarily a mode of life guided by the love of wisdom, a reflective discipline oriented toward

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the end of illuminating human existence. Abstract discourse was meant to provide a guide for the perplexed, and a person was known as a philosopher not by virtue of mastering this discourse but by allowing it to penetrate the way that he lived. The authenticity of those who “loved wisdom” in the “old days,” Kierkegaard claims, stands out in contrast with the dishonesty of many philosophers in the modern age: this is why, as he writes, “the Greeks still remain my consolation” during a time when the philosophical tradition has drifted away from its original ideals.

Among Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous authors, “Johannes Climacus” is one who seems to be especially preoccupied with this contrast between ancient Greek and modern European philosophy. Because he seeks to offer a “more Socratic way of doing philosophy,” he has been described as a kind of “Socratic philosopher” in his own right. In the Postscript, he shows an admiration for the classical ideal of a thinker as “someone inspired in existing and impassioned by his thought” (CUP 258), and he expresses a hope that “every Greek as well as every rational human being will understand what I am saying here” (CUP 161). He speaks fondly of Socrates (CUP 67, 135) and of “that subtle little Socratic secret” that truth is found in a “taking to heart” of beliefs that can transform a person—not in a neutral, unconcerned endorsement of “a sum of propositions” (CUP 33). No doubt, Socrates is an exemplary representative of the Greek understanding that “truthfulness should be attributed to persons and not to propositions.” Yet Socrates is not the only embodiment of the Greek conception of philosophy that Climacus holds in high esteem. Aristotle and Plato are foremost among a number of other ancient thinkers who are singled out for approval throughout the Postscript, and Greek philosophy in toto is often cited as a gold standard that epitomizes philosophy as it ought to be. For instance, Climacus alludes to the Greeks as proof that “inwardness” and “subjectivity” can exist outside of Christianity (CUP 233).

Because of the emphasis on ethics and the care of the soul that prevails in ancient philosophy from Socrates through the Hellenistic

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5 See also CUP 254: “I also know that in Greece a thinker was not someone leading a self-effacing existence who produced works of art, but was himself an existing work of art.”
6 As I have pointed out before: see Furtak, *Wisdom in Love*, 43–44.
7 Plato is chastised for tending toward speculation (CUP 173), but his conception of love is applauded more than once (CUP 78, 103). See Plato, *Symposium* 203b–c, 205d–206c.
The Kierkegaardian ideal of “essential knowing” school – indeed, “Greek philosophy always had a relation to ethics” (CUP 104) – Climacus could have in mind any number of classical thinkers that exemplify passionate, subjective thinking. What is noteworthy is that the philosophical approach that Climacus favors is fairly widespread and well represented in ancient philosophy, so that we can grasp his meaning when he praises Trendelenburg as a “Greek thinker” (CUP 93); or when he says that to “live like a Greek philosopher” in the contemporary age would be a matter of “expressing existentially” a “life-view” (CUP 295–296), an achievement which would presumably be exceptional in the context of modern philosophy. As a case in point, he observes that even an ancient philosopher who sought skeptical equanimity did so “within existence” (CUP 266), knowing that this goal was “very difficult” to attain (CUP 335–336; cf. 33–34). Along the same lines, Aristotle at his most theoretical speaks of contemplation as an activity, and one that constitutes the best mode of existence for such creatures as we are; and when the Platonists recommend that we purify ourselves by attending to universal truths, even this is a path suited for human beings, a practice whose transformative effects are described in first-personal, experiential terms. Similarly, in Stoicism both logic and cosmology are essentially related to ethics, since one must study the nature of both mind and world in order to live with wisdom.

In short, even the less evidently practical aspects of ancient Greek philosophy were integrated into an examined life. This is what the author of the Postscript – like its “editor,” Kierkegaard himself – admires most of all about the “beautiful Greek way of philosophizing” (CUP 84) in which reflection is an activity engaged in by someone in particular, who never forgets his or her identity as a distinctive existing person (CUP 258–259, 277). Such a mode of reflection would pertain to life in the way that philosophy ought to, according to the Postscript. This, however, raises an important question. If Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous work, and the Postscript in particular, can be seen as a renewal of the classical Greek approach to philosophy, then what relation does it have to the modern philosophical tradition that

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8 By contrast, Hegel uses the term “it” to describe the skeptical mentality: “it” attains a certain freedom, “it” overcomes desire, and so forth. See Phenomenology of Spirit, §§202–206. According to Climacus (CUP 45–46), this way of speaking is one sign of a decadent tradition: for modern-day intellectuals, it is “speculative philosophy” itself that “doubts everything,” etc. So we talk about “it” as if “it were a man, or as though a man were speculative philosophy.” Anyone who sought to emulate the Greek conception of philosophy in the modern day “would be considered a lunatic” (CUP 295).

9 See, e.g., Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 1177a–1179a; Plato, Phaedo 79a–80e, 114c; Plotinus, Enneads 1.6, 11.8, 9.9. On why it is that, for the Stoics, “morals become unintelligible apart from cosmology,” see MacIntyre, A Short History of Ethics, 104–105.
extends from Descartes through Kant and beyond, and which is largely devoted to the problem of knowledge? It might appear that the best answer is: none whatsoever. And it is precisely because Kierkegaard advocates “the Greek concept of philosophy” as the human search for wisdom that Jon Stewart regards him as participating in an altogether “different tradition of philosophy.”

On this reading, it would seem to be an odd mistake to view the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* as part of the modern philosophical canon. At most, Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous author would stand outside this tradition as curious onlookers, commenting from the sidelines much in the manner of Samuel Johnson.

Whether accusing Hume of insincerely feigning peace of mind in relation to his own mortality, or trying in vain to refute Berkeley by “striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone,” Dr. Johnson offers little more than a marginal commentary on the arguments of the most prominent modern philosophers. His remarks, regardless of how memorable they may occasionally be, are usually impatient and sometimes uncomprehending (as when he imagines that the sensible qualities of stones are denied by Berkeley’s doctrine); and he does not contribute substantially to the critique of Humean skepticism or to the appraisal of subjective idealism. So it is fair to say that Johnson does not play a leading role in the modern philosophical tradition. In what is arguably his most philosophical work, the novella *Rasselas*, Johnson follows a young prince as he wanders through Arabian lands and takes part in a series of conversations about moral and spiritual issues – such as, for example, whether to get married; or how to find a vocation and way of life. Now, these topics might be at home in Plato’s *Republic* or Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, not to mention *Either/Or*, but they are hardly addressed by philosophical texts such as the *Meditations on First Philosophy* or the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Not only are Rasselas and his interlocutors blissfully ignorant of Descartes and company, but Johnson’s philosophical fable does not seem to be animated by any serious polemical aims. It may appeal to readers who are fond of the portrayals of ancient sages that can be found in Diogenes Laertius, but it is happy to leave recent philosophy aside. If *Rasselas* stands more or less apart from the modern philosophical tradition, this is because it is simply doing something else.

But it is not so easy to make the same claims about the tale of Johannes Climacus and *his* philosophical reflections. Admittedly, Kierkegaard might

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resemble Dr. Johnson in his use of narrative modes of writing to explore conceptual questions. Yet when Kierkegaard introduces his own story about a young thinker, he defends his use of this literary form by saying that it is a way of countering “the detestable untruth that characterizes recent philosophy,” which differs from “older philosophy” by having decided that it is ridiculous to do what one said one would do. Johannes Climacus himself makes a similar point when he contends in the Postscript that, currently, philosophers doubt everything only “in print” (CUP 266). These are the words, not of an author who is located decidedly outside the history of modern philosophy, but of a critical participant in the Western philosophical tradition who regards the modern philosophers as having failed by their own standards. This is what distinguishes Kierkegaard’s project from that of many other literary authors: even as it deviates from recent philosophy, it insists that we interpret this very deviation as a philosophically significant gesture.

Of course, an author who rejects the way in which modern philosophers are going about their business cannot be expected to abide by the same procedures. Kierkegaard is exploring conceptual issues that have perennially been at the heart of Western philosophy, yet he is skeptical about whether these issues can be adequately handled through the conventional philosophical methods of his time. This, in part, is why he remains among “the most misunderstood of all modern thinkers” despite his profound influence – in some cases overtly acknowledged, and in others blatantly concealed – on so many other post-Kantian philosophers. As Stanley Cavell has argued, if you mount a philosophical challenge to philosophy itself – as Heidegger and Wittgenstein do, no less than Kierkegaard and Nietzsche – then the question of “whether what you are composing is or is not philosophy is necessarily unstable.” Climacus is aware that he would effectively “contradict himself” if he were to employ a form of exposition that is inappropriate to the subject matter of his investigation (CUP 128). If we assume that knowledge must have an impersonal character, and that the truth can be known only by a dispassionate observer, then the Concluding Unscientific Postscript will not qualify as a contribution to modern epistemology. Needless to say, however, we ought to be cautious about presuming that our criteria are settled in this respect. Otherwise we run the risk of dismissing a revisionary work by virtue of the same prejudice that it is inviting us to question.

13 Kierkegaard, Johannes Climacus, KW 7: 117.
14 Walsh, The Modern Philosophical Revolution, 179.
15 Cavell, Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome, 133.
The alleged failure of modern philosophy to do what it claims to be doing is simultaneously a failure to do something that needs to be done. Johannes Climacus is not trying to change the subject, but he is trying to change the nature of the conversation. It is fine for philosophers to be concerned about knowledge, as long as they remember that “the knower is one who exists,” for this would lead them to employ a mode of reflection that pertains to human existence (CUP 165–166). The plea for “essential knowing” is nothing other than an attempt to return philosophy, the love of wisdom, to a focus on wisdom as a “form of understanding that unites a reflective attitude and a practical concern.” Essential knowing, after all, is a sort of knowing; the Postscript does not advise us to forsake the tasks of epistemology (CUP 166–167). It does, however, suggest that the systematic arguments of the modern philosophers will not help us to find the kind of knowledge that we are seeking. They are therefore “misleading,” tricking the person who “reaches out for the truth” into pursuing a “chimera” or a “phantom” instead (CUP 259–260, 265). This charge against recent philosophy brings to mind an image from Either/Or, since it insinuates that philosophical explanations are often as deceptive as a sign that says “Pressing Done Here” located in a store window (KW 3: 32). If you bring in your shirts to be ironed, you find out to your chagrin that it is not a laundry but a thrift store, and that only the sign is for sale.

What warrant is there for the claim that modern philosophy fails on its own terms to accomplish exactly what it sets out to do? At the outset of the modern tradition, in Part One of his Discourse on Method, René Descartes promises to look for truth “in order to see my way clearly in my actions,” and to avoid getting lost in idle speculations that are of no consequence as far as practical life is concerned. He speaks in a personal voice, admirably enough perhaps, and he doubts only for the sake of arriving at true beliefs. Yet, according to Climacus, Descartes ends up neglecting “ethical knowledge,” allowing his identity as a “particular

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17 Descartes, Discourse on Method, in Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy, 6.
18 In Fear and Trembling, Descartes is commended for speaking as if his method “had significance only for him” (KW 6: 5–7). Thanks to Paul Muench for reminding me to mention this. Likewise, Kierkegaard pays tribute to him for displaying earnest personal concern for others by not drawing them into “the same doubt” (JP 1: 736). However we interpret these remarks, they are conspicuous owing to their complimentary tone. Indeed, as Rasmussen notes, virtually “all other comments on the philosophy of Descartes made by Kierkegaard are of a negative or polemical nature.” See “René Descartes,” 12–14.
existing human being” to become a “matter of infinite indifference” (CUP 265–267). We need to search no further than Part Three of the Discourse on Method to see where the fatal step has been taken:

Just as it is not enough, before beginning to rebuild the house where one is living, simply to pull it down, and to make provision for materials and architects or to train oneself in architecture . . . but it is also necessary to be provided with someplace else where one can live comfortably while working on it; so too, in order not to remain irresolute in my actions while reason required me to be so in my judgments, and in order not to cease to live as happily as possible during this time, I formulated a provisional code of morals, which consisted of but three or four maxims.19

The “house” in question is the house of his opinions, which are being demolished in order to be rebuilt on more solid foundations. What is maddening about Descartes’ analogy is that, even as he admits that he cannot live without some ethical beliefs, he portrays all of his beliefs collectively as a dwelling place that he can leave behind in order to live elsewhere during the construction. Kierkegaard would say that our ideas must be conceived as the building we inhabit, even while “remodeling,” or else the way that we are thinking about them is radically confused. And this is not the only problem with the Cartesian image. In an unpublished journal entry, Kierkegaard develops a line of criticism that is continuous with the above comments by Climacus:

The point on which the skeptics should really get caught is the ethical. Ever since Descartes, all of them have believed that during the time they were doubting, they dared not say anything definite with respect to knowledge. But on the other hand, they dared to act because with respect to action they could be satisfied with the probable. What an enormous contradiction! (KJN 2, JJ:83; cf. JP 3:3308)

When Descartes exempts practical reason from his method of doubt, as if it were only important to strive for accuracy in one’s theoretical opinions, he neglects his professed intention of navigating his way with clarity. Climacus shares the Cartesian anxiety enough to be moved by an imperative to hunt for reliable knowledge: as he says, “I feel this need to know what I am doing” (CUP 151). The rich “philosophy of subjectivity” that he develops in the Postscript is motivated by the quintessentially modern epistemological ambition of showing how the subjective conditions of thought can provide a truthful view of reality.20 What he seeks, however,

20 Poole, Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication, 145. In another journal entry (KJN 1, AA:23), Kierkegaard vows to analyze “subjective receptivity,” not “as something sickly and unsound” but
is not just any knowledge, but \textit{essential knowing} that is relevant to the complexities of human existence: and for this, adherence to three or four maxims will not be sufficient. Speculative philosophy attempts “to get the individual to transcend himself objectively,” he says, yet this simply cannot be done (CUP 166).\textsuperscript{21} To separate the thinker from his thoughts is disingenuous at best, and it may be tantamount to intellectual suicide. When Descartes makes this move, he violates his own premises and turns the search for wisdom into a parody of itself – that is, a merely academic exercise.

All of this might seem to be making a scapegoat of Descartes to an unjust degree; still, we should keep in mind that Cartesian philosophy is merely emblematic of a philosophical outlook that is pervasive in the modern era. In the \textit{Postscript}, allusions to specific modern philosophers are often indirect, and the paradigm that is being attacked is more frequently identified by definite description than through the names of its advocates. The target of the Kierkegaardian polemic is not one figure or another, but “all of modern philosophy” from Descartes to Hegel.\textsuperscript{22} It is therefore beside the point to worry about whether Descartes, Hegel, or Martensen is the chief target of a critical remark that applies equally to all three. In the intellectual climate of Kierkegaard’s Copenhagen, the impersonal Cartesian ego and the principle of universal doubt were celebrated as the core premises of all modern philosophy, from Descartes through the present day.\textsuperscript{23} When Climacus issues a rejoinder to the view that philosophy must begin “without presuppositions” (CUP 44), it should go without saying that his argument bears upon any thinker who endorses this idea. If there ever comes to be a “Danish philosophy” in its own right, Kierkegaard states, it will not make the mistake of claiming to begin from nothing (PAP \textit{v A} 46; KJN 2, JJ:239).

By the same token, Hume infamously separates the life of the backgammon-playing philosopher from his thoughts, but this too is typical

\textsuperscript{21} Cf. Kierkegaard’s “Gilleleje” journal (KJN 1, AA:12; PAP i A 75). The phrase “Cartesian anxiety” is from Bernstein, \textit{Beyond Objectivism and Relativism}, 18. On why objective thinking is a kind of suicide, see Marino, \textit{Kierkegaard in the Present Age}, 17–39.

\textsuperscript{22} As Jon Stewart has quite rightly observed: see \textit{Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered}, 650–651. We differ only with respect to the implications of Kierkegaard’s broad critique, which begins at least as early as “The Conflict between the Old and the New Soap-Cellar,” a farcical drama in which devotees of both Descartes and Hegel get plenty of scorn: see KJN 1, DD:208 and KW 1: 105–124.

The Kierkegaardian ideal of “essential knowing” of modern philosophy, according to Johannes Climacus (CUP 483). The ideal of “pure thought” is dubious, because it has nothing to do with existence (CUP 277–278). Spinoza may claim that we should see things under the aspect of eternity, but he is not the only modern philosopher who encourages us to adopt a view from nowhere in our contemplations; therefore, a critique of this idea has more general relevance (CUP 69, 332). And the “pure” standpoint of the epistemological subject who begins without presupposing anything is related to the idea of a timeless “God’s-eye” view, an Archimedean perspective located wholly outside the world. Both of these are manifestations of a prevalent but faulty way of thinking, which gives the impression that “there is no one who thinks” (CUP 278). As Climacus explains, a thinker who abstracts “from his being there” may be active as a pure mind, but as a particular living person he “has ceased to exist” (CUP 265, 291). Insofar as the modern epistemologists intend to inquire into the conditions of distinctively human knowledge, rather than conducting abstract thought-experiments for their own sake, their failure to deliver on this promise is an indictment of their entire program.24 Leaving aside for the time being the question of whether the criticism is fair with respect to specific thinkers, we can easily see what conception of philosophy is being rejected. In different ways, each of the leading modern philosophers provides a fit target for the campaign against “speculation, which is indifferent to existence” (CUP 211).

Even when a speculative author tries “to forget that he is existing,” he still continues to exist, and the question then becomes what one “must be content with” in the realm of meaningful beliefs that could provide guidance for a person’s life in the world (CUP 102–103). With this claim, Climacus issues a generic rebuke that is meant to unseat a false conception of philosophy, and to reorient the whole philosophical conversation about the nature of knowledge. It would be absurd, he suggests, to pursue rigorous standards of proof in one’s inquiries while making no effort to explore the kind of truth that matters most to us. This, to paraphrase Nietzsche, would leave us with knowledge that is no more pertinent to human existence than knowledge of water’s chemical composition would be to a sailor at risk of shipwreck.25 The “difficulty with existence” simply never shows up in “the language of abstract thought,” which “disregards the concrete, the

24 In light of Hegel’s belief that his philosophy should be not “esoteric” but “accessible to everyone,” his mode of expression and his contempt for “the edifying” are rather unfortunate. See Kierkegaard, PAP III 6 and KJN 2, JJ:265. Cf. Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, §§ 9, 13. I am grateful to Karin Nisenbaum for her guidance regarding these Hegelian citations.

25 See Human, All Too Human, § 9, pp. 15–16.
temporal,” and “the predicament of the existing individual” (CUP 252). For a living human being, however, urgent issues remain, even after one has abandoned the task of philosophy in favor of thinking that is irrelevant to existence.

The “suspect nature” of such abstract thought is that it requires the reliable knower to be pure, neutral, and disinterested (CUP 253, 284). And it does seem that the Cartesian ego is a disembodied, ahistorical subject who has no interest other than in finding out whatever can be known with certainty. Insofar as he is a thinking being, Descartes claims, he is independent of parenting, culture, and experience. His thought processes ostensibly presume nothing and float free of all empirical influences. This, if possible, would enable one to arrive at results that are universally valid, untainted by anything that is local or particular to the knowing subject. The “scholarly investigator” is thus depicted as a pure, neutral observer who can arrive at “objective, disinterested” truth (CUP 20) – not an embodied being who lives in a certain place and time, and whose outlook on the world is shaped by contingent factors such as one’s personality and conceptual framework. All of these are viewed as potential obstacles to attaining truth, which could taint the inquiring mind with biases, delusions, and other distortions imposed by one’s own subjective disposition. In all likelihood, the desire to find a timeless, absolute perspective arises from a dissatisfaction with our finite condition.

Our point of view has been shaped by so many random and accidental features of our situation that we wish we could exchange it for a transparent, non-distorting lens. But since there is no such thing as a rational being of no particular biological and cultural formation, and none who exists outside of history and is uninfluenced by idiosyncratic and biographical factors, we must be mistaken in thinking of ourselves exclusively or primarily as pure knowers. If we try to “bracket” certain features of our embodied and situated perspective, for the sake of inquiries in which this is appropriate, we do this for reasons that make sense in terms of our entire life in the world. The wish to be liberated from any trace of upbringing and circumstance, on the other hand, is nothing other than a wish to transcend the human condition: understandable, perhaps, but problematic nonetheless. As Kierkegaard writes in an 1840 fragment, the mere fact that one’s language is a medium that pure thought has “not provided for itself” indicates the falsehood involved in

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postulating that philosophy must begin “without presuppositions.” Just as the Cartesian concept of God bears some relation to the religious tradition in which Descartes was educated – which is why Climacus claims that he has only “proven” what he presupposed (CUP 280) – the claim that one has transcended all prejudices could itself be a prejudice of the worst kind, since it dishonestly refuses to acknowledge the finite and historical sources of one’s own consciousness. The “objective tendency” that leads us to think of ourselves as neutral observers renders our philosophical thought inconsequential, or indifferent to human existence (CUP 110). Turning away from the context in which genuine perplexities occur to us in the first place, it focuses on theoretical issues that appear to be quite remote from human concerns, even congratulating itself for doing so. But if we ourselves are part of the reality that we seek to comprehend, then this is a crucial omission; so a serious point lies underneath all the jesting references throughout the Postscript to scholarly philosophers who forget that they are human beings. When the speculating “Herr Professor” offers an account of all reality that disregards his own existence (CUP 121), he has left an essential factor out of the equation. This represents a moral failing on the part of the philosopher – and it is not the sort of failing that is extraneous to philosophy, and that could be attacked only by an ad hominem argument. Rather, it is a human shortcoming that entails a defective philosophical method.

Thinkers who are so intoxicated with the allure of systematic abstraction that they leave human existence out of account thereby corrupt both their epistemology and their self-understanding, by leaving the investigator out of the investigation.

It is therefore a dubious virtue for the philosophy of knowledge to overlook “the fact that the knower is someone existing” (CUP 174). This makes it impossible to explain “what it means to be situated in existence” (CUP 179) – a worthy issue for philosophers to grapple with, and one for which speculative thought is reproached for not even attempting to grasp. Of course, it is all too easy for philosophy to lose sight of its own human relevance, so that philosophers are no longer moved by questions that pertain to life as we know it. This is what happens, as Kierkegaard laments, when we lose ourselves in “objective thought” and “indifferent talk”: we end up understanding nothing about being (JP 4: 4536). Yet

30 Here, we see how a philosophical failure can be “a failure of our humanity,” as Cavell points out: see Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome, 47. On how we ourselves are part of the being that we seek to understand, see also Heidegger, Being and Time, 39–41 (§ 9).
If, as Heidegger claims, we always have a background understanding of what it means to exist, then our alternatives are either to reflect critically upon that background understanding, constantly striving to render it more adequate, or to avoid thinking about it altogether. We can plainly see which path Johannes Climacus would advise us to follow: a thinker can either “do his best to forget that he is existing,” or else “turn all his attention” to existence, endeavoring to understand “what it is to be a human being” (CUP 102). It is when philosophers “abandon existence,” imagining that “abstract thinking is supreme,” that all of us are left “to face the worst” (CUP 252), coping with the difficulties of human existence as best we can in the absence of any reflective discipline that might help us to know what we are doing.

If we keep in mind that “philosophizing is not a matter of talking fantastically to fantastic beings,” but that it is an activity of finite beings who wish to come to terms with their condition (CUP 103), it should be evident that what we need is a mode of thinking which pertains to existence. This is the ideal in the name of which Climacus records his litany of protests against what he variously describes as speculation, pure or systematic thought, objective thinking that forgets the thinker, or abstract thought that loses sight of the concrete reality from which it has abstracted (CUP 263). These related terms are meant to denote a set of beliefs that are commonly taken for granted in modern philosophy. Together, these assumptions characterize the philosophical approach that Climacus is opposing:

(a) knowledge claims ought to attain **certainty**
(b) knowledge must be **impersonal**; i.e., the knower is no one in particular
(c) philosophy must begin with **doubt** or without **presuppositions**
(d) knowledge ought to be **dispassionate** or **disinterested**
(e) the knower is **ahistorical** and located nowhere
(f) knowledge ought to be primarily **theoretical**.

Descartes is perhaps the only major modern philosopher who could be convicted of accepting all six assumptions: it would be hard to accuse Kant, Hume, Spinoza, Leibniz, or Hegel of holding more than four or five of the above beliefs. Does this mean that the *Postscript*’s critique of modern

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32 Very briefly, here is where some of the others diverge. Kant rejects (f) by asserting the primacy of practical over theoretical reason; Hume could be interpreted as rejecting (d), since he refuses to place reason above the passions. Spinoza rejects (c) by stipulating his axioms at the outset; Leibniz may not accept (b) owing to his conception of the soul; and Hegel intends to reject (e), since he does not deny that consciousness has a historical context. Other than the early modern rationalists, few thinkers accept (a), at least in its strongest form.
philosophy is aimed at a “straw man” or a mere caricature? Not at all. If each of the leading modern philosophers agrees either tacitly or explicitly with a majority of these beliefs, then the Postscript does have a real and obvious target at which to direct its polemical arrows. There is, in other words, a cluster of assumptions which bear a family resemblance to each other and which do more or less define the modern epistemological tradition. Although few modern philosophers fit the whole profile, Climacus is vastly different from his contemporaries in rejecting all six of the assumptions on the above list. His critique is therefore applicable to the prevailing model of philosophy, and it remains in force even after all hyperbolic embellishments have been stripped away.

**The Importance of Being Subjective**

We have now been introduced to the main principles on which Kierkegaard’s Socratic author stakes his philosophical reputation. He maintains that, in offering its different accounts of reality, the philosophical tradition has too often relied upon the same inadequate conception of being. Whether idealist or materialist, rationalist or empiricist, many thinkers have misconceived both the knower and the known, because they have been “wholly indifferent to subjectivity” (CUP 64). In this sense, they are alike: governed by the assumption that we must transcend our particular standpoint in order to find the truth, they attempt to describe reality in such a way as to eliminate the human perspective. The Concluding Unscientific Postscript bases its quarrel with modern philosophy on this criticism above all – in a word, it is too objective, or it relies on an untenable concept of objectivity. Since objective thought is taken to be overly impersonal, disinterested, theoretical, pure, and so on, this critique encapsulates many if not all of the main complaints made against Descartes and the Hegelians.

Anticipating Husserl’s critique of “objective-scientific ways of thinking” as well as Merleau-Ponty’s complaint that “objective thought” is “unaware of the subject,” Kierkegaard repeatedly inverts against “objective thinking” which is “not the least bit concerned about the thinker” (KJN 2, JJ: 344). He is echoed, as it were, by Climacus, who claims repeatedly that “subjectivity is truth” (CUP 171). Regardless of which philosophical conception of knowledge and reality we are considering, Climacus states, we must take “great care” in noticing “what is meant by ‘being,’ [so that]

33 Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 129; Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 240. On page 82, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges Kierkegaard as a critic of “objective thought.”
the knowing human spirit is not tricked into losing itself in the indeterminate,” turning into an impersonal subject who is located nowhere, which no one either is or can be (CUP 159). If too “pure” or “abstract” a notion of existence is assumed, then the individual will fail to get clear about “what it means for him to be there”; hence, “the question of truth” will still remain unanswered (CUP 159–160). For the philosopher who is concerned with “edifying truth” that can inform a life of wisdom, the “truth for you” is the only kind worthy of the name (CUP 215; cf. KW 4: 324). This kind of truth does not carry the self-contained validity of a mathematical proof: rather, it requires the interest and commitment of the human being to whose life it pertains.

There are, however, certain areas of knowledge in which the knowing subject can effectively drop out of the picture. We can “quite rightly” reduce the subject to a mere vanishing point if we are taking the “path of objective reflection,” which leads “to mathematics” and to various other kinds of knowledge (CUP 162–163). When we take this path, and pursue this type of knowledge, we try to extinguish anything that is peculiarly subjective or individual. If a logical, mathematical, or scientific thinker suspends any interest in “what it means to be an existing human being,” then so much the better (CUP 264): in these intellectual domains, the truth of a proposition has nothing to do with the character of the person who asserts it (see KW 7: 153). We can comprehend the equations of differential calculus without taking an independent interest in the personalities of those who discovered them, just as we can learn many other things by adopting the neutral stance of the theoretical observer. And what we can thereby learn would be concealed from us if we were to be subjectively involved in the wrong way, influenced by anything other than what Husserl calls “the passionate interest of the natural scientist” – for instance, by neglecting the evidence in favor of seeing only what we wanted to see.34 When the Postscript makes a plea for subjectivity, it is not undermining the legitimacy of mathematical and scientific truth. Unlike the narrator of Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground, who feels that he must reject mathematical truth because it is somehow hostile to life, Kierkegaard is quite clear that the absolute certainty of mathematics is valid within its sphere.35 He has no

34 Husserl, The Crisis of European Sciences, 43. Any point of view is “selectively attentive,” including the stance of a scientific investigator, as Calhoun reminds us: “Subjectivity and Emotion,” 109. On the neutral mood of theoretical observation, see also Heidegger, Being and Time, 130 (§ 29).

35 Notes from Underground, 13–14, 31–34. See, e.g., Kierkegaard, PAP IV C 100; Papers and Journals: A Selection, 178. On the error of treating all subjects “as if they were branches of science,” see also Pattison, The Philosophy of Kierkegaard, 127.
interest in showing that scientific truth is merely a social construction, because he does not believe that it is.

Instead, his goal is to remind us of what sort of truth can and cannot be properly understood as “objective” in the sense that it is somehow independent of subjectivity, or purified of any element that is unique to the human perspective. The progress of modern epistemology leading up to Kierkegaard’s time had led to an increasing recognition “that what we know . . . is conditioned by how we know.” So if our thoughts are limited only by the pure intuition of spatiality, or only by the requirement to abide by the rule of noncontradiction, then we can expect to attain a high degree of certainty. This is why Kant says in the Preface to the Second Edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* that logic is able to follow “the secure path of a science” by virtue of its abstract and hypothetical character, whereas other areas of inquiry cannot be so precise and scientific. As he adds in the *Transcendental Doctrine of Method*, there is no place for subjective conviction in mathematics: “here one must know, or refrain from all judgment.” What is inappropriate, Kierkegaard would say, is to insist on employing the same mode of reason when we are engaged in a more impure kind of reflection, one in which the passionate standpoint of the individual moral agent should not be dismissed as a hindrance to knowledge. In this respect, the *Postscript* can be seen as a long commentary on Kant’s insight into the relevance of subjective conviction in areas where scientific certainty is unattainable.

Within the most abstract realms of inquiry, the veracity and certitude of our conclusions is unquestionable because they do not pertain to existence, and they do not qualify as “essential truth” for this reason (CUP 171–172). The problem with the statement “two plus two equals four” is not that it is untrue, but that it asserts an impersonal proposition – and is, therefore, existentially irrelevant. Logical thinking abstracts away from the human situation: nothing related to life itself falls into its orbit (CUP 94, 257). Although some thinkers may prefer the purity and security of abstract knowledge to the ambiguous difficulties of concrete existence, Climacus argues that it would be absurd to presume that pure mathematical

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knowledge can guide us with respect to ethical questions. Once again, the philosopher who prides himself on rising above these personal and subjective issues still pays his debt to existence by existing nevertheless (CUP 160). If he occupies himself “solely with logic,” he must live “in other categories”; and if “he finds that this is not worth thinking about, then so be it” (CUP 79, 483). Furthermore, we might add: so much the worse for his thoughts, which cannot possibly qualify as wisdom, and for his life, which is not informed by his most arduous reflective efforts.

If scientific precision cannot be found with respect to ethical and religious questions, then it is simply dishonest to state that one’s beliefs in these areas are objectively certain and indubitable. Indeed, the zealot who is “absolutely secure” in his or her spiritual convictions, and willing to take all kinds of pious oaths, has demonstrated a lack of understanding – precisely through this “impudent assurance” (CUP 381, 416). The all-or-nothing principle of Cartesian thinking, which demands that we believe nothing about matters that are even somewhat uncertain, is more appropriate in some domains of inquiry than in others. Like Kant, Kierkegaard sees that it would be unreasonable to maintain such a rigid and inflexible standard when one is thinking about human existence. As Climacus observes, final conclusions are not available in relation to “the uncertainty of earthly life,” where everything is unsure (CUP 73). Logical reason can aspire to exact finality, but life as we know it “is just the opposite” of this (CUP 100). We should resist the temptation to regard existential reflection as an unworthy endeavor because it is unscientific compared to “the system, astrology or veterinary science” (CUP 389): “unscientific,” in a Kierkegaardian context, does not imply “more facile” and “less difficult.” In an 1846 journal entry, he notes that “the difficulty with speculating” actually increases to the extent that we are speculating about something that relates to our existence (KJN 2, JJ:488). Here, he repeats that modern philosophers – “both Hegel and all the others” – basically “exist in categories other than those in which they speculate.” To “abstract from existence,” in other words, “is to

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39 For Aristotle, ethical reflection requires “a kind of judgment altogether different from that of mathematics.” MacIntyre, A Short History of Ethics, 59. This represents a departure from certain Platonic assumptions.

40 As Descartes does in Meditation Three: see Discourse and Meditations, 77. Spinoza declares that he knows the truth of his philosophy with mathematical certainty, “in the same way as you know that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles.” See Correspondence, in Works, vol. 11, 416 (letter of late 1675 to Albert Burgh).

41 Descartes articulates this principle in Part Four of the Discourse on Method and states it again in the First Meditation: see Discourse and Meditations, 18, 59. The Cartesian demand for absolute truth or nothing at all, as Peter Hylton points out, is made by later philosophers who are drawn to the model of mathematical accuracy: see Russell, Idealism, and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy, 10–12.
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remove the difficulty” of understanding oneself in the midst of life – yet this, as Climacus affirms, is what matters to us as knowing subjects (CUP 294–297).

When a concern for certainty is allowed to determine one’s epistemic criteria, then one’s investigations are bound to produce very little knowledge that pertains to existence. Yet this is essentially skepticism, as Kierkegaard emphasizes, because it leaves us empty-handed regarding issues that are so practically urgent that we cannot avoid thinking about them as long as we exist. And he is echoed by Johannes Climacus, who asserts that “pure thought,” as represented by the Cartesian ego, is the “most dangerous” kind of skepticism, since it gives the deceptive appearance of offering solid conclusions (CUP 259, 264–265, 275). It is dangerous to get “the misapprehension” that one is arriving at philosophical knowledge by virtue of this deception, because it is not “as if existing consisted in getting to know something about this or that” (CUP 209, 280–281). If, for instance, we are wondering about life and its meaning, and this is a topic about which precise knowledge is unavailable, then we will not bring our inquiry any nearer to resolution by deciding to be precise about something else instead. After all, I get no closer to knowing whether I can entrust a person with a secret by learning such measurable facts as her blood type or her shoe size. Yet the promise of definite knowledge has a compelling appeal, and “when one has something so infinitely great before one’s eyes as the objective truth,” it is easy to forget about one’s little “crumb of subjectivity and what, as a subject, one has to do” (CUP 193). This is why we can find ourselves straying from the questions that ought to interest us most.

Rather than allowing our search for knowledge to be motivated by a demand for indisputable certainty, and thus confining ourselves to thinking about pure logical relations, what if we were to start anew by raising the question: what sort of thing do we have an interest in knowing? This would return us to the starting point of the modern epistemological tradition, but with a different sense of how we ought to proceed. Kierkegaard would approve of this renewal of “modern philosophy,” which has so far been only “an introduction to making philosophizing possible.” As he notes, “objective doubt” is a misnomer: just as there is no such thing as an objective subject, doubt arises only when someone has an interest in knowing (see KW 7: 170–171). In other words, the pursuit of knowledge always begins with a particular subject with a “definite something” – a

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43 Unpublished note from 1840. See PAP iii A 3; Papers and Journals: A Selection, 128.
specific issue or topic – that he or she wants to understand (CUP 279). The “indifference of objective knowledge,” Climacus insists, is a poor substitute for the sort of consciousness that is animated by our “passionate interest” in understanding existence (CUP 48). And this is something that each existing individual must be personally concerned about: “the difficulty with existence is what interests one who exists,” and it is impossible “to think about existence,” while existing, “without becoming passionate” (CUP 253, 293). As living human beings, we cannot help but care about philosophical questions that pertain to the way we live, and that affect how we actually experience and interpret the world.

For this, what we need is not “contemplative astonishment” but “ethical circumspection” (CUP 118). Citing Aristotle in support of his argument, Climacus points out that practical reasoning is distinguished by its focus on the aims and goals that orient a person, and he adds that our “supreme interest” in existing is served only by a mode of reflection that is fitting for teleologically directed moral agents (CUP 262). What mode of reflection, then, would it be appropriate for us to employ in the search for “essential knowing” which “concerns existence” (CUP 166)? Here also we might want to follow Aristotle’s lead. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he claims that we must find a degree of precision that is suitable for the matter at hand: a mathematical standard of accuracy is apt for mathematics, but not for ethics. It is obvious, he adds, that *phronēsis* – wisdom related to human life – is not the same as *epistēmē*, or scientific knowledge. That is because scientific knowledge deals only with necessary truths, and yet – as he says in the *Posterior Analytics* – much that is true, and many aspects of reality, cannot be known scientifically. Since everything is uncertain with respect to the temporal, contingent realm in which we exist (CUP 38, 73–74), any essential knowing that pertains to existence would necessarily take a different form. Deliberating about what to do – “practical reasoning” in the most narrow sense of the term – is only part of what is included under the heading of “subjective thought,” since this category ought to encompass all reflective thinking that is somehow relevant to life.

Of course, even a logic instructor can use concrete examples to illustrate a conceptual point about exclusive disjunction or deductive inference. If Kierkegaard’s appeal for thinking which pertains to existence were a straightforward call for applied philosophy, there would be no need to

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44 He quotes from *De Anima* 433a; see also *Nicomachean Ethics* 1139b, where Aristotle lists five terms for different types of truth-functional experience.


reorient or transform our whole approach: we would merely need to utter
factual statements in contexts where their significance is clear, rather than
declaring that “the earth is round” when this has no immediate pertinence
(CUP 164). Just as scientific inquiry requires a certain kind of subjective
attunement in order to proceed, a true opinion such as “the earth is round”
can be stated with or without a subjective awareness of why this matters
at the moment.47 However, when Kierkegaard speaks in an 1846 journal
entry of how an “existential problem” must be viewed in light of “its
meaning for me,” he is pointing out the need for subjective thinking in a
more pronounced sense, which includes more than this minimal relevance
(KJN 2, JJ:441). And that is what Climacus has in mind when he claims
that philosophers need to engage in something other than disinterested
reflection in order to address questions that pertain to each of us as human
beings (CUP 268–270). Regarding the issue of how to think about these
existential questions, he warns that some philosophical methods will not
provide us with a way of confronting the kind of difficulty that they
represent (CUP 110–111, 257–260). Both philosophers and ordinary mortals
are drawn to objective reflection not because it is more difficult but because
it is easier – at least, it avoids one kind of difficulty, substituting the
challenges of abstract reasoning for the challenge of trying to understand
oneself in existence. To illustrate this difference, Kierkegaard invites us
to compare the difficulty of scientific research with the difficulty of “the
question whether I shall be a scientist” (KJN 2, JJ:442). The former is
indisputably challenging, but the latter is difficult in a way that might
prompt us to “make the problem a little more objective” and thus escape
from the “pain and crisis” that we must face in thinking about it (CUP 107).
When it comes to the decisive problems of human life, it is important for
the philosophical author to be able to stimulate what the Postscript describes
as “subjective thinking.”

For Kierkegaard no less than for Kant, then, there are questions that trou-
ble the human mind, and that we “cannot dismiss” even though abstract
reason cannot settle them one way or another.48 Kant names a future life,
free will, and God’s existence as the chief topics about which we must
make room for faith in the absence of definite knowledge; in the Postscript,

47 In addition to the famous “madman” passage in the Postscript, Kierkegaard also says that a person
is “mad” who “states a correct opinion” that has “no significance for him” in Three Discourses on
Imagined Occasions, KW 10: 99–100.
48 Cf. Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, Avii, p. 5. See also bxxx, p. 31, on having to deny knowledge in order
to make room for faith. Regarding what follows, see Critique of Pure Reason A828–829/B856–857,
pp. 752–753; and A753/B781, pp. 697–698.
Climacus provides a comparable list of matters that concern us and that call for subjective thinking. Whereas the first *Critique* focuses on immortality, Climacus talks about what it means to die and what death might bring (CUP 138–148). While Kant speaks about the being of God *per se*, Climacus turns to the religious question of what it means to be grateful for whatever good one is given in life (CUP 148–150). And where Kant inquires into whether human beings are metaphysically free to make moral choices, the *Postscript* reflects on the specific moral question of whether to get married, and on what it means to make this decision (CUP 150–152). Each of these questions has inspired a long legacy of philosophical thought, and each is a claimant for the mode of thinking that the *Postscript* calls for, in which a heightened stress is laid on the personal relevance of the issue at hand. If there is a “methodology of the anti-system” in Kierkegaard’s work, then it can be glimpsed in the way that his pseudonymous author reframes the famous Kantian questions, and in what he says about how questions of this kind ought to be approached.

**THE LIMITS OF EPISTEMOLOGY**

Existential questions involve matters of “objective uncertainty” that concern every individual human being *as such*: about these issues, if a person does not find the truth while existing then he or she “will never get hold of it” (CUP 176; trans. modified). Philosophical reflection about any such question, as it pertains to us, entails weighing our values, motives, and convictions; it is qualitatively different from the process of verifying a matter of fact or solving a crossword puzzle. This is why we cannot abstract from the personal *I* and allow our own particularity to become a “small speck” that hovers over everything finite when thinking, for instance, about death (CUP 456, 140): for “abstract thinking” only “kill[s] me off as a particular existing individual” (CUP 253), providing the dubious reassurance that something in me will never perish. If what survives my death is not recognizably *me*, then its survival is not mine – that is, its persistence cannot be equated with my survival, regardless of whether it is the intellectual soul or the material elements of my body that may endure after my personal death. As Climacus explains, “this immortality is not at all the one inquired about” when our philosophical topic is the death of the distinct individual and what it means (CUP 143). It is a “ludicrous contradiction” to inquire into such matters “in general” (CUP 146), leaving out any palpable concern

49 As Ricoeur suggests, in *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*, 207.
for the specific person whose mortality is being considered. All men are mortal, and I am a man, so it follows that I must be mortal: yet I can entertain the truth of this conclusion without feeling an awareness of how acutely it pertains to me, and this amounts to not really knowing it in the way that Climacus is talking about.

To bring home the point, Climacus lists many objective truths that he “knows” about death, ranging from its chemical causes to how it has been interpreted by different cultures, and then he adds that even with all this knowledge, he can “in no way consider death something that I have understood” (CUP 138–139). He is not convinced that he has succeeded at thinking about death in such a way that his meditations are permeated with an appreciation of how his own life is colored by the fact of his finitude. To think this through as a meaningful or significant fact that interests or concerns him personally, he would need to become passionate and to engage in the kind of subjective thinking that is infinitely difficult and never finished. There is no need “to proceed to astronomy or veterinary science” in order to find an intellectual challenge, since the tasks of subjective thinking are intricate enough to occupy us for the rest of life (CUP 152).

Anticipating those who will scoff at the idea that thinking about existence is truly difficult, compared with the less edifying and more disinterested tasks of systematic philosophy, Climacus invites them to put their analytical prowess on display by undertaking to explain “just one of the simplest existence-problems” (CUP 295). Until they do this, he implies, we should assume that they have turned away from the greater difficulty.

This is a shame, since the matters that call for subjective thinking are the “highest tasks” of existence: with respect to these issues, any “delay means mortal danger” (CUP 169), because we must form views and make resolutions about such issues in order to live and act, rather than being paralyzed by doubt. This is why “subjective knowledge” is also called “essential knowing” (CUP 166–169): not only are we quite intimately involved in these questions, but the meaning of our existence is at stake in the way that we answer them. This is quite different from “knowledge of railroads, machines, and kaleidoscopes,” or knowledge of “world history” as contemplated “from God’s point of view” (CUP 181, 332). Understandably enough, we feel “a constant urge to have something finished,” but this “must be renounced” if we are dealing with existential questions (CUP 73).

50 When it comes to existential problems, Climacus says that to conceive of them in a dispassionate manner “is not to think of them at all” (CUP 294). On the intentionality of passion/emotion, and its relation to value and interest, see Evans, Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript, 69–70; and Stokes, Kierkegaard’s Mirrors, 48–52.
The problems that call for subjective thought share several characteristics. First of all, they have to do with matters that are not value-neutral. Secondly, they are subject-involving, in the sense that they concern each of us personally. And finally, they involve some degree of objective uncertainty. Now, one could reject all claims about axiological valence, as some ancient thinkers did – yet, as Climacus contends, they still did so “within existence,” for the sake of attaining peace of mind as existing subjects (CUP 266).51 This is different from forgetting one’s existence as it relates to precisely the question one is asking, which amounts to ignoring the issue of subjective relevance. But if we grant that there are significant problems and realize that they concern us directly, then we will inevitably be engaged in passionate thinking as we strive to work out a view of life. As for the last item in the above list, a denial that some uncertainty attaches to all “existence-problems” could arise only from a false confidence or an outright self-deception. We do not know what death will bring, yet instead of seeking conclusive proofs we should “seek to become a little subjective” with regard to mortality, trying to clarify our deepest beliefs about death in the way that Socrates does (CUP 146, 169–170).52 Likewise, our cognitive outlook in matters of love is not susceptible of becoming “absolutely certain” (CUP 382) – we cannot really know that we are loved, for instance – but even so, we can hardly refrain from having some attitude, and holding some views, on this topic.

Elsewhere, Kierkegaard notes that one’s entire “conception of life,” as well as one’s understanding “of oneself,” is implicated in making an ethical resolution (KW 10: 52). There is no way to preclude second-guessing oneself later on: whatever decision we make, we will be vulnerable to regret (see KW 3: 38–39). Our conception of existence and our self-understanding will always be works in progress, containing an element of uncertainty that cannot be eliminated. With respect to the most important issues in human life, we cannot know for sure what we are doing; as Kierkegaard notes in an 1843 journal entry, life is lived forward and understood in retrospect, and temporal existence therefore cannot be known fully by anyone who exists in time (KJN 2, JJ: 167). However, this in itself does not need to be regarded as an embarrassment for philosophy. We may be able

51 On the Skeptical ideal of a “higher” view above all “false” values, see Hadot, What Is Ancient Philosophy?, 112–113. Alluding again to the Skeptics, Climacus adds that a philosopher of this school “needed passion even with regard to his ataraxy” (CUP 297).

52 See Plato, Phaedo, 91a, 107a–b, 114d. Cf. Howland, Kierkegaard and Socrates, 201. Kierkegaard admits to having misgivings about how abstractly the soul is defined in this dialogue: see The Concept of Irony, KW 2: 71. About why it is that “every finite certainty is simply a deception,” see JP 1: 632.
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to think constructively about issues that are too ambiguous to be known with certainty, as long as we do not render constructive thought impossible by employing a mode of reason that is inappropriate for the task. What is scandalous is not that philosophers have failed to establish the reality of the objective world, but that they have been too exclusively or one-sidedly preoccupied with scientific objectivity as the criterion of truth, maligning our subjective comportment toward the world as a necessary evil, even after having discovered that what we know is conditioned by how we know (see CUP 293, 270). As a corrective against this overemphasis, the Concluding Unscientific Postscript presents the subjectivity of the existing individual as not an obfuscation but a condition of attaining knowledge. Rather than a negligible entity, the knowing subject is now understood as a concrete person who is interested, situated, and living in a world. Objective reality, then, is redefined by Kierkegaard as that which “takes shape in a corresponding subjectivity,” so that the very concept of objectivity does not exclude but incorporates a reference to our subjective interest and concern (JP 6: 6360). What we know is influenced and affected by how we are subjectively disposed, to such a degree that the “how” of one’s inward disposition is a decisive factor in determining the truth – even though the world that is revealed through our mental processing is discovered and not made (CUP 167–168, 516–517). Because we need to focus more on the subjective aspect of knowledge, philosophers after Kierkegaard must think in terms of attunement and interpretation rather than sheer objectivity.

In a sense, then, the Concluding Unscientific Postscript marks the beginning of a transition within the history of philosophy. We are still figuring out how to deal with the “strenuous difficulties” of existence (CUP 72–73), but we cannot leave them aside entirely, as if the difficulties of pure thought are somehow more deserving of our attention than the difficulties of concrete reality (CUP 264). And if Kierkegaard himself struggles with the question of how philosophy could possibly live up to its own image of itself as the love of wisdom, we should not be surprised that Johannes Climacus has more to say about how not to address real perplexities than about how to do so. The Postscript points beyond itself, provoking its readers to embark on a project that remains unfinished. Its polemical flourishes

53 On the “scandal” of philosophy, see Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, bxl, p. 36. Cf. Heidegger, Being and Time, 190 (§ 43). See also Bowie, Aesthetics and Subjectivity, 11–17.

54 For all the attention paid to Climacus’ realization that his “philosophical endeavor” is to “create difficulties,” even in this passage he says that so many forces conspire to “make things easy” that people are liable to “miss the difficulty” (CUP 156–157). Making things difficult, then, is a matter of making people aware of real difficulties that they might otherwise miss.
have less in common with the stone-kicking of Samuel Johnson, who is exasperated with philosophy altogether, and more with the statement that was made by Diogenes the Cynic when he walked around to demonstrate the irrelevance of his fellow philosophers’ arguments: it summons us back to actual existence, which is the realm of being that concerns us. In order to provide a forum for a mode of thinking better suited to its own questions, philosophy may need to become literature, or to acknowledge religion, in a way that it has not done. After all, Johannes Climacus is not the most literary or the most religious of Kierkegaard’s authors. Yet his rejection of certain trends in modern philosophy should not be mistaken for an anti-philosophical gesture; on the contrary, the Postscript opens up a space for philosophy as it might be.

As reported by Diogenes Laertius in *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* vi.39. Climacus notes that the Eleatic denial of motion is a phantom of abstract thought that vanishes in the face of real life (CUP 315–316): it “does not relate to existing but to speculation” (CUP 319). See *Repetition*, KW 6: 331. In an 1847 letter to his sister-in-law (KW 25: 215), Kierkegaard writes: “If anyone denies that motion exists, I do as Diogenes did, I walk.” For the Eleatics, this only shows that the realm of temporality and becoming is illusory. But Kierkegaard counters: so much the worse for a philosophy that cannot tell us anything about this realm.
Two historical figures, separated by more than two millennia but linked by their understanding of the essential tasks of teaching and learning, play important roles in Johannes Climacus’ *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*. One of them, Socrates, is associated in *Crumbs* with an account of learning that seems to be a dead end from the perspective of faith, but appears in *Postscript* in what one might call (with apologies to Plato) a new and beautiful guise: that of Climacus’ primary example of the subjective existing thinker.¹ The other, the eighteenth-century dramatist, critic, and essayist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, is never mentioned in *Crumbs* but looms large in *Postscript*. The core of *Postscript* – Part Two, “The subjective problem. The subject’s relation to the truth of Christianity, or what it is to become a Christian” – begins with “Something on Lessing,” the title of the first of two sections of this second and last part of the book. “Something on Lessing,” in turn, is divided into two chapters: “An expression of gratitude to Lessing” and “Possible and actual theses of Lessing.” Why does Climacus pay special attention to Lessing in taking up the issue of what it means to become a Christian? And why does he go on to reintroduce Socrates in the context of Christian faith – a context in which Socrates’ understanding of the relationship of human beings to the truth would seem, at least according to the stark opposition between philosophy and faith that Climacus sketches in *Crumbs*, to be irrelevant?

In pondering the first of these questions, we might begin by noting that the entire Climacan project is a response to a problem originally formulated by Lessing. On the title page of *Crumbs*, Climacus asks: “Can a historical point of departure be given for an eternal consciousness; how can such a point of departure be of more than historical interest; can an eternal happiness be built on historical knowledge?” The source of these

¹ Plato disavows authorship of the dialogues in his *Second Letter*, claiming that his writings are instead “of a Socrates grown beautiful and young” (314c).
orienting questions becomes clear in Postscript when Climacus reflects on
Lessing’s assertion, in his essay “On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power,”
that “contingent truths of history can never become the demonstration
of necessary truths of reason” (CUP 82). Lessing makes this claim in the
course of explaining why he is personally unable to embrace the essential
tenet of Christianity that Jesus is God incarnate. While he freely grants the
historical truth of the miracles associated with Jesus in the Bible, including
the miracle of his resurrection, Lessing maintains that he is not on this
account rationally obliged to “accept it as true that this risen Christ was the
Son of God.” “Fundamental ideas of the nature of the Godhead [von dem
Wesen der Gottheit],” he argues, belong to the category of “metaphysical
and moral ideas,” which are “necessary truths of reason.” But necessary
truths of reason cannot be inferred from contingent, historical truths, for
these belong to different conceptual classes; one can move from one to the
other only by means of a non-logical “jump” of the sort that Lessing is not
prepared to make. “This, then, is the broad ugly ditch which I cannot get
across, however often and however earnestly I have tried to make the leap,”
he confesses.²

In Crumbs, Climacus replies to Lessing by denying that becoming a
Christian essentially involves assenting to certain necessary truths of reason.
To become a Christian is rather to embrace, as decisive for one’s eternal
happiness, the historical event of God’s incarnation as man – an event to
which no necessity attaches, inasmuch as it is a free act of divine love (KW
7: 24–25; cf. 7: 72–88). “The moment” of incarnation is furthermore a
paradoxical unity of eternity and time, infinity and finitude. This paradox
is “absolute,” which is to say that it is beyond the comprehension of reason;
it must instead be grasped by passion, and in particular by the passion of
faith (KW 7: 51, 59). Faith, a “decision of eternity” which is neither a kind
of knowledge nor an act of will (KW 7: 58, 62), is given individually by
God. When Climacus speaks of “the moment,” he thus has in mind not
only the singular historical event of God’s incarnation, but also the time
at which an individual comes to embrace the truth of the incarnation
in faith. Because “the moment” may be understood objectively as well as
subjectively, referring to both the dateable event of the incarnation and the
internal event of religious conversion, the hypothesis of faith that Climacus
explores in Crumbs affirms in a twofold sense a historical point of departure
for one’s eternal consciousness and eternal happiness.

This snapshot of Climacus’ response to Lessing serves only to sharpen our original questions. If Crumbs implicitly argues that Lessing was wrong about the individual’s relation to the truth of Christianity, why does Climacus wish to express his gratitude to him when he revisits this issue in Postscript? The problem of Lessing is analogous to that of Socrates: if the project of Crumbs “indisputably goes beyond the Socratic,” as Climacus insists (KW 7: 111), why does Climacus return to Socrates – and even present him as the subjective thinker par excellence – in the continuation of this project in Postscript?

CLIMACUS’ FRACTURED PROJECT

The first clues about the roles of Lessing and Socrates in Postscript are furnished by the nature and structure of the book as a whole. Climacus’ introductory statement that Postscript undertakes “a new approach to the problem of the Crumbs” (CUP 18) alerts us to the fact that he will be covering familiar ground from a different angle. This feature of Postscript – its tendency to circle back over territory that has already been traversed – has been explored by Andrew Burgess in an article that clarifies what he calls the book’s “bilateral symmetry”: “Except for the four chapters in section two, each primary subdivision of the book is cut into two, and only two, parts; and except for the last division, between A and B, each second part is much longer than the first.”3 (The same lopsided symmetry is reflected not only in the relationship between Climacus’ two volumes – curiously, the “postscript” to Crumbs is roughly six times as long as the original book – but also in Crumbs itself, inasmuch as its exploration of the hypothesis of faith is much longer than that of the initial philosophical or Socratic hypothesis about learning the truth.) Burgess goes on to suggest that a “serial reading” of Postscript is inadequate; Climacus repeatedly goes over the same ground at greater degrees of focus and precision.4 While Burgess pictures the structure of Postscript variously as “a path with many branches, a set of nested boxes, a ladder,”5 another helpful image for the Climacan writings as a whole – and one that seems especially appropriate, given Climacus’ anti-systematic bent – is what mathematicians call a fractal, a term derived from the Latin fractus (“fractured”) that describes geometrical shapes displaying the same structure at different levels of magnification. Because Climacus has (in general, but not in every particular) constructed

4 Ibid., 334.
5 Ibid., 337.
his inquiry as a fractal, each part of the inquiry reflects the shape of the whole, and structural elements that appear on one level reappear on others.

Even a cursory consideration of Climacus’ writings discloses this principle of reduplication or refraction. *Philosophical Crumbs*, the first part of Climacus’ bipartite project, explores two competing hypotheses about learning the truth: (1) we can learn the truth by means of reason alone (the Socratic or philosophical hypothesis) and (2) we can learn the truth only with divine aid (the hypothesis of religious faith). On the second hypothesis, we were created with the condition for understanding the truth, but have lost it through sin (KW 7: 15); only “the god,” acting out of love, can restore it to us. Because Climacus argues that the god’s love for the learner who is “untruth” must manifest itself in his “descent” through incarnation, it is not surprising that the second hypothesis is finally identified with Christianity at the end of the book (KW 7: 23–36, 109). While the scope of *Postscript* is narrower than that of *Crumbs* in that it ignores the first hypothesis and focuses exclusively on Christian faith, *Postscript* presents its own fundamental alternative with respect to the truth of Christianity: we must decide whether to approach this truth “objectively” or “subjectively.” With this alternative, Climacus announces the essential theme of the book: if *Crumbs* concerns how we can learn the truth, *Postscript* will elucidate what it means to do so.

Like *Crumbs*, the bulk of *Postscript* is devoted to developing the second of the two alternatives it proposes at the outset. Climacus quickly dispenses in Part One with “objective” methods of understanding Christianity, under the rubric of which he includes the speculative philosophy of Hegel and his disciples. Objective approaches are dispassionate and theoretical; the “scientific researcher” undertakes a historical or philosophical inquiry into the truth of Christianity, but does not reflect on the individual’s relation to this truth. But the truth of Christianity cannot be separated from the “subjective truth, the truth of appropriation” (CUP 159–161). Christianity demands that the individual be “infinitely, personally, impassionedly interested in his relation to this truth” (CUP 19) because the revealed truth or teaching of Christianity – God incarnate – is infinitely and passionately interested in the individual.6 Most important, Christianity speaks to the whole human being, not merely to the mind; it asks us not simply to acknowledge its truth, but to try to live up to it. And to try to live up to

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6 Cf. *Philosophical Crumbs* (KW 7: 53), where Climacus writes that “the presence of the god in human form . . . is precisely the teaching.”
the truth, to strive to incorporate it within one’s existence, is the work of passion.

Because existence is a lifelong process, the individual’s subjective task of striving to appropriate the truth is perpetually unfinished – or rather, concludes only in death. Climacus observes that most people, however, at some point feel “honor bound to have something finished, to have results”; they “engage now and then in a little striving, but the latter is only the spare marginal note to a text completed long ago” (CUP 72). This remark is more than an acute psychological observation, for it suggests that Climacus’ writing itself images a life of striving. While a postscript is normally much like a marginal note, the fact that Postscript is many times longer than Crumbs highlights the essential incompleteness of Climacus’ authorial project. This incompleteness is also hinted at in the principle of repetition that binds the parts of Climacus’ literary production with the whole: the same principle is at work in a human life, in which one’s character comes to light in the consistent manner in which one approaches and performs the same handful of essential human tasks.\(^7\) Climacus’ name offers further confirmation of the connection between his individually incomplete and repetitive books and the life of striving to appropriate the truth. Johannes Climacus is “John of the Ladder” (from the Greek klimax); this image, which hearkens back to Jacob’s dream (Genesis 28:12), does more than bring to mind the theme of bridging the domains of God and man, eternity and time, for the geometry of the ladder also manifests the structural repetition characteristic of a fractal.

These reflections suggest an initial explanation of the role of Socrates in Postscript. If from the perspective of Postscript Socrates is wrong about the nature of the truth (which he identifies with philosophically cognizable being) and wrong about our ability to learn the truth on our own, he is nevertheless fundamentally right about the individual’s relation to the truth. As Climacus emphasizes in Crumbs, Socratic philosophizing, like faith, is a passionate affair. What Climacus calls “the passion of thought” (KW 7: 37), Socrates, expanding and elevating the range of the Greek word for sexual desire, calls erôs. Eros, “love,” is the soul’s longing to come into the presence of the eternal truth of what is – not in order to be absorbed or vanish into what is, but to make the truth its own, “coupling” with it in order to give birth to internal goodness and beauty (cf. Plato, Republic

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\(^7\) Socrates is a case in point: “in his seventieth year, he was still not through with striving to rehearse more and more wholeheartedly what a sixteen-year-old girl already knows” (CUP 75). See also CUP 238–239: “Socrates staked his honor and pride on one thing: keeping on saying the same about the same” (a reference to Plato, Gorgias 490e).
490a–b). This image of sexual union and reproduction emphasizes the private, subjective nature of the philosophical achievement of wisdom. And it is the fundamentally erotic character of Socratic philosophizing that makes Socrates an ideal model for Climacus’ conception of the human task – the unceasing attempt to reflect the eternal, universal truth within one’s own time-bound, particular existence.⁸

In fact, the affinities between Socrates’ erotic philosophizing and Climacus’ conception of the passion of faith are so strong that one begins to wonder why Socrates does not play an even bigger role in Postscript. In particular, the structure of Climacus’ project would lead one to expect Socrates to appear precisely at the point where Climacus instead introduces Lessing. It is true that while Socrates takes center stage in the first part of Crumbs, he is largely absent from Part One of Postscript, but the reason is obvious: he is a subjective thinker in Climacus’ sense, for he is infinitely, passionately interested in existing in truth.⁹ What is more curious is that Socrates also plays second fiddle to Lessing at the beginning of Part Two of Postscript, where Climacus emphasizes Lessing’s understanding of teaching and learning. This is especially surprising because Climacus presents Socrates in the opening pages of Crumbs as an unsurpassed model of pedagogy, a teacher whose communications express absolute fidelity to his fundamental insight that each individual must learn the truth by himself:

[Socrates] was and continued to be a midwife... because he perceived that this relation is the highest a human being can have to another. And in that he is indeed forever right, for even if a divine point of departure is ever given, this remains the true relation between one human being and another. (KW 7:10)

Lest we miss Climacus’ substitution of Lessing for Socrates, Climacus underscores it when he praises Lessing for “teasingly using his own I, almost like Socrates, declining all partnership, or rather, insuring himself against it, regarding that truth where the main thing is to be alone about it” (CUP 58–59, emphasis in original).

What makes Lessing in particular indispensable to Climacus’ purposes when he circles back to the same pedagogical issues he covered at the

⁸ See pp. 122–126 below. In Plato’s Symposium, Socrates depicts the erotic ascent of philosophy as having the same stepwise structure as a ladder (see the reference to “rising stairs” at 211c).

⁹ Socrates is mentioned only twice in Part One; on both occasions, Climacus introduces him to highlight the absurdity of speculative philosophy. Climacus imagines Socrates interrogating Hegel in the afterlife and laughing at his claim to wisdom (CUP 30n); later, he reminds us that, while the Hegelians speak of speculation doubting, etc. “as though it were a man,” Socrates speaks more sensibly of human beings (CUP 45).
Lessing and Socrates in Kierkegaard’s Postscript

beginning of Crumbs? There are two main points one might make in response to this question. First, Lessing, unlike Socrates, was privileged to reflect on revelation in general and Christianity in particular; Climacus can therefore present him as a kind of post-Athenian Socrates, a Socratic learner in the context of Jerusalem. Nor is this an injustice to Socrates, for his conception of philosophy as a lifelong erotic quest for wisdom is echoed in Lessing’s well-known embrace of “the one and only ever-striving drive for truth,” even in preference to the possession of the truth itself.\(^\text{10}\) While Lessing reflects on the problem of the objective truth of the central doctrine of Christianity, the literary evidence furthermore indicates that he is concerned not with the “broad ugly ditch” in itself, but with the “leap” that must carry one across it. Climacus interprets this “leap” as the act of becoming a Christian, which Lessing correctly understood to be a purely subjective movement that is obliged to negotiate the “incommensurability between a historical truth and an eternal decision” (CUP 83). In this connection, Climacus praises the insight implicit in Lessing’s witty refusal, on his deathbed, of Jacobi’s muddle-headed offer of assistance in making this leap.\(^\text{11}\) Lessing grasps what Jacobi does not – “that it [the leap] cannot be taught or imparted directly, exactly because it is an act of isolation that, precisely regarding what cannot be thought, leaves it to the individual whether he will decide to accept it in faith and on the strength of the absurd” (CUP 85).\(^\text{12}\)

Although Climacus does not mention it, we may also note that the turn he takes in moving from Part One to Part Two of Postscript – the turn away from what is objectively the case in order to focus, with passionate concern, on existing religiously – is prefigured in one of the most famous passages in all of Lessing, the Parable of the Rings that the Jew Nathan tells the Muslim Saladin in Act 3, Scene 7 of Nathan the Wise.\(^\text{13}\) In this allegory about the relationship between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, three brothers have each privately received from their father a magnificent ring that was to go to the one son who was dearest to him. At least two of the three rings in the brothers’ possession must therefore be imitations of the original, but it

\(^{10}\) Climacus quotes the entire passage: “If God held the truth enclosed in his right hand, and in his left hand the one and only ever-striving drive for truth, even with the corollary of erring for ever and ever, and if he were to say to me: Choose! – I would humbly fall down to him at his left hand and say: Father, give! Pure truth is indeed only for you alone” (CUP 90). This is the last paragraph of “Eine Duplik,” section i; see Lessing, Werke, vol. viii, 33.

\(^{11}\) CUP 84–88. Hannay cites the text of Jacobi on which Climacus is commenting at CUP 86n.

\(^{12}\) Cf. CUP 88–89: “The last thing human thinking can do is to will to go beyond itself in the paradoxical. And Christianity is precisely the paradoxical.”

\(^{13}\) In Lessing, Werke, vol. ii, 275–282.
is impossible after their father’s demise to determine which one, if any, is the genuine article. Because the ring furthermore entitles its possessor to rule his siblings, the brothers are locked in a bitter dispute. However, the true ring also has the mysterious power to make its owner most beloved to God and men – a quality nowhere in evidence among the siblings. Hence the wise judge to whom the brothers present their dispute advises them to attempt to prove their claims existentially, by manifesting in speech and deed the lovable virtue that is supposed to inhere in the ring itself. Just so, Lessing suggests, the truth of religious faith is not objective, but subjective; it is not a matter of intellectually assenting to a rationally superior body of doctrine, but of living in fidelity to the beautiful and noble teachings of one’s faith.14

The second reason Climacus focuses on Lessing at the beginning of Part Two of Postscript is that, while Socrates philosophized exclusively in speech, Lessing chose to express his thoughts in writing. In Postscript, Climacus has evidently become self-conscious about the pedagogical character of his writing in a way that he was not in Crumbs, and it is Lessing’s example – or, more precisely, what he thinks he discerns in Lessing’s example – that helps him to grasp just what is at stake in his own authorial activity.

LESSING IS MORE: THE PARADOXES OF PEDAGOGY

Climacus offers his “expression of gratitude to Lessing” both “in jest and in earnest.” The jest, he explains, is intended to moderate words of appreciation that might otherwise be “all too starry eyed” (CUP 54, emphasis in original). Why does Lessing deserve gratitude, and why does Climacus run the risk of being too enthusiastic in his thanks? These questions take us to the heart of Lessing’s significance in Postscript.

Climacus indicates that his gratitude pertains not to anything that can be directly admired in Lessing, but rather to the impression that he “understood, and knew how to insist, that the religious concerned Lessing and Lessing alone, just as it concerns every other human being in the same manner; understood that he had infinitely to do with God and nothing, nothing directly to do with any human being” (CUP 55). What Lessing understood of “the religious” cannot be directly admired because it was never directly expressed; it is something Climacus infers from his writings, and in particular from Lessing’s habit of keeping the reader guessing as

14 For further discussion of the relationship between the figure of Lessing in Postscript and the historical Lessing, see Stott, Behind the Mask.
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to what he seeks to accomplish and what opinion he might have held. Climacus clarifies the significance of this uncertainty by way of a joke: “Has he [Lessing] accepted Christianity, has he rejected it, has he defended it, has he attacked it, so that I can adopt the same opinion too . . .?” (CUP 55). The joke is that, if Lessing does indeed deserve Climacus’ gratitude, it is precisely because he did not express his understanding directly; to do so would have been to invite the sort of misunderstanding to which Climacus pretends to be subject – the misunderstanding that one’s God-relationship can be mediated by another human being in such a way that faith in that human being can serve as the basis for faith in God. It is a “great thing,” Climacus goes on to remark, for a person to conduct himself in such a way as to avoid the “meaningless consequence” of “anyone else having a God-relationship only through him” (CUP 57). But paradoxically, the understanding that intentionally expresses itself in writing that is designed to avoid this consequence is invisible to the extent that it is successful. Because Climacus’ reading of Lessing is an interpretation that lacks independent verification, he cannot be certain that he is right about Lessing’s understanding of the religious. “If I did know it for certain,” he notes on the other hand, “I could appeal to him; and if I could appeal to him and be justified in doing that, then certainly Lessing would not have done it” – that is, he would not have intentionally produced the kind of writing that avoids the aforementioned meaningless consequence (CUP 67).

The upshot of this paradox is that it is necessarily unclear whether Climacus’ admiration for Lessing is merited. This is why, in the next chapter, he presents the claim that “the subjective existing thinker is aware of communication’s dialectic” as merely a “possible” thesis by Lessing; that Climacus may have (in his words) “produced” what he supposes to have “received” from Lessing is itself an illustration of this dialectic (CUP 62–66, emphasis in original). Climacus’ uncertainty on this score is only part of the reason for his mixture of jest and earnestness; beyond this, he is aware that to express his appreciation for Lessing in anything other than a playful form is to risk being seriously misunderstood. As we saw previously, Climacus praises Socrates in Crumbs for having grasped that a human being

15 Were this the case, the other human being would become the object of faith and so would, in effect, be the god (cf. KW 7: 100–101).
16 Lessing’s ambiguity and inconclusiveness, Climacus notes, also made it “quite impossible to have Lessing killed and world-historically butchered and slated in a §” (CUP 90, where “§” refers to the paragraphs of Hegel’s Encyclopedia).
17 In each of the first two sections of the chapter “Possible and actual theses of Lessing,” Climacus reflects on a statement Lessing did not actually make; in the next two sections, he examines several propositions drawn from Lessing’s writings, as well as the aforementioned discussion with Jacobi.
can be only an occasion for another to learn the truth; because learning takes place either through one's own agency (as Socrates thought) or through the agency of the god (as per the hypothesis of faith), to regard a human being as anything more than an occasion is literally to idolize him or her. Climacus suggests that this is what Plato, in his misplaced “enthusiasm” and “infatuation,” did to Socrates, and he imagines that Lessing, no less than Socrates, would rebuff with irony any attempt to “enfold him politely, obligingly, in my admiring embrace, as the one to whom I owed everything” (KW 7: 12, 24; CUP 60). But again, what Climacus imagines may have no basis in reality.

Climacus’ discussion of Lessing helps us to see that it is neither possible nor desirable for another to know the religious life of a subjective existing thinker. It is not desirable, because working out one’s religious existence is a task for the solitary individual; “the course of the development of the religious subject,” Climacus notes, “has the remarkable trait that the way opens up before the individual and then closes behind him” (CUP 56). And it is not possible, because even if the subjective existing thinker should decide not to remain silent about the matter of religious existence but to engage in “the more difficult task: to speak as well” (CUP 55), this speech will effectively mask the speaker. Like Socrates’ irony, it will employ a judicious admixture of silence in such a way as to provoke thought while preserving the intellectual and spiritual independence of all parties.18 This does not mean, however, that Climacus’ gratitude to Lessing is entirely misplaced. Viewed Socratically, the relevant question for a reader is not “What does this author know?” but rather “What insights has this book occasioned?” And while it may be true that anyone, be it Socrates or Prodicus or a maidservant (cf. KW 7: 12), could potentially have provided the occasion for these same insights, what is needed – and the only thing that really matters to the learner – is an actual occasion. It is thus appropriate for one who has learned something by struggling to understand the words of another to want to express gratitude for these words, even if this expression is uncertain as to its object.

The foregoing reflections on Lessing are relevant to Climacus as well. Like Lessing – and perhaps because he has learned from him not just as a reader, but also as a writer – Climacus leaves readers uncertain as to his religious existence.19 But Climacus’ religious existence is ultimately

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18 On the significance of Socrates’ irony in Crumbs, see Howland, Kierkegaard and Socrates, 93–96.
19 He begins the Appendix to Postscript by proclaiming that “Johannes Climacus, who has written this work, does not make himself out to be a Christian; for he is completely preoccupied with how difficult it must be to become one” (CUP 520). John Lippitt, however, argues in Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought that Climacus’ self-presentation is part of a deliberate rhetorical
unimportant to the reader. What is important is that his writings, like those of Lessing, are structured so as to force readers to think for themselves and to refrain from trying to grasp the author’s coat-tails in the matter of religious truth. Climacus’ discussion in _Crumbs_ of what the contemporary of the incarnate god can do for someone who comes later applies equally well to himself. The contemporary, he explains, can utter what “is not a communication at all . . . but merely an occasion,” for “if I say ‘I believe and have believed that this happened, although it is folly to the understanding and an offense to the human heart,’ I have in the very same moment done everything to prevent anyone else from making up his mind in immediate continuity with me and to decline all partnership” (KW 7: 102, emphasis in original). So, too, Climacus makes it clear in _Postscript_ that he is in the business of revealing the difficulty of faith (CUP 320–322) – something which, owing largely to the historical success of Christianity and to centuries of “loose chatter” (including that of the speculative philosophers and theologians), now seems so easy that most people hardly give it a second thought (KW 7: 71). But the appearance of ease actually impedes faith, for it obscures the strenuous subjective exertion that is essential to it (see CUP 245).

Climacus’ desire to talk about Lessing as an existing human being reflects his overriding concern with how one lives as opposed to what one merely thinks. But asking whether _Postscript_’s characterization of Lessing as a kind of Christian Socrates is an accurate portrayal of the historical Lessing is something like asking about the historical Climacus: both questions are fundamentally meaningless for one who is “infinitely, personally, impassionedly interested” in appropriating the truth (cf. CUP 19). In emphasizing the impossibility of inferring who Lessing was from what he wrote, Climacus underscores the larger problem of moving between thinking and existence, speech and deed. One can hardly overemphasize the relevance of this problem to _Postscript_, which will have been misunderstood just insofar as the reader supposes that all the book requires of him or her is to understand it. The essential point is not simply to grasp what it is to be a

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20 At CUP 245, Climacus writes: “If only the age had as much existence-inwardness as a Jew or a Greek, then at least there could be some talk of a relation to Christianity. But if it was once terribly difficult to become a Christian, soon it will surely be impossible because it all becomes trivial.” He observes (CUP 189n) that “an explanation that makes the difficulty easy must be considered a temptation”; conversely, “when it is the difficult I am to appropriate, it is always an advantage, a relief, to have made difficult for me” (KW 7: 98).

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and pedagogical strategy akin to Socrates’ employment of irony. According to Lippitt, Climacus uses humor as an incognito “that both protect[s] . . . inwardness in the . . . religious person, and enable[s] something of the nature of this inwardness to be indirectly communicated” (95, emphasis in original; cf. CUP 422–429).
Christian, but actually to become one. Climacus’ discussion of Lessing thus brings us face-to-face with the human inadequacy or incompleteness of his purely authorial accomplishment, and with the parallel insufficiency of responding to his writing merely by providing a reading, however nuanced it may be. In both its production and its reception, a book, as the title of Climacus’ first volume suggests, is never more than a tantalizing morsel of life.

**Theses by Lessing, Existence by Socrates**

*Crumbs* presents Socratic philosophizing as essentially the recollection of eternal truth – a process in which “the temporal point of departure is a nothing” (KW 7: 13). In doing so, however, *Crumbs* runs the risk of imputing to Socrates the same forgetfulness of human existence, the same conception of philosophy as a one-way trip from temporality to eternity, that characterizes speculative thought.21 In *Postscript*, Climacus accordingly takes pains to correct his suggestion that Socrates somehow denies the significance of life in time. He admits in a footnote the “anomaly” that, in *Crumbs*, he “reduced the Socratic to the principle that all knowing is recollecting.”22 “Holding Socrates to the proposition that all knowing is recollecting,” he adds, “makes him into a speculating philosopher, instead of what he was, an existing thinker who understood the essential thing to be existing” (CUP 173n). What is more, Climacus makes it clear that Socrates’ speeches and deeds consistently display this understanding, and, in particular, that he employs the only form of communication whereby the subjective existing thinker can convey his conception of existence to another.

Here we encounter another anomaly. Although Climacus emphasizes that the theses about negative and indirect communication he attributes to Lessing only possibly pertain to him, he seems to have no doubt that they actually do pertain to Socrates. Thus, Climacus states explicitly in *Postscript* what we may in any case infer from his description of Socrates’ pedagogical maieutics in the opening pages of *Crumbs* (KW 7: 9–13) – namely, that Socrates is “aware of communication’s dialectic,” as per the

21 Cf. CUP 105–106: “If a dancer were able to jump very high we would admire him. But if he could jump even higher than any dancer before him, were he to give the impression of being able to fly, let laughter alone catch up with him. To jump is basically to belong to the earth and to respect the law of gravity; so that the leap is only momentary. But to fly means to be freed from telluric conditions, a privilege reserved only for winged creatures, maybe also inhabitants of the moon, maybe – and that may be where the system finds at last its true readers.”

22 His reason for doing so, he explains, was “my not wanting straight away to make the matter as difficult dialectically as it is” (CUP 173n).
first thesis (CUP 62). But if it is true that “Socrates . . . planned his entire form of communication artistically, so as to be misunderstood” (CUP 59n), and if, moreover, it is true that Socrates’ “view of life . . . [was] essentially a secret or an essential secret” (CUP 67), then how can Climacus be sure that he has indeed understood him correctly? Climacus does not even raise this question, let alone answer it. One might try to let him off the hook by observing that the Socrates of whom he speaks is in any case a poetic production of Plato, however much the latter may contest this.\footnote{See note 1 above. Note, too, that Climacus never asks about the relation between Plato’s Socrates and the historical Socrates.}

Yet Plato himself repeatedly calls attention to the problem of whether the character of Socrates in the dialogues has been misunderstood by the other characters.\footnote{Socrates explicitly raises the question “Who is Socrates?” at his public trial (Apology 20c), and makes his answer into the central theme of his defense speech. Cf. Alcibiades’ “trial” of Socrates at Symposium 215a–222c.} Perhaps we can only repeat what has already been said with regard to Lessing: what matters is not whether Climacus is right about what “Socrates” thought – whatever this might mean – but how Crumbs and Postscript can help the reader to live a better life.

The better and more meaningful life toward which Climacus wants to guide his readers, schooled as they presumably are in objective interpretations of Christianity and in speculative theology, is that of a Christian subjective existing thinker.\footnote{Hannay gives an overview of the Danish intellectual context of Kierkegaard’s day in the Introduction to his translation of Postscript (CUP xxi–xxvii). For further discussion see Stewart, Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered, especially 50–69.}

The essential significance of Socrates in Postscript is that, as the book’s foremost example of a subjective existing thinker tout court, he stands at the threshold of Climacus’ ultimate goal. But in Crumbs, as even Climacus’ most mildly attentive readers cannot have forgotten, Socrates represents the philosophical hypothesis that we can learn the truth by means of reason alone – the very antithesis of the hypothesis of faith. What, then, has Socrates to do with Christianity?

A full answer to this question would begin by noting that, as Crumbs itself makes clear, Socrates’ practice is in important respects at odds with the theoretical presupposition of philosophy. Thus, in the very course of formulating the philosophical hypothesis, Climacus incongruously calls attention to the essential role of “the god” in Socratic philosophizing (KW 7: 10–11).\footnote{For an extensive discussion of “the god” of Socrates in the context of the relationship between philosophy and faith in Crumbs, see Howland, Kierkegaard and Socrates.} One need not return to Crumbs, however, in order to observe that Climacus places the greatest emphasis on Socrates’ fidelity in speech and deed to “the god” and to his best understanding of the truth. And it is
Climacus’ characterization of Socrates’ passionate faithfulness in existence that sets the stage for his transition to what it means to exist in Christian faith.

In explaining the first thesis he associates with Lessing – “1. The subjective existing thinker is aware of communication’s dialectic” – Climacus makes the following observation:

While objective thought is indifferent to the thinking subject and his existence, the subjective thinker is, as existing, essentially interested in his own thinking, is existing in it. Therefore, his thinking has a different kind of reflection, namely the reflection of inwardness, of possession, by virtue of which it belongs to the subject and to no other. (CUP 62)

This “reflection of inwardness,” Climacus adds, “is the subjective thinker’s double reflection. In thinking, he thinks the universal, but as existing in this thinking, as assimilating this in his inwardness, he becomes more and more subjectively isolated” (CUP 62). The objective thinker, too, thinks the universal, but this is the full extent of his reflection. The subjective existing thinker makes an additional reflective movement of assimilation or appropriation, a movement that consists in applying his understanding of the universal to his own concrete existence. And because his existence is radically particular, this second reflection belongs only to him in his inwardness. This second reflection cannot be directly communicated, both because its uniqueness prevents it from being formulated in universal terms, and because it is always deeply tenuous and provisional. Climacus states that the subjective thinker becomes more and more isolated in the course of assimilating his thinking, because the movement of appropriation is never complete; while objective thought “invests everything in the result,” subjective thought “invests everything in becoming and omits the result . . . because as an existing individual he [the subjective thinker] is constantly coming to be” (CUP 62).

Considered in the light of Climacus’ description of the subjective existing thinker, the double reflection of Socratic philosophizing involves a ceaseless twofold striving. As a lover of wisdom (philosophos) rather than a wise man, Socrates is always “on the way to being” (CUP 68), always en route to the eternal, universal truth.27 At the same time, he is always in the process of applying the fruits of his philosophical labors to his own timebound,

27 He conceives this truth to be an intrinsically knowable order of stable, self-subsisting entities – the Ideas or Forms (ideai or eidÊ€) – that derive their being and intelligibility from “the Good,” the ultimate object of human longing as a whole (Republic 504e–511e; cf. 490a–b).
particular existence. Stretching simultaneously in two directions, Socratic philosophizing shuttles interminably between being and becoming, truth and life – a perpetually unfinished process that is reflected in the Platonic dialogues, which always begin with, and return to, questions that arise within everyday existence, but never quite reach satisfactory answers. And just as Socrates’ striving for truth is propelled by a profound awareness of his ignorance, his never-ending attempt to live in the light of a merely partial understanding of the truth is always open to correction.

As a mode of existence, double reflection manifests a paradoxical duality reminiscent of “the moment,” the living embrace of which calls for unwavering attention and exertion. Climacus captures this duality and this strenuous exertion in the second possible thesis of Lessing: “The existing subjective thinker is, in his existence-relation to the truth, just as negative as positive, has just as much humor as essentially he has pathos, and is constantly coming to be, i.e., striving” (CUP 68). By “the negative,” Climacus means more than theoretical ignorance and existential uncertainty. Or rather, he is referring to our immeasurable ignorance and uncertainty in the face of the certainty of death:

The negativity in life . . . has its ground in the subject’s synthesis, in the fact that he is an existing infinite spirit . . . The existing subject is eternal, but as existing [is] temporal. Infinitude’s treachery is now that the possibility of death is present at any moment. All positive reliability is thus rendered suspect. (CUP 69)

“The subjective existing thinker who has the infinite in his soul has it always,” Climacus adds; he “constantly keeps open that wound of the negative” that others – perhaps “think[ing] this uncertainty [of death] once and for all, or once a year at matins on New Year’s morning” – allow to heal (CUP 71, 139). What is more, he “expresses the same” in communication; “for that reason he is never a teacher but a learner; and since he is constantly just as negative as positive, he is constantly striving” (CUP 72).

Not coincidentally, it is Socrates who furnishes Climacus with his primary example of this subjectively indwelling infinity. What comes to the fore in his characterization of Socrates is the faithfulness of his philosophical betrothal to the negative and the infinite. Climacus speaks of Socrates as “conferring privately with the idea,” “keeping a little tryst with his idea, with ignorance,” and having an “assignation with the god” – an assignation of the soul that would seem laughable to a “young girl” who wants only to meet her beloved in “erotic embrace” (CUP 71, 75). Socrates’ fidelity to
the idea, to his knowledge of ignorance, and to the divinity he calls “the god,” is nothing less than absolute devotion to the tasks of existence, as becomes clear when Climacus offers the following comment on “the Greek conception of Eros that we find in the Symposium”:

[L]ove here evidently means existence, or that by virtue of which life in its entirety is the life that synthesizes the infinite and the finite. According to Plato, Poverty and Wealth begot Eros, whose nature was made of both. But what is existence? Existence is that child born of the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, and is therefore constantly striving. This was how Socrates saw it: that is why love is constantly striving, i.e., the thinking subject is existing. (CUP 78)

The Symposium includes speeches on eros by a tragic dramatist (Agathon) and a comic one (Aristophanes), because love and life combine humor and pathos: “At the root of both the comic and the tragic lies the disparity, the contradiction, between the infinite and the finite, the eternal and becoming” (CUP 76). This disparity presents itself as alternatively tragic and comic, depending on whether one looks “up,” so to speak, from the toil and trouble of existence to the infinite, and to the universal, eternal truth toward which love stretches the soul, or “down” from the heights of understanding to the finite and fleeting particularity of human life:

When the subjective existing thinker turns his face towards the idea, the grasping of the discrepancy is in pathos; when he turns his back to the idea and lets it cast its rays from behind into the same disparity, the grasping of it is in comedy. It is, in this way, the infinite pathos of religiousness to say Thou to God. It is infinitely comic when I turn my back on this, and see within finitude what falls into it from behind. (CUP 76)

As a lover and an existing human being, the subjective existing thinker knows that humor and pathos are inseparable. On this point, Plato and Climacus are of one mind: the Symposium concludes with the picture of Socrates trying to persuade Agathon and Aristophanes that “it belongs to one and the same man to know how to produce tragedy and comedy, and that the skilled tragic poet is also a comic poet” (223d).

**PHILOSOPHICAL EROS AND CHRISTIAN FAITH:**

**SOCRATES AND BEYOND**

Section Two of Part Two of Postscript, “The subjective problem, or how subjectivity must be for the problem to appear to it,” begins with a
chapter entitled “Becoming subjective” (CUP 107). In this chapter, Climacus makes three claims that are especially relevant to our inquiry: “becoming subjective . . . [i]s the task, the highest task set for every human being” (CUP 132; cf. CUP 111, 140); “faith is . . . the highest passion of subjectivity” (CUP 110); “Christianity wants . . . to intensify passion to its highest pitch” (CUP 109). Up to this point in Postscript, however, it is Socrates who has exemplified both what it means to become subjective and the passionate exertion that is required to do so. In what way is the passion of Christian faith even “higher” and more intensified than the passion of Socratic, philosophical eros?

Climacus addresses this question in Chapter 2 of Section Two, “The subjective truth, inwardness; truth is subjectivity” (CUP 159). In this chapter, he seems to locate Socratic eros just below Christian faith on a continuum of increasing subjective truth, paradox, and passion. Yet he also asserts that the difference between these two is “infinite.” This is itself a paradox that is well worth considering.

In the context of clarifying the difference between objective and subjective reflection, Climacus describes the relationship between passion and paradox as follows:

Inwardness at its highest in an existing subject is passion; to passion there corresponds truth as a paradox; and the fact that truth becomes the paradox is grounded precisely in its relation to an existing subject. (CUP 167)

Let us start with the last part of this statement. To objective reflection, the truth is not at all paradoxical. Up to this point, Socrates would find nothing to quarrel with: “Socratically, the eternal essential truth is by no means in itself paradoxical; it is so only by relating to someone existing” (CUP 173). But Socratic subjective reflection differs from objective reflection because it is double; the Socratic thinker strives not simply to know the truth, but to embody it in speech and deed. This ongoing act of subjective appropriation is inherently paradoxical, simply because it means bringing the universal and eternal truth into relation to one’s particular existence in time. The non-paradoxical truth – conceived, for example, as Platonic Ideas or Forms – has become paradoxical when it is related to an existing subject.

In what way, however, does truth as a paradox “correspond” to passion? If we may judge by the example of Socrates, passion both originates and answers to paradox. It originates paradox, for it is Socrates’ erotic desire to live up to the truth that motivates him to relate it to his existence. And
it answers to paradox, because Socrates is always questing for knowledge that is never fully in his possession, and it is precisely objective uncertainty about the truth “that tightens the infinite passion of inwardness” (CUP 171). In other words, if it is paradoxical to try to appropriate in one’s existence a known or objectively certain truth, it is still more paradoxical – and requires still more passion – to cling to, and attempt to embody, an objectively uncertain truth.

But this is not all, for Climacus sees more than a mere correspondence between passion and truth. Rather, he goes on to define the truth of subjectivity in terms of passion. “[T]ruth,” he writes, “is precisely this venture of choosing an objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite” (CUP 171). Still more precisely – and it is this that he calls “a definition of truth” – “the objective uncertainty maintained through appropriation in the most passionate inwardness is truth, the highest truth there is for someone existing” (CUP 171, emphasis in original). Once again, Socrates nicely illustrates Climacus’ point. A particularly striking example of Socrates’ attainment of truth through the passionate embrace of an objective uncertainty is his approach to the question of the immortality of the soul:

Nowadays everyone dabbles in a few proofs; one person has several, another not so many. But Socrates! He submits the question in what is objectively a problematic way: if there is an immortality. Does that mean that compared with one of the modern thinkers with three proofs he was a doubter? Not at all, he invests his entire life in this “if there is.” He dares to die, and with the passion of the infinite he has so ordered his entire life as to make it likely that it must be so – if there is an immortality. Is there any better proof of the immortality of the soul? (CUP 169–170)

Socrates’ “proof” is purely subjective: by living a life that is wholly faithful to his convictions, he furnishes a practical demonstration of the theoretically indemonstrable thesis that the soul is immortal. His existential demonstration of the truth of this article of faith, we may note, is exactly the sort that Lessing’s wise judge argues for in the Parable of the Rings.

According to Climacus, the definition of truth quoted in the previous paragraph “is another way of saying faith” – for “faith is just this, the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and objective uncertainty” (CUP 171–172). Climacus might thus be taken to have abolished the apparently absolute distinction he drew in Crumbs between the truth of (Christian) faith and the untruth of the learner without faith,
including the philosopher (KW 7: 13–15). And yet, he qualifies Socrates’ possession of truth in remarking that “Socrates, in his ignorance, was in the truth in the highest sense within paganism”; Christianity, in fact, is “a category of thought that really does go further [than Socrates]” (CUP 172). The difference between Socratic and Christian faith and truth thus seems to be one of degree. But even this is not quite right, for Climacus maintains that this difference is ultimately “infinite” (CUP 173–174n). How are we to make sense of this?

On the Socratic view, “the eternal, essential truth is by no means the paradox; it is so by relating to someone existing” (CUP 172). This is because any attempt to appropriate the universal, eternal truth in one’s particular, temporal existence generates paradox. Christian faith is also paradoxical for just this reason, except that the truth to which one relates in faith is the incarnation of God as man – the already paradoxical union of the universal, eternal, infinite truth with a particular, temporal, finite existence. What is more, this paradox is not relative, but absolute, involving as it does the absolute unity of absolute difference (KW 7: 44–47). In a word, it is “absurd.” This absurdity is a consequence of an “essential change” that existence has brought about in the learner – the loss, through sin, of the condition for understanding the truth (CUP 175). For it is sin, the fall into untruth, that introduces the absolute difference between the learner and the truth, as well as God’s consequent attempt to overcome this difference by becoming incarnate (KW 7: 46–47). “But if existence has got him [the learner] in its power in this way” – in other words, if the learner is untruth – then he is prevented from taking himself back into eternity by way of recollection. “If it was already paradoxical that the eternal truth related to one who exists, it is now absolutely paradoxical that it relates to such a one who exists” (CUP 175; cf. KW 7: 14–15). The intensity and depth of the passion of inwardness that is needed to grasp the truth corresponds precisely to this difference:

Socratic ignorance is an analogue of the category of the absurd, except that in the repellency of the absurd [to thought] there is even less objective certainty, since there is only the certainty that it is absurd. And just for that reason is the resilience of the inwardness even greater. Socratic inwardness in existing is an analogue of

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28 See the rhetorical question he asks at CUP 169: “If someone living in the midst of Christianity enters the house of God, the house of the true God, knowing the true conception of God, and now prays but prays untruly, and if someone lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all the passion of the infinite, although his eyes rest upon the image of an idol – where then is there more truth?” Subjectively, the answer is clear: “The one prays truly to God though he worships an idol; the other prays untruly to the true God, and therefore truly worships an idol.”
faith, except that the inwardness of faith, corresponding as it does to the resistance not of ignorance but of the absurd, is infinitely more profound. (CUP 172–173)

This is where Climacus lets the matter stand: the passion of philosophy as exemplified by Socrates is analogous to the passion of Christian faith, except that the latter is infinitely deeper than the former. “So much,” as Climacus says, “for the Socratic” (CUP 172).

That an analogy – by definition, a resemblance rooted in similarity – can encompass an infinite difference is, to say the least, paradoxical. But precisely this kind of paradox runs throughout Climacus’ discussion of faith. In *Crumbs*, Climacus introduces the parable of the King and the Maiden to clarify the nature of the god’s love for the learner, even though “no human situation can provide a valid analogy” (KW 7: 26), and although absolute difference can in no way be grasped by any of the tools available to human understanding. Climacus explains, however, that his purpose in introducing this parable is “to awaken the mind to an understanding of the divine” (KW 7: 26). Perhaps this is also his purpose in emphasizing the paradoxical unity of similarity and difference in Socratic, philosophical eros and Christian faith – two passions that seem to approach each other asymptotically, yet nevertheless remain worlds apart. As Climacus says in *Crumbs*, “the paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion: a mediocre fellow” (KW 7: 37).

Climacus arguably evinces the full extent of his kinship with Lessing and Socrates in employing a mode of communication that arouses and intensifies the passion of thought. The great question with which *Postscript* leaves us, however, is whether this intellectual passion is transferable to the tasks of existence. In the course of criticizing objective methods of understanding Christianity, Climacus issues a warning that readers of *Crumbs* and *Postscript* would also do well to heed:

At that time [i.e., when Christianity came into the world] the situation was as it should be: it was difficult to become a Christian and one did not meddle with understanding Christianity. Now we have almost reached the parody that to become a Christian is nothing while to understand Christianity is a very difficult and laborious task. Everything is thereby reversed: Christianity is made into a kind of philosophical theory, the difficulty then being quite properly that of understanding it. But Christianity relates essentially to existence, and what is difficult is to become a Christian. (CUP 311–312)

Jacob dreamt that the angels of God were ascending and descending a ladder that reached from earth to heaven; later, he wrestled with an angel
Is there a path that leads from pondering the intellectual paradoxes of Socratic eros and the incarnation – themselves ladders stretched between time and eternity – to wrestling with the existential paradoxes of Christian faith? In *Postscript*, Climacus makes it clear that each of us must struggle with this question individually, and that a proper answer must take the form, not of words, but of deeds that reflect the silent infinity of love.
Kierkegaard is usually taken to be a critic of Hegelian philosophy, meaning Hegel himself and the Danish Hegelians. Emphasis has been on Hegel himself, who is better known and more important to contemporary thought than his followers. This emphasis has recently been challenged by a two-pronged argument from Jon Stewart. Psychologically speaking, the argument goes, Kierkegaard’s critique has the Danish Hegelians but not Hegel in mind; and philosophically speaking, that critique does not in any case make substantive contact with Hegel’s own thought.¹

But the double argument is doubly mistaken. The psychological argument, which is only of interest to intellectual biography, is a non sequitur. That Kierkegaard may have a particular Danish formulation of a Hegelian view in mind does not mean that he does not also have Hegel himself in mind. More importantly in terms of philosophical significance, even if in a given case Kierkegaard has only a Danish Hegelian in mind, it does not follow that the critique fails effectively to engage Hegel’s own thought. Stewart’s attempts to show this in particular cases independently of the psychological thesis regularly fail.²

A full study of the critique of Hegelian thought in Kierkegaard’s writings would require examination of many texts, as evidenced by both Stewart’s and Thulstrup’s books. Sometimes it is explicit, sometimes implicit; sometimes it is pseudonymous, sometimes not. The focus here is obviously on Concluding Unscientific Postscript, but just as the “attack upon Christendom” begins long before the late essays eventually collected under that title,

¹ Stewart, Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered. Stewart takes Niels Thulstrup’s extreme version of the usual view to be the “standard” view, though it has long since ceased to be such. See Thulstrup, Kierkegaard’s Relation to Hegel. A third excellent source on the Danish Hegelians is Kirmmse, Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark.

so the critique of Hegel is already developed in such works as *The Concept of Irony* and *Fear and Trembling.*

*Postscript* is divided into two parts. Part One is about objectivity, while Part Two is about subjectivity. The latter is more than fourteen times as long as the former. Johannes Climacus, the pseudonymous author, is concerned about subjectivity, and it will come as no surprise that his critique of Hegel is primarily in that domain. Hegelian thought fails the subjectivity test.

But already in the brief discussion of objectivity Hegel is targeted. The question concerns the objectivity of both historical and philosophical knowledge. Both of these concern Hegel’s thought, for while it obviously claims to be philosophical truth, it is unlike most of its philosophical predecessors by being deeply and overtly historical, not merely as an occurrence but in substance. This is true not only of the lectures on the history of philosophy, the philosophy of history, the philosophy of religion, and the philosophy of art, but also of the *Philosophy of Right* and the *Phenomenology of Spirit.* It is even true of the *Science of Logic,* which belongs to the modern world and its culture. So, whether we think of Hegel’s writings as speculative metaphysics or the hermeneutics of modernity (a distinction he works hard to compromise), Hegel’s philosophy belongs to what Climacus discusses under the heading of objectivity.

What he says about it is expressed in a single word: *approximation* (CUP 21). Climacus is not just a fallibilist here, saying that we sometimes get it wrong (and, presumably, sometimes right). His understanding of the finitude of human understanding is qualitative. We never have it fully and finally right, and the quest for objective certainty and clarity is one that is never finished. (Here we have an analog to subjectivity, which at a deeper level consists of tasks that are never finished.)

This is because Climacus is a Hegelian holist. Hegel famously says that “the True is the whole.” This is, if you like, a reverse “flower-in-the-crannied-wall” thesis. In his poem “Flower in the Crannied Wall,” Tennyson says that if he really understood the tiny flower, he would *ipso facto* understand “what God and man is.” Hegel, conversely, says that unless I understand the whole of reality, I do not understand any of the parts. This is why philosophy must be a system if it is to be genuine, scientific.

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3 See, for example, my “L’Autre critique kierkegaardienne de Hegel,” as well as “Abraham and Hegel” in my *Kierkegaard’s Critique of Reason and Society,* 61–84.

4 *Hegel’s Science of Logic,* 25–26, 42, 51.

5 For Hegel, logic is metaphysics – but so is history, properly understood.

6 *Phenomenology of Spirit,* 11 (§ 20). Note that this is in the first instance an ontological thesis. The epistemological thesis is a corollary. Because true being is an organic totality, genuine knowledge must be holistic, that is, systematic.
knowledge, and why spirit must have come to full actuality and full self-consciousness in the system of scientific philosophy, which is the same thing said differently.

Like Hegel, Climacus thinks that reality is essentially historical. This means that unless we comically think that we are, either individually or collectively, somehow the fulfillment of the historical process, this aspiration toward cognitive totality can never be more than approximation.

Someone existing is constantly in coming to be; the genuinely existing subjective thinker . . . invests all his thinking in becoming.7 It is the same as with style: the only writer who really has style is the one who never has anything finished, but “troubles the waters of language” [see John 5:4] every time he begins, so that for him the most everyday expression comes into being with the pristine freshness of a new birth . . . one continually feels an urge to have something finished, but this urge is of evil and must be renounced. The continual becoming is the uncertainty of earthly life, in which everything is uncertain. (CUP 73)

In other words, putative objectivity is unable to transcend the subjectivity of existence. Thought is one of the tasks that are never finished.

Never hesitant to resort to satire, Climacus tells us that he is ready to bow down and worship the system as soon as it is finished, which he has been assured will be no later than next Sunday (CUP 91–92). But completing the system is not the only problem for the project of objectivity. Getting started is equally problematic. Hegel is aware of the problem, and opens his account of “Sense-Certainty” in the Phenomenology of Spirit with a defense of this as the proper place to begin. Even more vigorous is the defense of Being as the category with which he begins the Logic, and thus the System proper.8 Climacus claims that beginning here rather than there involves a decision, the resolution of a process of reflection. As such, it involves a leap (CUP 94–98).

Climacus borrows the category of the leap from Lessing, who says that “accidental historical truths could never become evidence of eternal truths of reason” and that “the transition whereby one will build an eternal truth on a historical account is a leap” (CUP 79).9 Lessing is arguing against any Christian apologetics that argues from miracles and fulfilled prophecies to the truth of trinitarian metaphysics. For the sake of argument, he is willing to concede the historical premise in order to attack the inference drawn

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7 Climacus’ use here and throughout of the verb “to exist” to signify the temporal incompleteness of human life is the basis for the term “existentialism.”
therefrom. “If on historical grounds I have no objection to the statement that Christ raised to life a dead man; must I therefore accept it as true that God has a Son who is of the same essence as himself?” Lessing elaborates:

But to jump from that historical truth to a quite different class of truths, and to demand of me that I should form all my metaphysical and moral ideas accordingly; to expect me to alter all my fundamental ideas of the nature of the Godhead because I cannot set any credible testimony against the resurrection of Christ: if that is not a \textit{μετάβασις εἰς ἄλλο γένος}, then I do not know what Aristotle meant by this phrase\textsuperscript{11} . . . That, then, is the ugly broad ditch which I cannot get across, however often and however earnestly I have tried to make the leap.\textsuperscript{12}

The last part of this passage is quoted directly in the Postscript (CUP 83–84). There are several things to notice about Climacus’ use of the concept of the leap.

- He is not discussing Lessing’s problem of the relation between historical and metaphysical knowledge.
- He is not discussing Christian faith. He does not use the phrase “leap of faith,” although he will call Christian faith a leap in the sense that it is an instance of a broader and more inclusive structure.
- He is discussing Hegel’s system in terms of how it can get started, or, to put it a bit differently, the foundation or presuppositions on which it rests.
- He says that Hegel’s system rests on a leap in the sense that in its very beginning it is without the certainty,\textsuperscript{13} the guarantee of absolute knowing, that it promises. Climacus describes a leap as a decision (a) that is made in time, so that subsequent time may support or undermine it; (b) that is therefore risky; and (c) that is made in isolation, which is to say that it is the responsibility of the individual who makes it (CUP 80–85).

\textsuperscript{10} Lessing, “On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power,” 54. Lessing describes the metaphysical conclusion not only as a non sequitur, but as a belief “against which my reason rebels,” making it clear that his metaphysics was not only entirely \textit{a priori} but also the product of a reason that rejects Christian orthodoxy. After Lessing’s death Jacobi described conversations in which Lessing allegedly admitted to being a Spinozist – that is, a pantheist for whom nature is god. See Jacobi, \textit{Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn}, in \textit{The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill}. For the \textit{Pantheismusstreit}, the scandal that ensued, see Beiser, “Jacobi and the Pantheism Controversy,” in \textit{The Fate of Reason}, 44–91.

\textsuperscript{11} The Greek phrase signifies the fallacious “jump” in Aristotelian logic from a premise about one mode of being to a conclusion about another mode. See \textit{Posterior Analytics}, 75a.


\textsuperscript{13} On the Cartesian dimension of Hegel’s thought in this respect, see Flay, \textit{Hegel’s Quest for Certainty}. 
One can therefore say that Hegel’s system rests on an act of faith. Not Christian faith, to be sure, but faith in the sense that it is a risky affirmation that is neither certain knowledge (intuition, perhaps) nor a necessary consequence of certain knowledge (deductive inference, perhaps). The idea that philosophical speculation is free of the risk that accompanies religious faith is a myth, an epistemic will-o’-the-wisp.

One could express much the same point in terms of the philosophical hermeneutics associated with Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur. To speak of the leap is to speak of the hermeneutical circle in which human understanding is never without presuppositions but always rests on assumptions that are neither self-evident nor proven, since they are presupposed by any proofs that follow. This is another way of expressing the qualitative finitude of human understanding.

All of this is summed up in two classic claims Climacus makes about the idea that Hegelian philosophy is the system that satisfies its own holistic requirements. The first is this: “(a) there can be a logical system, (b) but there can be no system for life itself” (CUP 92). There can be no completeness of thought for life itself follows from the temporal finitude of the human self who would construct or comprehend the (putative) system. That there can be a logical system signifies that it is only by abstracting from the concreteness of human life, focusing on static forms while ignoring temporal content, that we can seem to have a system. But by leaving out that concreteness we violate the holistic criteria that call for completeness. Something utterly essential, the individual in the midst of historical and especially personal becoming, has been left out.

The second claim about the system is this: “Life [existence] itself is a system – for God, but cannot be that for any existing spirit. System and finality correspond to each other, but life is just the opposite” (CUP 100). God can apprehend the real *sub specie aeterni* (under the aspect of eternity), but we cannot by virtue of our essential temporality (CUP 255–259). We are always at some specific point in personal and historical time, and we can only see what can be seen from that perspective. Like the six blind

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14 Earlier translations, including the one by the Hongs, render “Tilværelsens System” as “an existential system” or “a system of existence.” These translations preserve Climacus’ technical use of the term “existence” to signify the unique quality of personal human life. Hannay’s translation, contrasting logic and life, seeks to emphasize the difference between the abstract and the concrete. The two emphases are complementary.

15 Later Climacus will say that the agreement between thought and being is actual in God “but not for any existing spirit, seeing that in existing the latter is on the way to being” (CUP 160). “On the way to being” renders “i Vorden,” which elsewhere is rendered as “in a process of becoming.” For Hannay’s explanation, see CUP xxxviii.
men each of whom had hold of a different part of the elephant, we are structurally cut off from the vision of the whole that the system purports to be.

Taken together these two theses deny the possibility of the system. To affirm its possibility is either to abstract from the concreteness of life or to confuse ourselves with God, who sees the whole from the standpoint of eternity – or both. We either make ourselves less than human or more, or combine the two in an absent-mindedness that forgets what it means to be human. But since we are neither abstract thought nor divine thought, the system leaves us out and fails to be all inclusive.

Over against this absent-mindedness, Climacus encourages his readers to remember who they are. Just before his first thesis about the system, he writes with typical irony,

I, Johannes Climacus, am neither more nor less than a human being; and I assume that the person I have the honor of conversing with is also a human being. If he wants to be speculation, pure speculative thought, I must stop conversing with him; for at that moment he vanishes from my sight and from the feeble mortal eye of a human being. (CUP 92; cf. CUP 97, 100)

Climacus suggests that there is something immoral about this absent-mindedness, and he gives two reasons for thinking so. On the one hand, the system has no ethics. By focusing attention on the world-historical development of the species, the system lets us forget about the never completed tasks we face as individuals: becoming subjective and, perhaps, becoming a Christian (see CUP 101–103). On the other hand, since the system encourages the absent-minded, pantheistic confusion of the human knower with God, it is impious, even idolatrous (CUP 104–105). “But woe unto me if the god judged me in my innermost being for wanting mendaciously to be systematic and world historical and forget what it is to be a human being, and thereby forget what it means that he is the god . . . Woe unto me in time, and still more dreadfully once he got hold of me in eternity!” (CUP 154). But in the end Climacus thinks the best critique is laughter and satire. The absent-mindedness required by the system is ludicrous, ridiculous, comical (CUP 100–106).

An earlier pseudonym suggests that it is the faith of Abraham that is the task of a lifetime. See Fear and Trembling, KW 6: 6–8, 121–123. These two passages frame the entire discussion of the meaning of faith. The first explicitly contrasts Abraham’s faith with the system, which has no account of such faith; nor does it call the reader to imitate Abraham’s faith, because it is too objective for that. Hegel writes that “philosophy must beware of the wish to be edifying”: see Phenomenology of Spirit, 6 (§ 9); whereas a large chunk of Kierkegaard’s writing consists of “edifying” or upbuilding discourses. For Climacus, both becoming subjective and becoming a Christian are lifelong tasks, and serious writing should be in their service, directly or indirectly.
The reader will have noticed that Climacus has shifted from arguing that the system is impossible to the more important claim that it is undesirable even to the point of being existentially dangerous. It is not the strenuous striving to make our beliefs the best approximation of the real that we can achieve that is the deepest problem. It is rather two beliefs about the task of theory: first, that it can achieve the goals of objectivity, the holistic goals of being presuppositionless and all-encompassing, and second, that the theoretical task, so understood, is more fundamental to what it means to be human than the practical tasks of becoming more nearly human. In Postscript these tasks, as just indicated, are becoming subjective and becoming a Christian. These are related to each other as genus to species; becoming subjective is the necessary condition (not necessarily temporally prior) for the possibility of becoming a Christian. As Climacus sees it, absorption in the system and its interpretation of being as world history is a distraction from and thereby an evasion of these tasks.

One of the ways in which system fetishism evades the second of these tasks is by making the assumption that everyone is already a Christian. Climacus writes, “Although an outsider, this much I have grasped, that the only unpardonable lèse-majesté against Christianity is for the individual to take his relationship to it for granted” (CUP 17). Christendom already commits this treason, as Climacus sees it, and Hegelianism provides ideological encouragement to continue it by suggesting that the task is not to become a Christian but to “go beyond” religious faith to philosophical knowledge, that is, to the system. This suggestion mistakenly assumes (a) that the system is an achievable or even an achieved goal, (b) that religious faith is a failed attempt to achieve philosophical insight, and (c) that everyone is already a Christian.

On this last point Climacus first satirizes in the abstract. “The speculative view does of course have the virtue of being without presuppositions. It proceeds from nothing, assumes that nothing as given… One thing though is assumed: Christianity as given. It is assumed that we are all

17 Like Johannes de Silentio, Climacus presents himself as an outsider to biblical faith in such a way as to pose the question whether anyone has this faith, or has finished becoming a Christian.
18 Climacus renews the polemic against “going beyond” or “going further” than faith that Silentio develops in Fear and Trembling, KW 6: 5, 7, 23, 32, 37, 121–123. See, for example, CUP 46.
19 Here, as has often been the case, the discussion of faith and reason has been governed by a Platonism that knows nothing of biblical faith. Pístis, usually translated “opinion” in the Republic, is found on the lower half of the divided line. Its home is in the darkness of the cave, not the sunshine of the intelligible world. But pístis, the word for “faith” in the New Testament, is not trying and failing to be speculative knowledge. It is a personal response of trust in the promises, and obedience to the commands, of a God personal enough to speak, to make promises and give commands. This is the faith of Abraham in Fear and Trembling.
Climacus on subjectivity and the system

Christians” (CUP 44). He then proceeds to satirize in the concrete. If someone were to express doubt whether or not he was a Christian, he would not exactly suffer persecution or be put to death. But angry glances would come his way and people would say: “How tiresome . . . why can’t he behave like the rest of us who are all Christians?” . . . And should he happen to be married, his wife would say to him, “Dearest husband, how can you get such notions into your head? Aren’t you a Christian? Aren’t you a Dane, and doesn’t the geography book tell us that the prevailing religion in Denmark is Lutheran Christianity? You aren’t a Jew, or a Mohammedan; so what can you be? After all, a thousand years have gone since paganism was replaced, so I know that you are no pagan. Don’t you attend to your duties at the office as a good civil servant should; aren’t you a good subject of a Christian nation . . . ? . . . Then you must be a Christian.” (CUP 44–45)

Later, Climacus will satirize those who assume they are Christians because they have been baptized and received a copy of the Bible and a hymnbook, presumably at confirmation (CUP 466). In this kind of satire we have an especially lucid confluence of Kierkegaard’s (not just Climacus’) critiques of Hegelianism and Christendom.

Much of what Climacus has to say about subjectivity comes to its culmination in the (in)famous claim that “truth is subjectivity” (CUP 159–210). Speaking about his earlier reflections in Philosophical Crumbs (a.k.a. Philosophical Fragments), Climacus writes early on “that the problem is not about the truth of Christianity but about the individual’s relation to Christianity, that is, not about the indifferent individual’s systematic eagerness to arrange the truths of Christianity in §§ [paragraphs], but about the infinitely interested individual’s concern regarding his own relation to such a teaching” (CUP 16). Climacus’ account of faith as an “infinite personal passionate interest” in one’s eternal happiness would serve just as well as a definition of subjectivity if the specifically religious notion of eternal happiness were replaced with the more general concept of one’s own personal existence (CUP 48). He now returns to that theme and stresses that the issue is about appropriation, whose goal is “to deepen oneself in subjectivity” (CUP 161). In other words, it is about the “how” of our relation of what we take to be truth, rather than about the “what” of its content.

When truth is asked about objectively, reflection is directed objectively at truth as an object to which the knower relates. Reflection is not on the relation but on it being the truth, the true [the what] that he is relating to. If only this, to which he relates, is the

20 The earlier discussion of double reflection is all about appropriation (CUP 62–68).
truth, the true, then the subject is in the truth. If the truth is asked about subjectively, reflection is directed subjectively on the individual’s relation; if only the how of this relation is in truth, then the individual is in truth, even if he related in this way to untruth. (CUP 167–168, emphasis in original)

It should be abundantly clear that subjectivity is not Climacus’ answer to the question: how do we know what the truth is, what beliefs we should hold? When that is the question, we should be as objective as we can. With a single word, Climacus sides with postmodernity against modernity’s typical complacent overestimation of how objective we can be. But he is miles removed from an “anything goes” or “different strokes for different folks” epistemology. The question of subjectivity is simply a different question: appropriation, rather than approximation.

Climacus gives a fourfold commentary on truth in its subjectivity, on the personal relation of the believer to whatever she believes to be true. By now we should not be surprised that he begins with a satire. It concerns the madman who thinks he can prove his sanity to himself and to the world by putting a skittle ball in his coat-tail. When it bangs with each step against his “(to put it politely) ‘a—’,” he says, “Bang, the earth is round!” Somehow he reminds Climacus of the young scholar who, with equal regularity, chirps “de omnibus dubitandum est” (CUP 163–164). Instead of proving his sanity, his misunderstanding of the significance of objective truth proves the opposite. Silentio and Climacus are more than willing to acknowledge that from the standpoint of secular modernity biblical faith can only appear to be madness. But here Climacus turns the tables and suggests that absent-minded preoccupation with the system (and its Cartesian project of overcoming doubt with certainty) may be a form of madness from the standpoint of the subjectivity without which we cease to be human.

Just to be sure we do not attach the question of subjectivity to such beliefs as that the earth is round, Climacus tells us that he is talking about the domain of “essential knowing.” “All essential knowing concerns existence, or only such knowing as has an essential relation to existence is essential, is essential knowing... Therefore only ethical and ethico-religious knowing is essential knowing. But all ethical and ethico-religious knowing is essentially a relating to the fact that the knower is existing.”

22 For a more extended analysis, see my Becoming a Self, 114–133.
23 For a sustained and analytical satire on this claim that “everything is to be doubted,” see Johannes Climacus, the intellectual biography of our pseudonym that Kierkegaard sketched but did not publish: KW 7: 113–172.
Climacus on subjectivity and the system

(CUP 166). Whereas Silentio in Fear and Trembling seeks to distinguish the ethical in the Hegelian sense of Sittlichkeit, the laws and customs of one’s people, from the religious, in which the revealed will of God trumps the norms of one’s society and culture, Climacus seems to have a different understanding of the ethical: one that is intimately related to the religious, though he does not tell us much about it.²⁴

The second commentary on “truth is subjectivity” is a famous parable. If someone living in the midst of Christianity enters the house of God, the house of the true God, knowing the true conception of God, and now prays but prays untruly, and if someone lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all the passion of the infinite, although his eyes rest upon the image of an idol – where then is there more truth? The one prays truly to God though he worships an idol; the other prays untruly to the true God, and therefore truly worships an idol. (CUP 169)

The question here is not where objective truth is to be found. That is stipulated in a way that Climacus expects his readers to share. Both before and after this parable, as well as within it, the question is posed in terms of “more truth.” In other words, who is worse off, the one who prays idolatrously to the true God or the one who prays rightly to an idol? Notice the adverbial character of the question of subjectivity. It is about the “how.”

The implication of Climacus’ rhetorical question may be disturbing, but C. S. Lewis and the prophet Amos will be sympathetic. In the Narnia chronicles, Tash is the name of the false god of the pagan Calormenes, the very opposite of Aslan, the true God, who says, “And if any man do a cruelty in my name, then though he says the name of Aslan, it is Tash whom he serves and by Tash his deed is accepted.”²⁵ Amos went to the sanctuary at Bethel where Israel purported to worship Yahweh, the God of the covenant. But Amos’ prophecies are a sustained diatribe against this worship. Because of the social injustice in which the rich exploit the poor and keep the courts from doing anything about it, God completely rejects this worship and has become the enemy of the people of the covenant. The false worship of the true God is rejected as idolatrous.

The third commentary is a reference to Socrates. Objectively the crucial question is seen as problematic: “if there is an immortality. Does this mean that compared with one of the modern thinkers with three proofs he was a

²⁴ Kierkegaard’s full-fledged account of an ethics tightly bound to the religious, rather than the social or cultural, is to be found in Works of Love (KW 16).

doubt? Not at all, he invests his entire life in this ‘if there is.’ He dares to die, and with the passion of the infinite he has so ordered his entire life as to make it likely that it must be so” (CUP 169–170).

Socrates is important in three ways for Climacus’ account of subjectivity (CUP 170–171). First, there is the famous Socratic ignorance: Socrates does not assume that risk-free, presuppositionless certainty is either possible or necessary to the truly human life. Second, there is the willingness to live in paradox. This is, of course, not the paradox of Abraham’s faith in Fear and Trembling or the paradox of the God in time in Philosophical Crumbs and Postscript. It is the simpler and more formal paradox of the dialectical tension in a person’s life between the temporal in which he lives and the eternal toward which he is directed.

Third, by focusing on the “how” rather than the elusive “what,” Socrates led a life of passion, decision, and striving. Anticipating, as it were, Kant’s primacy of practical reason and Climacus’ notion of subjectivity, he gives priority to will, understood as “committed striving and passionate resolve,” over intellect, understood as the quest for and claim to certainty.

The fourth commentary sums up the first three in a definition of truth as subjectivity: “the objective uncertainty maintained through appropriation in the most passionate inwardness is truth, the highest truth there is for someone existing” (CUP 171, emphasis in original). Almost immediately, Climacus adds the following commentary:

But the above definition of truth is another way of saying faith. Without risk, no faith. Faith is just this, the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and objective uncertainty. If I can grasp God objectively, then I do not have faith, but just because I cannot do this, I must have faith. If I wish to stay in my faith, I must take constant care to keep hold of the objective uncertainty, to be “on the 70,000 fathoms deep” but still have faith. (CUP 171–172)

So what does this fourfold account of truth as subjectivity have to do with Hegel? Perhaps the key is in the phrase, “If I can grasp God objectively, then I do not have faith.” Two utterly central claims of the Hegelian system are (a) that it succeeds in grasping God objectively and (b) that in so doing it gives us an improved, superior version of Christianity. Climacus’ reply is

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26 These modern thinkers do not include Hegel, for whom the question of personal immortality is conspicuously unasked.

27 Earlier Climacus had spoken of the contradiction embodied in personal life as the synthesis of finite and infinite, eternal and temporal (CUP 69, 76). Anti-Climacus, a later pseudonym, will take this dialectical tension as his point of departure for reflection on human selfhood. See The Sickness Unto Death, KW 19: 13.

28 Davenport, Will as Commitment and Resolve, 4.
that when Hegelian thought assumes that everyone has faith and that the
task is to go beyond faith to knowledge (as provided in the system), it fails
to notice that it has gone so far beyond faith that it has abandoned faith
altogether. By subordinating subjectivity so completely to objectivity, it has
left the playing field on which the language game of faith is played. It is as
if Hegel promised to show us a new and improved way to play baseball,
and it turned out that he was playing ice hockey. So Climacus will ask with
reference to speculative thought, “why, then, call it Christian?” (CUP 468).

In his discussion of truth as subjectivity, Climacus writes:

Whether speculation is right is another question. Here we are asking only how its
explanation stands in relation to the Christianity that it explains . . . Speculation is
objective . . . Christianity is on the contrary subjective . . . for an objective knowl-
dge of the truth, or truths, of Christianity is precisely untruth. To know a decla-
ration of faith by heart is paganism, because Christianity is inwardness. (CUP 188)

Starting from the other direction, he writes:

Whether Christianity is right is another question . . . But if Christianity should
perhaps be wrong, this much at least is certain: speculation is definitely wrong, for
the only consistency outside Christianity is pantheism, the taking of oneself out
of existence back into the eternal by way of recollection, whereby all existence-decisions become a mere shadow-play. (CUP 190)

In other words, Climacus does not purport to decide whether Christianity
or Hegelianism is the better account, the closest approximation to the
nature of the real. He only insists that the two not be confused. In claiming
to express the content of Christianity in the superior form of speculative
thinking – higher, as it were, on a Platonic divided line – Hegel is simply
wrong. What he presents as a better form of baseball turns out to be ice
hockey.29

Already, before getting to the paradoxicality of specifically Christian
faith, Climacus here provides a basis for saying that, even generically speak-
ing, faith does not go merely beyond reason but against it.30 When reason
is defined in terms of objectivity and certainty, it leaves no room for faith
as risky personal decision and commitment without guarantees. Faith can

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29 On the nature of this style of argument, shared by Silentio and Climacus, which seeks to show
not that A is superior to B or vice versa, but simply that they are deeply different, see my essay
“Johannes and Johannes: Kierkegaard and Difference.”

30 The classical formulation, properly associated with Aquinas, is that faith does not go against reason
but only beyond it. But Aquinas has a different understanding of what the term “reason” designates.
preserve room for itself either by rejecting that definition of reason or by saying, in effect, “OK, if that’s what reason is we must insist, and you should admit, that it is the enemy of faith. It will have to be faith vs. reason.” Climacus prefers Lessing to Hegel precisely because he candidly acknowledges this conflict.

The lengthy discussion of Religiousness A and the very brief discussion of Religiousness B (which has already been presented in Philosophical Crumbs) continue the discussion of subjectivity. Under that general heading of subjectivity we can picture three concentric circles. The largest is the ethical, the next largest is Religiousness A, and the innermost is Religiousness B. The advantage of this image is that it shows the three not to be alternatives (in which case eccentric circles would be appropriate) but related in each pair as genus to species.

Climacus does not define the ethical with any precision. He does not, following Silentio, sharply distinguish it from the religious as Sittlichkeit, the laws or customs of one’s people, in distinction from the command of God, which is higher. He rather links it so closely to the religious that he sometimes speaks of the ethico-religious. It seems to be the genus of which Religiousness A is a species. One can be ethical, passionately concerned about right and wrong in the context of personal responsibility, without being religious, but one cannot be religious without being ethical in this sense. Similarly, one can practice Religiousness A without Religiousness B, a fact illustrated by Socrates, but Religiousness B presupposes and includes the existential pathos that makes up Religiousness A. If Climacus says that one must first locate oneself within A before one can claim to be within B, this is not a theory about developmental spirituality. The priority is logical, not temporal, as if one said that one must first be a dog in order to be a collie. If one were a cat, the claim to being a collie would be ludicrous. This is the logic of Climacus’ claim that speculative thought is ludicrously comical. By failing to be within these generic specifications of subjectivity, Hegelian speculation fails to be Christian thinking at all, much less a superior form thereof. To repeat, ice hockey is not a higher form of baseball.

What here distinguishes the religious from the ethical is the hope for eternal happiness. God and immortality had often been taken to be marks

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31 Philosophies that do this are often called “postmodern,” whether they do so for religious motives or not. This is why Kierkegaard is a kind of postmodernist. Again, see my “Kierkegaard’s Climacus – a Kind of Postmodernist.”

32 The earlier argument, that in its preoccupation with the world-historical point of view speculation has no ethics (see, e.g., CUP 112), can be expressed in these terms.
of the religion of reason, recollection without revelation, and if we ask why Climacus focuses on the latter rather than on the relation to God, as we find in such texts as *Fear and Trembling* and *Sickness Unto Death*, the answer is fairly obvious. Climacus has already presented Socrates (by synecdoche representing “paganism”) as a hero of subjectivity, and now he wants to explore the kind of religious subjectivity he might represent. His God-relation is ambiguous, so it makes sense to focus on his hope for eternal happiness, “if there is an immortality.” In terms of *Philosophical Crumbs*, this will be a religion grounded in recollection and not in revelation. But it will be a religion of faith in the sense described above: “the objective uncertainty maintained through appropriation in the most passionate inwardness.”

Religiousness A is defined in terms of a task and a threefold pathos. The task is to relate “at one time absolutely to one’s absolute τέλος [telos, “goal”], and relatively to what is relative” (CUP 325, emphasis added). Our natural condition, “immediacy” in the language of Hegel and Kierkegaard, is to be absolutely committed to relative goals. For the infant these are a full tummy and a dry bottom, and it bursts into weeping and wailing when these disappear. Or there is the teenage girl, overheard in a restaurant not getting her parents to agree to something she wanted, bemoaning her fate: “you’ve ruined my entire life!” (We can smile, while Climacus laughs loudly.) So the task of desiring and hoping absolutely for only the absolute good and only relatively for all finite goods involves “the transformation in which, in existing, the existing person changes everything in his existence in relation to that highest good” (CUP 327). The relation to eternal happiness as the absolute good must transform one’s existence “absolutely,” which means that there is nothing “he is not willing to give up for its sake” (CUP 330).

This task of this transformation is “ideal and maybe no one ever fulfils it; it is only on paper that one begins without further ado and is finished straight away” (CUP 362). Here we hear an echo of Silentio who, in *Fear and Trembling*, reminds us at the beginning and the end that faith is the task of a lifetime. The notion that it is only by abstracting from existence that one can be “finished straight away” is directed at the Hegelian notion that everyone has faith and that the task is to go beyond it to something higher, namely speculative knowledge.

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33 As in Kant and the English deists.
34 See the above analysis of the problems of getting the system started or finished.
There is a threefold pathos associated with this never completed task. Aesthetic pathos is the power of a *story* to evoke strong emotions such as pity and fear. Existentially or subjectively speaking, pathos is the power of a *task* to evoke strong emotions. In *Fear and Trembling*, for example, the lifelong task of faith as presented in the Abraham story evokes, well, fear and trembling, along with anxiety and distress. Here the threefold pathos of the existential task is its power to evoke resignation, suffering, and guilt. Resignation signifies the decision and desire to loosen one’s ties to all relative goods so as to carry out the transformation required by Religiousness A. Suffering is the consequent pain of a continual dying to the immediacy in which we are absolutely related to relative goods. Continual, because the task is never completed. Just for that reason one experiences guilt, the sense that one has not done what one ought to have done, has not brought one’s life into conformity with one’s highest duty and virtue. This is a total or essential guilt, a qualitative rather than a quantitative issue (CUP 442–443). It is a matter not of individual acts, but of the source from which one’s acts emerge. In theological language, it is about a sinful nature rather than particular sinful acts (though Climacus does not use the language of sin in this context).

Here again, before getting to a discussion of the specifically Christian form of religion, Climacus argues that, as the disinterested spectator of being and world history, the Hegelian is not even within the horizon within which Christianity can happen. Existential pathos, insofar as it appears at all in Hegelian thought, is what is to be overcome or surpassed. The Socrates presented by Climacus, whose hope is not realized in this life but only in the “beyond” and who has a personal task that is never accomplished, is the pagan paradigm of Unhappy Consciousness, far removed from the Absolute Knowing that is the goal of philosophy.

The sustained polemic against mediation in the discussion of resignation is to be understood in this light. Mediation signifies Hegel’s relational ontology and epistemology. Everything is what it is in relation to (and thus mediated by) something else and eventually to the whole of other things. Correspondingly, we understand things only when we see them in the context of the whole. Like other Kierkegaardian authors, including Kierkegaard himself, Climacus shares this relational view of things. But he charges that Hegel’s version of it compromises the “yawning chasm” (CUP 344) that exists between the absolute telos of human life, its highest good,

35 These two are the ones highlighted in Aristotle’s *Poetics* in relation to Greek tragedy.
36 Compare chapter 4 of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* with chapter 8.
37 See the above discussion of Hegel’s flower-in-the-crannied-wall holism.
and the relative goods that must be resigned, subordinated to the absolute in one’s hierarchy of values.

Mediation would make existence easier for the existing person by leaving out an absolute relation to the absolute τέλος; practicing the absolute distinction makes life absolutely strenuous, particularly when one is also to stay in the finite and relate at one and the same time absolutely to the absolute τέλος, and relatively to the relative goals. (CUP 354, emphasis added)

Climacus wants to affirm “that the individual oriented towards the absolute τέλος is situated in relative ends, but he is not situated in them in such a way that the former is exhausted in them” (CUP 336). His fear is that in Hegelian holism this is exactly what happens. My religion is just one of the competing demands on my time and attention, along with my family, my work, my recreation, and so forth. Or, to put it a bit differently, “I want a good education, a good career with plenty of income and status, a fine family, and, O yes, I also want eternal happiness.” Only the totality of my ends is absolute, no one of them being absolute in relation to all the others.

Hegel purports to be the fulfillment of Greek philosophy just as he claims to be the fulfillment of Christian thought. Climacus will not challenge his claim to be the fulfillment of Platonic or Aristotelian essentialist ontology. But he argues that in doing so he becomes the enemy, not the fulfillment, of Socratic existentialist spirituality. By failing to get as far as Socrates, or by arrogantly treating a Socratic commitment to a highest good that is not fulfilled in this life as the immaturity of an Unhappy Consciousness that ought to be and can be surpassed, Hegel ends up playing ice hockey while Socrates is playing baseball. The games are deeply different, and one becomes comical by treating one as an immature stage of the other. T-ball is a juvenile form of baseball, but baseball is not a juvenile form of ice hockey, nor is Christianity a juvenile form of speculative philosophy. In Climacus’ eyes Hegel misconstrues the relation of the speculative system, whatever its success as such, to faith, even the faith of Socrates.

With Religiousness B Climacus comes to the specifically Christian religion. Its focus, already presented in Philosophical Crumbs, is the incarnation, the God in time as a human individual, Jesus as fully human and fully divine. Climacus uses the familiar Kierkegaardian vocabulary of paradox, absurdity, and incomprehensibility to designate this crucial “what” of Christianity. He might have explored Hegel’s Christology and shown that Hegel’s system has a dramatically different “what” from Christianity at this point. But the critique of Hegel continues to focus on the “how.”
Christianity for Climacus is paradoxical or dialectical “in the second place” (CUP 465, 468). “Paradoxical” or “dialectical” signifies the togetherness of two elements that are at once inseparable and in unresolved tension with each other. In Socrates we have already encountered this structure “in the first place.” It is the togetherness of the temporal and the eternal in the human individual. Climacus sees a higher level of this paradox or dialectic in the claim that Jesus is at once fully human and fully divine.

A double critique of Hegel emerges from this analysis. First, whereas Hegel sees it as the task and accomplishment of speculative thought to remove the element of mystery from Christianity,\(^\text{38}\) Climacus sees the element of mystery as essential and inexpugnable. This is why he says that the Christian believes “against the understanding” (CUP 474, 476). If understanding or reason defines itself not only as objectivity and certainty but also as the elimination of mystery, then Christian faith must see it as a hostile alternative rather than a friendly improver.

Second, a certain spiritual elitism follows from the Hegelian view. He says so himself, “Religion is for everyone. It is not philosophy, which is not for everyone.”\(^\text{39}\) Over against this, Climacus posits a radical equality with respect to Christian faith. Brilliant thinkers have no advantage; those of lesser intellect have no disadvantage (CUP 466–467, 474).

Climacus does not try to prove Christianity to be objectively true or superior to Hegel’s philosophy. But, as we have already seen, he holds that Hegel is definitely wrong because of a comical confusion concerning the relation of his thinking to Christian thought and, even more fundamentally, the relation of his mode of being in the world to the Christian mode of existence.

Climacus calls attention to certain problems with the Hegelian project. But what offends him most is the claim that the speculative system is a higher version of Christianity. So he sums up his quarrel with Hegel’s system with a pointed question: “But why, then, call it Christian?” (CUP 468)

\(^{38}\) Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, vol. 1, 382.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., vol. 1, 180.
Early in my teaching career, two students independently came up to me to thank me for having set the essay on “Crop Rotation” from Either/Or as essential reading for that week. This, they said, was the first piece of philosophical writing they had been set in three years of university study that had made them laugh out loud.

Kierkegaard can be funny.¹ This assertion will strike some as surprising, others as a statement of the obvious. To anyone familiar with the witty, amusing prose of which he is capable, Kierkegaard’s popular reputation as the “melancholy Dane” has always seemed somewhat ironic. In Kierkegaard we read of the Paraguayan tribe so apathetic that visiting Jesuit missionaries found it necessary to ring a bell at midnight to remind the men to attend to their marital duties;² of a literary culture so willing to accept second-hand opinions that a book could be published, reviewed, and cause a sensation without having actually been written;³ and of authors in a small country commenting on each other’s books as akin to two fat princes who take their exercise by walking around one another.⁴ Perhaps my favorite is the story of the barefoot peasant who comes to town and makes so much money that he can afford to buy new shoes and stockings and still have enough left to get drunk. On the way home, inebriated, he lies down in the middle of the road and falls asleep. He is awoken by the driver of a passing carriage, who tells him that if he doesn’t move, the carriage will run over his legs. Looking down at the unfamiliar shoes and stockings, the peasant replies: “Go ahead, they are not my legs.”⁵

Yet Kierkegaard is not just a stylish, witty, and imaginative writer. Humor and irony play significant and often underappreciated roles in his thought. Kierkegaard makes some striking remarks about their relation to ethical and

¹ Indeed, one scholar claims him to be “the funniest philosopher of all time” and puts together a collection of evidence in support of his claim. See Oden (ed.), The Humor of Kierkegaard, 4.
² Kierkegaard, Either/Or, KW 4: 140.
⁵ The Sickness Unto Death, KW 19: 187.
religious life: in one journal entry, for instance, he claims that Christianity is “the most humorous view of life in world-history” (JP 2: 1681). His dissertation at the University of Copenhagen was on irony, with “continual reference” to Socrates, “the greatest master of irony” (JP 2: 1554), with whom he had a lifelong fascination, and he viewed J. G. Hamann as “the greatest humorist” (JP 2: 1554). But it is arguably in the Postscript that one finds Kierkegaard’s richest and most intriguing discussion of the ethical and religious significance of the comic.

The pseudonymous author of the Philosophical Crumbs and its Postscript, Johannes Climacus, several times describes himself as a “humorist.” In what follows, I shall discuss his account of the roles for irony and humor as confinia, or boundaries, between the aesthetic, ethical, and religious existence-spheres. Irony and humor also serve as “incognitos” for ethical and religious existence and – I shall suggest – can play significant roles in ethical and religious development. The Postscript also contains some of the most famous Kierkegaardian satire, ostensibly at the expense of Hegelianism. I shall also discuss this, linking it to the embryonic ethics of the comic in which Climacus offers normative claims as to under what circumstances a use of the comic is “legitimate.” Finally, with this in mind, we shall need to make some eschatological suggestions that take us beyond anything that Climacus himself explicitly says.

**THE COMIC AS “CONTRADICTION”**

As a preliminary to all this, however, we should note that Climacus treats the comic (and the tragic) as being rooted in “contradiction” (Modsigelse). He claims that “wherever there is life there is contradiction, and where there is contradiction the comic is present . . . but the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comic the painless contradiction” (CUP 431).

In a footnote,

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6 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates* (KW 2).

7 In this chapter, following what seems to be Johannes Climacus’ primary usage of the terms, I shall treat “the comic” (det Comiske) as the more generic term; under this heading, irony and humor are sub-categories.

8 I have chosen to concentrate here upon different aspects of this from those highlighted by Alastair Hannay in the introduction to his translation (CUP xiii–xviii).

9 However, given the confines of space and the focus of this volume, I shall stick predominantly to Climacus’ views. There is plenty more to be said about *The Concept of Irony* and the comments on irony and humor in Kierkegaard’s early journals. In some of these journal entries, humor seems to be a more radically Christian category than Climacus claims. On Kierkegaard’s dissertation, see for instance Frazier, *Rorty and Kierkegaard on Irony and Moral Commitment* and Söderquist, *The Isolated Self*.

10 This rather broad-brush distinction needs to be qualified in light of what Climacus says about humor, as a form of the comic, being essentially related to suffering. See pp. 151–161 below.
Humor and irony in the Postscript

Climacus cites Aristotle’s view, in the Poetics, that “the laughable may be defined as a mistake or a deformity not productive of pain or harm to others” (CUP 431n). Climacus commends Aristotle for wanting to exclude that which arouses sympathy from the laughable. However, he claims that Aristotle mistakes the laughable as “a something,” rather than recognizing it as “a relation, the misrelation of contradiction, but free from pain” (CUP 431n). As the examples Climacus goes on to offer in this footnote make clear, by “contradiction” he means not necessarily formal contradiction, but what theorists of humor have tended to call “incongruity.” In other words, everything from strictly logical contradictions such as non sequiturs to mere inappropriateness, such as what one commentator calls “the obtrusion into one context of what belongs in another”11 – for instance, the four-year-old who says to a child of three-and-a-half “Come now, my little lamb” (CUP 432n). Kierkegaard’s thought is full of apparent incongruities: human beings are a synthesis of such ostensible opposites as the infinite and the finite; the temporal and the eternal; freedom and necessity.12 One reason Kierkegaard seems to think of Christianity as the “most humorous view of life in world-history” is its insistence on what might be thought of as the ultimate incongruity: that God entered time to save humanity.13

IRONY, HUMOR, AND THE EXISTENCE-SPHERES:
BOUNDARIES AND INCOGNITOS

Against this background, the Postscript develops important existential roles for irony and humor as confinia or “boundaries”14 between the “aesthetic,” “ethical,” and “religious” existence-spheres. Climacus portrays a clear hierarchy of existence-spheres: from the aesthetic through the ethical to different forms of the religious – chiefly, Religiousness A (more of which below) and B (Christianity as Climacus understands it). Climacus sees the ironist as being on the boundary of the “aesthetic” and the “ethical” life. The ironist has seen the limitations of the aesthetic life – a life which involves an endless evasive toying with existential possibilities – but has not yet made the movement to the ethical, in which ethically serious choices and commitments for one’s own life are made. The ironist possesses a partial

13 See also JP 2: 1682. Notice, though, that this claim about Christianity itself has the whiff of non sequitur about it. Even if it were the case that all humor is in some way based on incongruity (a contentious, yet commonly held, view), it would not follow that all incongruity is ipso facto humorous.
14 Hannay translates confinium as “boundary”; the Hongs, in their earlier translation of the Postscript (KW 121), go with “border territory.”
insight into the stage “beyond,” and thus occupies a transitional position in between the two spheres of existence: aware of the limitations of the former, but unable or unwilling to make the move to the latter. In general, the same relation applies to the humorist and the religious sphere – but matters soon become more complex, as we shall see. With respect to the comic in general, Climacus makes the following prima facie bizarre claim: “Quite generally, the comic is present everywhere, and every existence can be identified and assigned at once to its specific sphere by knowing how it relates to the comic . . . the more proficiently a person exists, the more he will discover the comic” (CUP 387–388).

So existential “proficiency” correlates with discovering the comic. But how? The rest of this section will aim to answer this question.

First, consider the very idea that the existence-spheres are supposed to form a hierarchy. This will come as no surprise to readers of Kierkegaard: take Either/Or, for instance. In his review of Kierkegaard’s earlier work, the “Glance at a Contemporary Effort in Danish Literature,” Climacus describes the aesthete “A” as “an existence-possibility that cannot gain existence” (CUP 212). The aesthete’s endless reflection on various life-possibilities is used to evade decision. Consequently, his “life will be nothing but approach runs.” By contrast, the ethicist Judge William “has despaired . . . in the despair he has chosen himself” (CUP 212). He realizes that it is through time and “the possibility of gaining a history” that genuine individuality is formed, as opposed to the mere “world of possibility” that is the aesthete (CUP 213). Yet, according to Climacus, Judge William exaggerates the degree of our self-sufficiency insofar as he assumes that the ethical self has within itself the resources to conquer despair. “The religious” in a deeper sense than Judge William countenances it shows that our need for “divine assistance” (CUP 216) is more radical than the Judge allows.

The text discussed at most length in the Glance is Stages on Life’s Way, in some sense a sequel to Either/Or. One reason this matters for our purposes is that, according to Climacus, Stages “through humor as confinium” defines the religious stage (CUP 251). The central concern on which Climacus focuses is the relationship between humor and religious suffering. Whereas suffering in relation to living aesthetically is “accidental” (a matter of good

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15 Kierkegaard, Either/Or, trans. Hannay (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992), 384. I use Hannay’s translation of Dit Liv vil gaae op i letter Tilløb til at leve as it is much more memorable than the Hongs’ “Your life will amount to nothing but tentative efforts at living.”

16 For some reason, in Hannay’s translation of the Postscript, the last four words of the sentence are missing here.
or bad luck), in relation to religious existence it is “crucial” (CUP 241).
The key elements of the existence-spheres are glossed thus: “While aesthetic
existence is essentially enjoyment, and ethical existence essentially struggle
and victory, religious existence is essentially suffering – and not as transi-
tional but persisting” (CUP 241). Later, as we shall see, Climacus extends
this thought into the claim that suffering is the “essential” expression of
existential pathos in Religiousness A.

Climacus’ treatment of two of Stages’ voices, Frater Taciturnus and the
diarist Quidam, shows particularly clearly his view of the existence-spheres
as hierarchical. The difference lies precisely in their different attitudes to
religious suffering. For Quidam “with his good sense sees the comic and
also suffers the tragic, and from the unity of the comic and the tragic
chooses the tragic” (CUP 243). This echoes what Frater Taciturnus says
about Quidam in Stages, and he immediately adds that “this is the religious
and something that I, who see there both elements in equilibrium, cannot
understand.”17 In other words, Frater Taciturnus (who is “essentially a
humorist”) “defines his own existence as lower than Quidam’s” (CUP 243),
and “we have humor promoted as the terminus a quo in relation to the
Christian-religious” (CUP 244). That is, humor borders on but is not
identical to or as “high” as Christianity. In contrast to Hegelian “modern
scholarship,” for which “humor has become the highest after faith” (CUP
244), Climacus insists that humor “is prior to faith”: it cannot be a “devel-
opment of faith” because, understood “in the Christian way, there is no
going beyond faith” (CUP 244). But what exactly makes faith (Quidam)
higher than humor (Frater Taciturnus)? Quidam represents genuine reli-
gious suffering, whereas humor,

even when it wants to try its hand at the paradoxes . . . does not take on the
suffering side of the paradox or the ethical aspect of faith, but only the amusing
aspect. For it is a suffering . . . to have the eternal happiness of one’s soul related to
something18 over which the understanding despairs. (CUP 244)

In other words, it is quite possible to stand at a “comic distance” from, say,
the paradoxical claim that God became man in Jesus Christ and to view
this incongruity as humorous. But to do so is not to have “gone further”
than faith: on the contrary, it is a preliminary stage in which one has not
yet appropriated the significance of the incarnation into one’s life. And on
Climacus’ view, no perspective that excludes genuine religious suffering
can claim to be higher than that faith it has failed genuinely to appropriate.

17 Kierkegaard, Stages on Life’s Way, KW 11: 434.
18 That “something” is the “absolute paradox” of the god in time, as discussed in Philosophical Crumbs.
So, to summarize, the spheres stand in a hierarchical relation to each other, and Christianity, not humor, is at the apex.

As an important preliminary to what follows, note that much of what I discuss below comes from the very long chapter on “The Problem of the Crumbs” (CUP 303–493), in which Climacus outlines the pathos of Religiousness A. Although this chapter returns to the Crumbs’ central question – how can an eternal happiness be built on historical knowledge? (that is, of the incarnation of the god in time) – much of the account of religious pathos given there is in fact preliminary, an essential prerequisite, to anything specifically Christian, and addresses what Merold Westphal describes as “a phenomenology of religion as such.”

Climacus maps the hierarchy of spheres as follows: “There are three existence-spheres: the aesthetic, the ethical, the religious. To these there correspond two boundaries [confinia]: irony is the boundary between the aesthetic and the ethical; humor the boundary between the ethical and the religious” (CUP 421). As his discussion progresses, Climacus seems to equivocate as to whether humor stands at the boundary of the ethical and Religiousness A, or at the boundary between Religiousness A and B. The best way to approach this, I think, is the one taken by C. Stephen Evans, who views Climacan humor as “not a ‘slot’ in a lock step of existential positions, but an existential possibility within a ‘range’.”

This seems consistent with Climacus’ claim that the humorous, “precisely as the confiniium of the religious . . . is very comprehensive” (CUP 378).

But exactly what is a confiniium? It is a liminal zone: both a “border territory,” as the Hongs translate the term, and a point of transition. As Robert Widenmann puts it, a confiniium provides a connecting link “that makes an eventual qualitative transition possible.” We shall see at pp. 161–162 below that this dual role is important to irony and humor’s roles in ethical and religious transitions. For now, note that their liminal position means that the existential stances of the ironist and the humorist provide a certain incomplete insight into the spheres “beyond” them. How so?

In the case of irony and the ethical, Climacus says that it is possible that someone who appears to be a mere ironist might actually be an ethicist. The “immediate” or aesthetic person can instantly be recognized as such, because he has not made “the movement of infinity” (CUP 421).

19 Westphal, Becoming a Self, 150.
20 Evans, Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript, 201.
21 Widenmann, “Kierkegaard’s Concept of a Confine.”
22 There is reason to think that Climacus exaggerates the ease with which this recognition can be made. On this point see Frazier, Rorty and Kierkegaard on Irony and Moral Commitment, 154.
things are not so straightforward in the case of the ironist and the ethicist, both of whom have made this movement. Again, how so?

The irony arises from continually placing the particularities of the finite together with the infinite ethical requirement and letting the contradiction come about. Whoever can do this with skill . . . must have made the movement of infinity, and to that extent it is possible that he is an ethicist . . . [but] it is only by relating within himself to the absolute requirement that he is an ethicist. Such an ethicist uses irony as his incognito. In this sense Socrates was an ethicist but, please note, bordering on the religious. (CUP 421–422, my emphasis)

A number of commentators have seen a strongly Kantian strain in Climacus here, reading the idea of “relating within [oneself] to the absolute requirement” as meaning recognizing one’s absolute duty to duty itself. On such a view, the “infinite ethical requirement” is an absolute moral ideal that relativizes “the particularities of the finite”: that is, the moral norms and standards of any given actuality. The “contradiction” that comes about by placing these particularities alongside the “infinite ethical requirement” presumably therefore refers to those who relate absolutely to what ought to be related to relatively (at best). This is the irony that the ironist sees. But what then distinguishes him from a true ethicist? Quite simply, the fact that one might note this “contradiction” of absolutizing the relative and yet still not do anything about appropriating into one’s life the “infinite ethical requirement.” As Brad Frazier puts the point, “the perception of the ‘ethical infinite requirement’ is a necessary condition of ethical existence, but it is not a sufficient condition of it.” Recognizing a requirement is not the same as living it.

In contrast, irony as used by the true ethicist (as his incognito) is “the unity of ethical passion, which in inwardness infinitely stresses one’s own I in relation to the ethical requirement – and culture [Dannelse] which, outwardly, infinitely abstracts from the personal I as one finitude amongst all the other finitudes and particulars” (CUP 422, emphasis in original).

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23 See, e.g., Evans, Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript, 82 and Frazier, Rorty and Kierkegaard on Irony and Moral Commitment, 153.
24 Such as, for instance, the “abortive Hegelian ethics” that seeks “to make the state the highest ethical authority” (CUP 422n).
26 One needs to read this passage and its context carefully to see that what Climacus is describing here is not irony simpliciter, but irony as used by an ethicist as his incognito. The crucial clue is the distinction he makes between irony as he is describing it here and that as “Magister Kierkegaard” (i.e the author of The Concept of Irony) sees it. Climacus accuses the young Kierkegaard of bringing out “the one side only” of Socrates’ irony, insofar as the dissertation makes Socrates out to be “an ironist pure and simple,” as Hannay puts it (CUP 422n).
In other words, the true ethicist manages to make a unity of this tension between inner and outer – in contrast to “the mass of people,” who Climacus alleges are more concerned with how they appear outwardly than the state of their inwardness.\(^{27}\)

I read Climacus as saying that the ethicist’s use of irony has a double role. First, it protects an “inward” space in which he can continually appropriate what the ethical demands: “In order not to be distracted by the finite, by all the relativities in the world, the ethicist places the comic between himself and the world, and ensures thereby that he himself does not become comic through a naive misunderstanding of his ethical enthusiasm” (CUP 423). As opposed, that is, to the kind of moral hypocrite, busybody, or “enthusiast” who is forever drawing attention to his own virtue. Frazier supplements these comments in an interesting way. He suggests that an ethicist’s use of irony with respect to the “ground projects”\(^{28}\) around which his life is oriented enables him “to retain a complex stance of critical engagement and detachment while fulfilling these tasks. Such persons are not reluctant to critique and even lampoon their roles and tasks and their own performances in attempting to accomplish them.”\(^{29}\) Thus they may appear to be less than serious.

But there is also a second purpose, more implicit than explicit (perhaps appropriately, given the focus on incognito!), but hinted at by the demarcation of Socrates as such an ethicist. The danger with a focus on the inward alone is that the ethical might become radically private: and what then becomes of the idea, central to Either/Or as endorsed by Climacus in the Glance, that the ethical is the sphere of “openness” or revelation?\(^{30}\) Given that Climacus holds Socrates to be an exemplary indirect communicator, we might reasonably infer that even if the ethical cannot be communicated directly (a point the above-mentioned “enthusiast” misses), it can be communicated indirectly.\(^{31}\) Many will misjudge an ethicist travelling under an

\(^{27}\) Strictly speaking, given his recognition in this discussion of the use of irony and humor as incognitos for genuinely ethical or religious existence, it is not clear that Climacus has sufficient grounds for this dismissal of “the mass of people” (CUP 422). Perhaps such users of these incognitos are greater in number, and more varied in the form that their incognitos take, than he allows.

\(^{28}\) The phrase is from Bernard Williams. See “Persons, Character and Morality,” in his Moral Luck, 1–19.

\(^{29}\) Frazier, Rorty and Kierkegaard on Irony and Moral Commitment, 184.

\(^{30}\) Climacus quotes as follows: “the expression that brings out the difference between the ethical and the aesthetic” is: “It is every human being’s duty to become revealed [at blive aabenbar]” (CUP 212–213).

\(^{31}\) Climacus says that what makes the ethicist an ethicist, the way he “puts his life out there together, inwardly, with the ethical’s infinite requirement . . . is not seen directly” (CUP 423). But that is perfectly consistent with it being seen indirectly.
ironic incognito as someone for whom “nothing has importance” (CUP 423). But that does not rule out the possibility that sufficiently attuned observers might pick up on some vital clues and discern the truth of the matter (as Climacus effectively claims to have done himself with respect to Socrates). This would be one way in which something important about the ethical could be indirectly communicated. (For more on the mechanics of this, see pp. 161–162 below.) Thus I would resist as strong a conclusion as Westphal reaches when he claims that the difference between the ethicist and (mere) ironist is “radically inward, not publicly visible.”

A detailed comparison of these passages with The Concept of Irony is beyond the scope of this chapter, but the above may shed some light on why, in the final section of his dissertation, Kierkegaard describes irony as the “absolute beginning of personal life” and claims that “no genuinely human life is possible without irony” (KW 2: 326). The religious person who uses humor as his incognito is a similar case:

The humorous is constantly putting the God-idea together with other things and bringing about the contradiction – but he himself does not relate to God in religious passion (stricte sic dictus). He transforms himself into a playful yet profound right of way for all these transactions to pass through, but he does not relate to God. The religious person does the same, he puts the God-conception together with everything and sees the contradiction, but he relates in his innermost being to God . . . Religiousness with humor as its incognito is therefore: unity of absolute religious passion . . . and maturity of spirit, which recalls religiousness from all exteriority in inwardness, and again in this there is indeed the absolute religious passion. (CUP 423–424)

So the difference again lies in the personal appropriation (or otherwise) of the religious demand. The religious individual remains active in the world – indeed, “his incognito is just that” (CUP 424) – but he “absorbs his outward activity inwardly before God by admitting that he is incapable of anything, by cutting off any teleological relation to his activity in its outward direction, to all the proceeds derived from it in the finite world” (CUP 424). What does this mean? He is “incapable of anything” in the sense that he recognizes just how radical is his dependence upon God: that even if “the finite world” admires and rewards his achievements, without God, he is nothing.

But to understand further this relation between humor and religiousness, we need to consider an earlier part of Climacus’ account in this chapter.

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32 Westphal, Becoming a Self, 168.
33 Oden offers a nice comparison here: “Like Moses glimpsing the Promised Land from a distance, humor glimpses the arena of faith from afar but does not enter it.” The Humor of Kierkegaard, 24.
Climacus is discussing the pathos of Religiousness A under the headings of its “initial,” “essential,” and “decisive” expressions: resignation, suffering and guilt. The chief point about the first is the necessity to recognize that living religiously involves relating oneself absolutely to one’s absolute telos (one’s “eternal happiness” [Salighed]), and, therefore, only relatively to any other teloi. To put spending eternity with God on a wish-list that also includes winning the lottery and sleeping with Penélope Cruz would betray a somewhat less than fully developed form of religious “inwardness.” But it is in the lengthy discussion of suffering as the “essential” expression of the pathos of Religiousness A (CUP 361–439) that the above-discussed link between suffering and humor also emerges.

Climacus here distinguishes between “immediate” (aesthetic), ethical, and religious views of suffering. For the former, suffering is simply a matter of good or ill fortune (CUP 363), whereas for “inwardness (the ethical and ethico-religious individual)” suffering is understood as “essential” (CUP 364). What demarcates a fully developed religious pathos from a less developed, “merely” ethical pathos is that the former recognizes suffering not merely as “transient” or “transitional” but “persisting.” As we have seen, to be a humorist is to be a kind of ethical-religious individual. But as we have also seen, Climacus insists that humor is “lower” than the fully religious individual. The reason, he claims here, lies in the humorist’s proclivity for “revocation” or “taking back” (Tilbagekaldelse). The humorist would not try to explain “the riddle of existence” (CUP 378), or the meaning of life (CUP 377), even if you paid him – for the following reason. “If life is a riddle, then the author of the riddle will presumably explain it in the end” (CUP 378): that is, just as newspapers tend to set puzzles one day and provide the solution the next. So why bother working out the solution in advance? “Everyone gets just as far am Ende [in the end]” (CUP 377). This seems to betray a fairly relaxed attitude to ultimate questions, yet precisely because the humorist is an ethical-religiously concerned individual, it cannot be mere apathy. So what is going on? I think the answer is that the

34 In the sense of Religiousness A, rather than the still “higher” form of distinctively Christian religiousness that Climacus calls Religiousness B.

35 This is something Climacus does with his book as a whole: see the Appendix (CUP 520–526). The significance of this for how we read the text has sparked a sizeable scholarly debate, the details of which I do not have space for here. For a much discussed reading, see Conant “Must We Show What We Cannot Say?”; “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense”; and “Putting Two and Two Together.” For criticisms of Conant’s view, see for instance Lippitt, Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought, chapter 4; Rudd, “Believing All Things”; and Schönbaumsfeld, A Confusion of the Spheres, chapter 3.
humorist holds along with Socrates and Plato that the eternal is within our possession: yet whatever salvation is available, is available to all. Toward the end of the book, Climacus puts it like this:

every human being, viewed essentially, must be assumed to have a share in this blessedness and finally becomes blessed. The difference between the religious person and someone who does not transform his existence religiously becomes a humorous difference: that while the religious person devotes his whole life to becoming conscious of the relation to an eternal happiness and the other is not concerned about that...they both come equally far from an eternal viewpoint. (CUP 489)

Yet perhaps this is only how things look from the standpoint of a humorist. For earlier, Climacus has said that the humorist makes a turn that he describes as “treacherous,” by “revoking the suffering in the form of jest” (CUP 375). Here is the relevant passage in full:

Since an existing humorist is the closest approximation to one who is religious, he too has an essential conception of the suffering that he is in, in that he does not grasp existence as one thing and fortune and misfortune as something that happens to the one existing, but exists in a way in which suffering stands to existence. But it is then that the humorist makes the treacherous turn, revoking the suffering in the form of jest. He grasps suffering’s meaning in relation to existence but he does not grasp the meaning of suffering. He grasps that it belongs to existing but he does not grasp its meaning otherwise than that suffering does so belong. The first is the pain in the humorous, the second is the jest – and this is why one both weeps and laughs when he speaks. In the pain, he touches the secret of existence, but then he goes back home. (CUP 375)

How should we unpack this? The clue to understanding it is found a few pages earlier, where Climacus says that “from the religious viewpoint it is a matter of grasping the suffering and remaining in it in a way in which reflection is turned upon the suffering and not away from it” (CUP 372). This distinction must be understood in the context of Climacus’ lengthy aside on whether a religious person could enjoy a trip to the Deer Park, a popular form of amusement. It is important to Climacus that such a person can, since it is a “sickly state” (CUP 408) to be unable to hold together one’s God-relationship – our utterly dependent relation to God.

Evans offers this interpretation in “Kierkegaard’s View of Humor,” 182. I discuss these points in more detail in Lippitt, _Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought_, chapters 4 and 5.

How can Climacus the humorist occupy such a standpoint? Either he is aiming to identify unimaginatively with a higher perspective (see p. 162 below), or he really does occupy such a perspective and is throughout using humor as his “incognito.”
as the absolute *telos* of our life, without whom we are nothing – and
the finite, often apparently trivial activities of human life. But *prima facie*,
enjoyment of such things seems inconsistent with focusing one’s “reflection
upon” the suffering of life. To be constantly bringing to mind the essential
nature of my suffering and guilt – the “decisive” expression of the pathos
of Religiousness A (CUP 440) – sounds like something of a buzz-kill.

Climacus’ point, I think, is this. It is not that a religious person needs
costantly to be bringing suffering and guilt present to consciousness
while at the Deer Park. It is rather that these and other aspects of her
God-relationship play a more fundamental role in her mode of being
than is the case with the humorist. Press both to explain their enjoyment
after the fact, and they would be inclined to give different answers. The
humorist will see no reason to look outside that enjoyment to explain its
significance, whereas the religious person will characterize the enjoyment as
a gift from God for which she is grateful. As to the suffering, the humorist
reflects “away from” it in the sense that, while recognizing it as essential
to life, he has nothing to offer by way of explanation other than a shrug
of the shoulders and a (somewhat pained) smile. The claim that he “does
not relate to God in religious passion” means, in part, that he does not
understand that suffering in relation to the God-given task of which he
has fallen short (hence the reference to guilt). Whereas the religious person
does, and moreover she “reflects on” the suffering in the sense that, bringing
it together with the enjoyment of such simple pleasures as the Deer Park
affords, she sees a greater significance in the latter as a valuable divine gift
in the midst of suffering. In this way, the religious person’s world is far
more “God-saturated” than that of the humorist.

A key difference between irony and humor, then, is that the humorist
has a more profound understanding of important elements of life, a deeper
pathos, than the ironist: in particular, he understands that suffering is
essential to human life. But another key difference is that whereas irony is
proud, and tends to divide one person from another – Climacus describes
it in terms of self-assertion and “teasing” (CUP 462n) – humor is rather
more gentle, and is concerned with those tragicomic elements of the human
condition shared by all human beings: it has a *sympathy* that irony lacks
(CUP 489).38

38 Kierkegaard’s position in the early journals seems significantly different. Yet despite this, in an 1837
journal entry, in a conception of humor darker than that of Climacus, Kierkegaard brings out starkly
the greater depth of the humorist: “When an ironist laughs at the whimsicalities and witticisms of a
humorist, he is like the vulture tearing away at Prometheus’s liver, for the humorist’s whimsicalities
are not *capricious little darlings* but the *sons of pain*, and with every one of them goes a piece of
In summary, then, the overall idea seems to be that, as one ascends the existence-spheres, one develops an ever deeper and more profound sense of the comical in life. The religious person is described as she who has “discovered the comic on the largest scale,” yet (as noted) such a person “does not consider the comic the highest” (CUP 387). Such a person views life as a “jest,” in that she has seen that all our efforts are as nothing, because we are capable of nothing without God. But such jest is balanced with “earnestness” in that one’s ultimate dependence upon God does not detract from the need for existential striving. And as we have seen, in a remark echoing Frater Taciturnus on Quidam earlier, Climacus insists that there are limits to what may legitimately be laughed at: “the comic is excluded from religious suffering . . . the latter is inaccessible to the comic” (CUP 405).

To continue our summary: as well as being confina, irony and humor play a second important role as “incognitos” for ethical and religious individuals respectively. By acting as a kind of existential disguise, irony and humor allow such individuals to protect their “inwardness.” Yet they also act as means by which what it is to live ethically or religiously can be communicated indirectly to those on the boundaries of ethical or religious life. That is, irony and humor can function as forms of “indirect communication,” potentially drawing those with the relevant sensitivity toward an ethical or religious life.

THE COMIC, IMAGINATION, AND ETHICAL AND RELIGIOUS TRANSITIONS

But perhaps we have overlooked a really fundamental question. Why place two forms of the comic at the boundaries between existence-spheres at all? What fits the comic, of all things, for such roles? I suggest that irony and humor’s status as liminal zones is rendered less mysterious if we consider Jamie Ferreira’s work on the role of the imagination in ethical and religious transitions.39 On Ferreira’s account, such transitions involve actively imagining one’s current and “ideal” (higher) self in tension.40 The move

his innermost entrails, and it is the emaciated ironist who needs the humorist’s desperate depth. His laughter is often the grin of death. Just as a shriek wrung from pain could very well appear to be laughable to someone at great distance . . . so it goes with the laughter of a humorist, and it probably betrays a greater psychological insight to cry over such a thing . . . than to laugh over it” (JP 2: 1706).

39 Ferreira, Transforming Vision. For a more detailed account of the material in this section, see Lippitt, Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought, chapter 6.
40 Ferreira, Transforming Vision, 62–63.
to a higher sphere is less the result of an argument the steps of which can easily be retraced than it is a shift in one’s way of seeing the world: a new form of “seeing-as.” And Kierkegaard presents getting a joke as the paradigmatic case of the importance of subjectivity in seeing-as, when Frater Taciturnus ridicules the idea of laughing at a joke because someone has told you it is funny: you need to see it for yourself (KW 11: 438–439). Ferreira discusses two complementary factors: the kind of seeing-as brought about by a Gestalt shift (where one can slide between the two interpretations, as in Jastrow’s duck–rabbit) and the experience described by a number of writers on metaphor (which involves holding elements in tension). But these experiences parallel two different elements of the tradition that understands humor in terms of incongruity, where the focus is on either the resolution of incongruity or the incongruity itself. Consequently, we can see the relevance of Climacus’ discussion to debates beyond the particularities of how the terms “irony” and “humor” were being used by his immediate intellectual predecessors and contemporaries. The primary role of irony and humor as con finia pertains to relating oneself to a higher position that one has not – yet – embraced, but which one is attempting to identify oneself with in imagination. And as Robert C. Roberts has argued, repeated exposure to a sense of humor that speaks from a position “higher” than that which we currently occupy may be just what we need to provide the kind of “attractive redescription” that makes a “leap” to the higher perspective possible for us. In this way, prolonged exposure to humor of an appropriate sort might have an important role to play in the development of ethical and religious character, as part of the process of moral education as “habituation.” This could be another dimension of how a truly ethical or religious individual may be able to communicate indirectly through using irony or humor as her “incognito.”

41 In roughly Wittgenstein’s sense of “seeing aspects”: see Philosophical Investigations, Part II, § xi.
42 Ibid.
43 The latter we briefly discussed on p. 151 above; examples of the former would include humor which involves seeing a deeper congruity beneath an apparent incongruity, such as a caricature which, however grotesque, somehow accurately captures an aspect of a politician’s character.
44 For a study with these more historical concerns, though focusing primarily on Kierkegaard’s dissertation, see Söderquist, The Isolated Self.
45 Roberts, “Humor and the Virtues.” The phrase “attractive redescription” is after the fashion of Ferreira, following Richard Rorty: see especially Ferreira, Transforming Vision, 61.
46 As espoused by Aristotle. To make this claim convincingly would require more space than I have here, but for more on this matter, see my “Is a Sense of Humour a Virtue?”
A further aspect of our topic is Climacus’ own uses of the comic. The satirical remarks about system-building made at the expense of Hegelians by various Kierkegaardian voices, such as Anti-Climacus’ story of the thinker who has built himself a “huge building,” a magnificent system of thought, and yet himself actually lives “in a shed alongside it, or in a doghouse, or at best the janitor’s quarters” (KW 19: 43–44), are well known. But there is more to such remarks than meets the eye. The ostensibly anti-Hegelian satire of the Postscript, I claim, is best read as a kind of indirect communication likely to rebound on the reader, insofar as we tend to be susceptible to various “diseases of reflection.” What is the basis for this claim?

A key message of the Postscript is the tendency to relate “objectively” to issues that are properly engaged with “subjectively,” that is, in the first person. Such matters as the demands of ethical obligation and the call of Christ are not matters for disinterested scholarly reflection, but require a first-person response. Hence Climacus’ fun-poking at the following kind of evasive, responsibility-ducking self-forgetfulness:

It seems strange to me that people are always talking of speculative philosophy and speculation as though it were a man, or as though a man were speculative philosophy. It is speculative philosophy that does everything, doubts everything, etc. The speculative philosopher has become too objective on the other hand to talk about himself; he says not that he himself doubts everything, but that speculation does so . . . But should we not agree to be human beings! Socrates familiarly says that when we assume flute-playing we must also assume a flautist; similarly, if we assume speculative philosophy we must also assume a speculative philosopher, or several such. (CUP 45)

This self-forgetfulness strikes Climacus as ethically significant (hence my choice of the term “responsibility-ducking”). Yet it is also comical. In such a guise, modern speculation has:

not . . . a mistaken presupposition, but . . . a comic presupposition, due to its having forgotten in a sort of world-historical distraction what it is to be a human

47 But for an important study of the relationship between Kierkegaard and Hegelianism, see Stewart, Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered.

48 Gouwens, Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker, chapter 1. For more on the material of this section, see Lippitt, Humor and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought, chapters 2 and 7.
being. Not indeed, what it means to be a human being at all, for this is the sort of thing even a speculative philosopher might be induced to go into, but what it means that you and I and he, we, are human beings, each individually. (CUP 102)

What makes it appropriate to laugh at the speculative philosopher, rather than soberly pointing out his error? Part of the answer, I think, lies in the idea that this is not merely an error, but what Kierkegaard in The Point of View calls an “illusion” that shapes an entire worldview, and that “there is nothing that requires as gentle a treatment as the removal of an illusion” (KW 22: 43). Direct attacks make their victims irritated and defensive, with the result that the illusion is only strengthened.

But there are two things going on here. First, as Hub Zwart has argued,49 when a worldview becomes sufficiently entrenched – as, arguably, “speculative philosophy” had become in Kierkegaard’s intellectual context – the option of straightforward critical argument against it becomes all but unavailable. Here satire becomes a more useful weapon. But wait. Am I claiming that if you can’t find an argument against a view, you should resort to satire and ridicule? That seems philosophically disreputable.50 No, that is not my claim. For here the second feature becomes important. For all that the ostensible target of Climacus’ satire appears to be Hegelianism, I think it is vital to see that the “diseases of reflection” in which we avoid first-person choice and decision through intellectual procrastination and evasion are far more widespread than just “speculative philosophy.” To take one of the examples Climacus discusses at length, isn’t it incredibly easy to turn death into an abstract question rather than face up seriously to my own mortality? Different aspects of this widespread tendency have been treated by such figures as Heidegger in Being and Time and Tolstoy in “The Death of Ivan Ilyich.”51 The wider point, then, is that the kind of illusions Climacus is concerned with are those to which each of us is susceptible (though perhaps especially readers of such books as the Postscript). In this sense, Climacus’ satire involves more than just encouraging an “us” to poke fun at a Hegelian “them.” And note how this claim is consistent with what we observed on page 160 above, about the inherent

49 Zwart, Ethical Consensus and the Truth of Laughter.
50 That this is philosophically disreputable would doubtless be a majority view, but it is worth noting that there are significant and interesting exceptions, perhaps most especially the ancient Cynics. See ibid., 193–201 and Lippitt, Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought, 122–123.
51 See also Kierkegaard’s treatment of this aspect of death in the discourse “At a Graveside.” For example, the idea that “To think of oneself as dead is earnestness; to be a witness to the death of another is mood.” Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions, KW 10: 75.
“sympathy” and all-inclusiveness of humor as Climacus understands the term.

Readers may still feel a sense of unease at the idea of humor or satire being used in this way: perhaps especially those familiar with the notorious attack launched upon Kierkegaard by the scurrilous periodical the Corsair.\(^{52}\) For this reason amongst others, then, it is worth turning our attention briefly to Climacus’ account of when the comic is “legitimate.” Climacus describes “power in the comic” as being “the police badge, the badge of authority which today every agent must bear who really is an agent” (CUP 236). But just as a regular policeman must not abuse his authority, so the comic must be wielded with care: “This comedy is essentially humor. If the comedy is cold and comfortless, it is a sign that no new immediacy is sprouting, and then there is no harvest, only the empty passion of a barren wind raging over the naked fields” (CUP 236). When, then, is a use of this police badge appropriate, and when should its misuse be reported to the police complaints authority?

Note that the second of the four theses attributed to Lessing\(^{53}\) contains the claim that “the existing subjective thinker...has just as much humor as essentially he has pathos” (CUP 68). And Climacus, like Quidam in Stages, insists that the comic and pathos need to be in balance: pathos without the comic is “illusion,” the comic without pathos is “immaturity” (CUP 74). Climacus cites as an example of Socratic irony the comment that it is remarkable that a sea-captain should collect his passengers’ fares regardless of whether he has done them a service or not: after all, it might have been better for them to have perished at sea (CUP 71). This is neither merely a “jest” nor merely in “earnest”: both may be conveyed simultaneously by the same remark. And Climacus’ view, as we noted on p. 161, is that the true comic includes a delicate balance of “jest” and “earnestness.” We need to bear this in mind when we consider his own satire. He is extremely critical of what he calls “immature” humor, such as parodying the quest for the meaning of life by focusing on the trivial (CUP 244), or ultimately nihilistic laughter that has nothing to offer in the place of that at which it laughs.\(^{54}\) Relatedly, the criticism that Frater

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53 See CUP 61–106.
54 Unfortunately, space does not permit a discussion of The Concept of Irony’s contrast between the Hegel-inspired view of irony as “infinite absolute negativity” and “mastered” irony. For more on this, see Lippitt, Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought, chapter 8. For more detailed accounts, see also Frazier, Rorty and Kierkegaard on Irony and Moral Commitment, chapters 4 and 5; and Söderquist, The Isolated Self.
Taciturnus makes of the Corsair might spark some recognition in many a contemporary satirist, when he describes a certain kind of satirist’s wish “that there may always be more and more people to vilify, more and more active assistants of irascibility and spite on the paper” (KW 11: 48–49). (We are some way, here, from Dryden’s view that the appropriate end of satire is the amendment of vices.) So what is the ethically legitimate alternative?

Lee Barrett has argued that Kierkegaard has four criteria here. First, within the comic contradiction or incongruity, something momentous must be in tension with something comparatively trivial. Second, there must be a “polemical” element – satire, to be worth its salt, must always speak from a specific position – and this polemic must be directed against something finite being taken more seriously than it really deserves. Third, the comic contradiction must not be painful, and fourth, the comic interpretation must have in mind “the way out” (CUP 433). This last element is perhaps the most important. With respect to the third, as we have noted, Climacus distinguishes the tragic from the comic as the “suffering” and “painless” contradictions respectively. But we cannot take this terminology at face value, given what we also noted earlier about the essentiality of suffering to humor, and of the “true comic” combining the comic and pathos; the comic and the tragic. Climacus acknowledges that “satire . . . entails pain, but this pain is teleologically dialectical and directed towards healing” (CUP 432). Talk of the “way out” therefore seems more promising than talk of painlessness alone. But how should this be understood?

Barrett notes that, in his journal, Kierkegaard criticises the playwright Holberg for “presenting characters who were caught up in the grip of genuine suffering . . . In a genuinely comic situation, the individual exemplifying the contradiction must not experience the contradiction as painful; the person must be oblivious to the import of the contradiction. The comic character preferably should even be happy in his delusion.” But if, as we noted on p. 164, the comic character is we ourselves, to the extent that we fall into delusions, perhaps our very ability to be brought around by Climacus to seeing such delusions is all the “way out” we need. This is consistent with the ability a humorist such as Climacus has, as we noted, to be relatively relaxed, given his belief that the eternal is within our possession, that “everyone gets just as far in the end” (see CUP 377).

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However, given what we have also noted about how Climacus acknowledges that humor is not the “highest,” perhaps we should look for a deeper meaning of the “way out.” An additional reason to do so is a good point made by George Pattison.\textsuperscript{57} Pattison argues that while formulating criteria for the legitimacy of the comic is all very well, the tricky part is in their actual application. It is possible to imagine circumstances in which Kierkegaard’s criteria for comic legitimacy are met, but where there is still unease about whether the comedy is legitimate. Pattison gives as an example the furiously divided critical disagreement over the Roberto Benigni film \textit{Life is Beautiful}, a comedy set in a concentration camp:

Many (including some survivors of the camps) saw the attempt to get a laugh out of situations in which millions died in conditions of utter horrendousness as virtually blasphemous. Others (also including some survivors of the camps) saw it as a sublime affirmation of human goodness in the face of all the dehumanizing forces epitomized by the “Final Solution.” Yet often, both sets of critics may have shared similar concerns about the legitimacy of the comic in general terms. The problem was the actual judgment on this particular work.\textsuperscript{58}

For Christianity, the “way out” would ultimately have to be eschatological. Roberts suggests that seeing the humor in a situation of someone’s being caught out in telling a lie, for instance – if that humor is to be something other than mere Schadenfreude – requires “an auxiliary belief which disemembursens you of total responsibility for correcting the evil.”\textsuperscript{59} That belief, for the Christian, is indeed eschatological: faith in a God who “will prevail in the end,”\textsuperscript{60} such that the essential suffering of life – including, presumably, the presence of moral evil within it – need not be experienced as utterly overwhelming. What would matter for Kierkegaard, though, is that this ultimate “way out” not be confused with just putting one’s feet up (as the cigar-smoking Climacus, for all his insistence on the importance of recognizing the suffering in life, is sometimes wont to do).\textsuperscript{61}

In a journal entry, Kierkegaard says that in comparison to the true earnestness of the atonement, the strenuous striving required in the imitation of Christ should appear as but a jest. However, he adds: “It is detestable... for a man to want to use grace, ‘since all is grace,’ to avoid all striving” (JP 2: 1909). So the “way out” should in no way be interpreted as denying either the reality of suffering or the necessity of ethical-religious

\textsuperscript{57} Pattison, review of Lippitt, \textit{Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought}.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 21–22.\textsuperscript{19} Roberts, “Smiling with God,” 172.\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} See especially CUP 155-158.
striving in human life. The key point is that we should not be overwhelmed by either: “The seriousness and the jest are mutually supportive. For the humor and its attendant joy cannot be deep without the seriousness; and without the ‘distance’ afforded by the atonement the seriousness is ‘transformed into agonizing anxiety in which a man is burned up, so to speak, and less than ever begins to strive.”

One option here – though it would go beyond anything Climacus explicitly says – would be to connect the comic with hope, as does Harvey Cox: “The comic sensibility can laugh at those who ferment wars and perpetuate hunger, at the same time as it struggles to dethrone them. It foresees their downfall even when their power seems secure. The comic . . . because it ignites hope, leads to more . . . participation in the struggle for a just world.” These thoughts might also tempt us in the direction of wondering whether Climacus is, despite his protestations to the contrary, really a Christian after all, merely using humor as his incognito.

Finally, let us briefly consider a further line of thought in relation to the above: the idea of being laughed at as characteristic of the Christian life. The Christian worldview so radically upsets the assumptions of “worldly wisdom” that the Christian can expect a kind of “martyrdom of laughter” (JP 6: 6348). In an 1849 note, Kierkegaard wonders how Christ would be received were he to return at that time: “The world has changed; it is now immersed in ‘understanding.’ Therefore Christ would be ridiculed and treated as a mad man, but a mad man at whom one laughs.” Further, a person who strictly took on board and applied the Golden Rule would meet with the following reaction: “his contemporaries would at the very least burst into laughter . . . It is absolutely impossible, absolutely, for a Christian not to make himself laughable” (JP 1: 492). Christianity appears as foolishness – and not only to the Greeks. On Climacus’ account, such laughter may not be legitimate – but the Christian should presumably both expect it and not resent it.

63 Cox, The Feast of Fools, 153.
64 On this point, see Burgess, “Kierkegaard’s Climacus on Christianity and Laughter,” 31–34.
66 This is in stark contrast to the advice of the fourth-century bishop St. John Chrysostom: “When . . . thou seest persons laughing, reflect that those teeth, that grin now, will one day have to sustain that most dreadful wailing and gnashing, and that they will remember this same laugh on That Day whilst they are grinding and gnashing! Then thou shalt remember this laugh!” Concerning the Statutes, Homily, xx, cited in Gilhus, Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins, 63.
SUMMARY

In this chapter, I have tried to show some of the key aspects of the comic, irony, and humor in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. We have noted Climacus’ view of the comic as being rooted in “contradiction” or incongruity; observed the roles for irony and humor as both *confinia* and incognitos amongst the existence-spheres; and briefly suggested a possible rationale for this in terms of the comic’s potential at points of existential transition. We also considered how Climacus’ ostensibly anti-Hegelian satire might rebound on his readers, and aspects of the “way out” central to the “legitimacy” of the comic. What we have not done is explore Kierkegaard’s own uses of humor and irony in any detail. For that, the reader should take a bath in the Kierkegaardian “sea of irony” for herself, “not in order to stay there . . . but in order to come out healthy, happy, and buoyant and to dress again” (KW 2: 327). Just make sure you remember what you were wearing, so that you will recognize your own legs.
Chapter 9

Climacus on the task of becoming a Christian

Clare Carlisle

“the simplest task is the most difficult . . .”

Kierkegaard is a thinker of movement, of becoming. The loquacious writer of Concluding Unscientific Postscript never digresses from the subject labeled “the task of becoming a Christian” – a deceptively simple phrase that stands for a whole philosophy of movement,1 drawing on and distilling elements from Kierkegaard’s earlier pseudonymous texts. The Postscript’s supposed author Johannes Climacus2 praises the constancy of “repetition’s ever-deepening absorption in the one thought,” and the philosophical preoccupation of Kierkegaard’s whole authorship is the thought – or, rather, the question – of becoming. To this question belong the concepts of task, decision, transition, leap, kinēsis, striving, and repetition that are employed in Climacus’ elucidation of how Christianity is appropriated and practiced. The proliferation of these figures of movement throughout the Postscript reflects the pseudonym’s insistence that “existence without motion is unthinkable” (CUP 258); that the human being “is constantly coming to be” (CUP 77). The purpose of this chapter is to draw the reader’s attention to the various configurations of the question of becoming within the text, and to illuminate their provenance and philosophical significance. Most particularly, this analysis of the theme of movement will help us to make sense of the dialectic of immanence and transcendence which runs through the Postscript.

1 See, e.g., The Point of View, KW 22: 55.

2 In this chapter I attempt to follow a principle of attributing to the pseudonym, Johannes Climacus, ideas and quotations contained in the Postscript, while attributing to Kierkegaard views expressed throughout his authorship. Although it is important to note Climacus’ questionable status as a pseudonym, ironist, and humorist, for the purposes of the present discussion I will refrain from casting doubt on the sincerity of the analysis of becoming and movement in the Postscript, not least because such questions are best raised once we have clarified this analysis – that is, once we know more precisely what Climacus may or may not be sincere, humorous, and ironic about. My own view is that the discussion of movement develops quite consistently over the course of the pseudonymous authorship, and that it therefore can legitimately be attributed to Kierkegaard.
Climacus’ discussion of the task of becoming a Christian focuses on “how” rather than “what”: on the existential form rather than the intellectual content of Christian belief. He touches hardly at all on the doctrine of the incarnation, and even less on the existence and nature of God. The immortality of the soul, on the other hand, is certainly an important theme, but the pseudonym’s approach to it emphasizes the objective uncertainty of eternal life, and the existing individual’s subjective, temporal relation – of anticipation and expectancy – to her future after death. In the Postscript, then, the meaning of “Christianity” is inseparable from the meaning of “task” and “becoming,” and indeed these latter terms receive more attention than the former.

To discuss the task of becoming a Christian is to posit, and to explore, a difference between the Christian identity already assumed by the reader – one that is given to a nineteenth-century Danish Lutheran – and a more questionable Christian identity that is not yet given, and perhaps will never be. The former is worldly, determinate, or “finite” as Climacus puts it; the latter is indeterminate, “infinite.” The difference between them is nothing “objective,” nothing to do with religious doctrine, belief, or practice. It is human existence itself, and the question of what it means to exist, that lies between Christianity in the finite sense, and the infinite task of becoming a Christian – and it is this question that is at stake in the Postscript. Climacus regards motion as the key existential “category” because existence is itself a movement inter-esse: a being-between that constitutes the interest, or the significance, of human life (see, e.g., CUP 263).

It seems that for Climacus the philosophical problem of existence is inseparable from the philosophical question of motion. He echoes previous Kierkegaardian pseudonyms in highlighting parallels between his own existential philosophy of becoming, and the ancient Greek debates surrounding the possibility of motion and change (see CUP 258). Just as the pre-Socratics struggled to grasp movement intellectually, and in this struggle encountered paradoxes that seemed to put the reality of motion into question, so Climacus finds that “existence, like motion, is a very difficult matter to deal with. If I think it, I do away with it, and then do not think it. It might seem... that there is something that cannot be thought, namely, existing” (CUP 258). However, this apparent incommensurability between becoming and thinking is complicated by the fact that both seem to belong together within human existence itself, for the “thinker is one who exists” (CUP 294). The task of Christianity is, to be sure, a task for the existing individual, but it brings with it a distinctive philosophical task, to be undertaken by a subjective thinker – one who embraces the fact that her own
existence is the basis of her thinking and questioning; one who is herself in a process of becoming, and through this affected by suffering, *pathos*.


Climacus’ analysis of the task of becoming a Christian is not merely an academic exercise. It is an urgent call to a task that has to be understood in the context of Kierkegaard’s response to a perceived spiritual crisis within nineteenth-century Christendom. Four decades before Nietzsche was to proclaim, “too early,” the death of God— the decline of traditional religious belief and of all that rested upon it – Kierkegaard detected signs of such decline in Denmark: a self-deceiving religious complacency among his educated, middle-class contemporaries, and a fashion for Hegelian ideas in philosophy, theology, and aesthetics. He regarded these two signs – one indicating a broad cultural tendency, the other a narrower intellectual development – as essentially connected, and for this reason they often appear to be interchangeable in his analysis of “the present age.”

As Jon Stewart’s important work on Kierkegaard’s relations to Hegel has shown, the most direct targets of the pseudonymous polemics were Danish Hegelians such as J. L. Heiberg and Hans Martensen, rather than their German mentor. Far from reducing Kierkegaard’s critique of speculative thought to a peevish parochialism (as Stewart sometimes suggests), this insight indicates his ability to penetrate current philosophical and theological debates and to disclose the essential historical issue underlying them: the spiritual health of the human being in modernity. For Kierkegaard, Hegelian philosophy – whether first-hand or second-hand, German or Danish – was a symptom of a crisis of values. As Climacus reflects: “Before an outbreak of cholera a kind of fly comes along that is not otherwise seen. May not the appearance of these incredible pure thinkers be a sign of a disaster in store for humankind, such as, for example, the loss of the ethical and the religious?” (CUP 257). Although the pseudonym implies here that this “loss” is a future possibility, he clearly believes it is already happening: “our now-living sullen generation ... has the passion neither of thought nor of religiousness” (CUP 246). In fact, Kierkegaard’s diagnosis of his time in part echoes that of Heiberg, whose 1833 essay *On the Significance of Philosophy for the Present Age* identifies a crisis of religion and culture and a decline into nihilistic relativism.4 However, Heiberg believed

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3 Cf. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.
that Hegel’s thought represented the solution to this crisis, not one of its symptoms. Kierkegaard’s view, on the other hand, is that spiritual health cannot be improved by anything finite – not even by moral improvement or religious reform, and certainly not by a new philosophy. The essential task is not to become more virtuous or pious or clever, but to open and preserve the difference between the finite and the infinite, the determinate and the questionable.

Two aspects of Hegelianism that Kierkegaard regards as signs of spiritual degeneration are its all-consuming rationalism, and the idea of historical progress. Rejecting Kant’s delimitation of knowledge, and the dualism this entails, Hegel and his followers argued that everything is essentially knowable, and actually becoming known more fully through time; that rational comprehension is the highest task of philosophy. Kierkegaard attacks this principle repeatedly in his pseudonymous texts, and in the Postscript Climacus deplores its application to Christianity:

Now we have almost reached the parody that to become a Christian is nothing, while to understand Christianity is a very difficult and laborious task. Everything is thereby reversed: Christianity is made into a kind of philosophical theory, the difficulty then being quite properly that of understanding it. But Christianity relates essentially to existence, and what is difficult is to become a Christian. (CUP 311–312)

According to the progressivist historicism inspired by Hegel, the nineteenth century was interpreted as fulfilling the work of spirit (Geist). Because Kierkegaard interprets his century in terms of decline, rather than progress, he claims that the Hegelian view is not only arrogant but delusory. (Indeed, his insistence that every human being is constituted by her relation to God, which is essentially indeterminate, implies that all arrogance is delusory.) Climacus suggests that the idea of progress conceals from individuals the nature of their spiritual tasks:

Development of spirit is self-activity; in death the spiritually developed individual takes his spiritual development with him. If a succeeding individual is to reach the same level, it must be through his own self-activity. He must therefore not skip over anything. Now, of course it is handier and easier and wohlfteilere [cheaper] to shout about being born in the speculative nineteenth century... The more the generation-idea has come to dominate even the common conception, the more terrible is the transition – instead of being part of the race and saying “we,” “the age,” “the nineteenth century” – to becoming an individual existing human being. (CUP 290, 297)
Human existence, Kierkegaard insists, is essentially singular, and this is why Climacus can assert that “in our time one does not exist at all, and so it is quite natural that it is all right for everyone to be a Christian as a matter of course” (CUP 245). The pseudonym suggests that the delusion of historical progress makes the task of becoming a Christian more difficult, precisely because it makes the task appear easy – so easy that it can be thought to have already been accomplished without effort: “if it was once terribly difficult to become a Christian, soon it surely will be impossible because it all becomes trivial” (CUP 245); “Truly, if at one time it was difficult to become a Christian, now I think it becomes more and more difficult year by year, because to become one is now so easy” (CUP 181).

This ironic diagnosis of the situation is mirrored in an equally ironic approach to correcting it. If Climacus seeks to assist his reader in her spiritual task, his strategy involves making Christianity appear to be more difficult than it really is. He recalls how he conceived this plan while chain-smoking cigars in the Frederiksberg Gardens one Sunday afternoon:

suddenly this thought flashed through my mind: You must do something, but since with your limited abilities it will be impossible to make anything easier than it has become, you must... make something more difficult... When all join together in making everything easier in every way, there remains only one possible danger, namely, that the ease becomes so great that it becomes altogether too easy... Out of love for humankind... I conceived that it was my task everywhere to create difficulties. (CUP 156–157; see also 320)

Climacus indicates that this decisive realization occurred about “four years” ago, and indeed his account of it offers an explicit characterization of the strategy employed implicitly by previous Kierkegaardian pseudonyms. In Fear and Trembling, for example, Johannes de Silentio presents an interpretation of the story of Abraham that so accentuates the intellectual, moral, and existential difficulties of understanding and admiring the Hebrew “father of faith” that the reader is pushed to concede her own inability to demonstrate the “absolute duty to God” that genuine faith requires. In this earlier text, as in the Postscript, the problematization of religious faith is undertaken in response to a perceived decline in the value of faith, which is linked to both intellectualism and the idea of historical progression (see KW 6: 5–8, 121–123).

Throughout the Postscript, then, Climacus repeats the claim that “becoming a Christian is really the hardest of all tasks” (CUP 316). To some extent this difficulty is a function of the human condition, and as such must be considered in terms of the philosophical issues of finitude
and temporality, and the theological issue of sin, which shape Kierkegaard's anthropology. But there is also a historical element to Climacus' argument: as more time elapses since Jesus' life and death, the nature of the decision to become a Christian undergoes a shift (see KW 7: 71, 93–9). “When Christianity came into the world, one was not Christian and the difficulty was to become that; the difficulty of becoming it now is of having, by one's own self-activity, to transform an initial being-a-Christian into a possibility in order truly to become Christian” (CUP 306), explains the pseudonym. His argument here is that, in order to make a decision, that which is to be decided upon must be encountered in the form of a possibility; if the decision has been taken already then the possibility has been made actual, and thus annulled qua mere possibility. The situation of nineteenth-century Christians, however, is characterized by “the semblance of a decision,” and thus the apparent annulment of the possibility: “if it looks as though it were decided, then if I am already a Christian (i.e., am baptized, which is after all only a possibility), then there is nothing to help me to become properly aware of it” (CUP 307). The conclusion of this analysis is that “it is easier to become a Christian if I am not a Christian than to become a Christian when I am one” (CUP 307, emphasis in original). Climacus’ own claim not to be a Christian (see CUP 391) can be understood, in the light of this, as an essential moment of the specifically nineteenth-century form of the task of Christianity. In refusing to identify himself as a Christian, the pseudonym keeps open the possibility of becoming one. In this way, Kierkegaard presents Climacus as an exemplar to help reorient his reader to her own spiritual tasks.

**The Leap: Decision, Transition, and 'Room to Move'**

If the task of becoming a Christian involves decision, then the nature of this decision needs to be clarified philosophically. Climacus states near the beginning of the Postscript that “there is no direct and immediate transition to Christianity” (CUP 43), and much of the discussion that follows can be taken as expanding on this claim. Chapter 2 of Part Two, Section One, entitled “Possible and actual theses by Lessing,” at once directs attention to the concepts of possibility and actuality – drawn from Aristotle’s physics and metaphysics, and central to the Greek philosopher’s account of movement (kinēsis) – and rehearses the analysis of historical becoming presented by Climacus in his earlier text, *Philosophical Crumbs.*

The pseudonym attributes to Lessing the view that “accidental historical truths could never become evidence of eternal truths of reason; and also
that the transition whereby one will build an eternal truth on a historical account is a leap” (CUP 79). In other words, it is “the direct transition from dependable history to an eternal decision” (CUP 81) that Lessing supposedly disputes. The “eternal truth” at stake here is individual immortality, secured by the resurrection of Christ; but in relation to the existing person this “truth” becomes an “eternal decision” – a decision to appropriate it as true – that is anything but secure. The argument offered in support of this view of the transition from historical truth to eternal decision had already been presented in Philosophical Crumbs, where Climacus suggests that just as the existing individual’s temporal life – her becoming – should be understood as the choice or actualization of a possibility, so history, as becoming-that-has-been, should be conceptualized in essentially the same way. In opposition to the Hegelian view that historical processes have a kind of necessity, an inner logic that unfolds concretely through time, Kierkegaard insists (like Heidegger after him\(^5\)) that history has to be understood on the basis of the historicality, or becoming, of the individual’s existence: in terms of possibility, and thus as contingent. “Everything that becomes historical is contingent, for it is precisely through coming into being, becoming historical, that it has its moment of contingency, for contingency is precisely the one factor in all becoming” (CUP 83), writes Climacus in the Postscript.\(^6\)

Even though the inner being of the existing individual shares in common with historical events these elements of possibility and contingency, and in fact precisely for this reason, there is an “incommensurability” between any historical truth and the decision regarding an eternal happiness. This qualitative difference means that the transition from the former to the latter must take the form of a “leap,” which Climacus designates as “the category of decision” (CUP 84) or as “the category of transition” (CUP 247). He follows Lessing in conceiving the leap in terms borrowed from Aristotle: “the transition in which something historical and the relation to it become decisive for an eternal happiness is a μεταβάσις εἰς ἄλλο γένος [metabasis eis allo genos]. Lessing even says, ‘if this is not what it is, then I do not understand what Aristotle has meant by it,’ a leap both for the contemporary and for the one who comes later” (CUP 83). The leap is a particular kind of movement that is characterized by being

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\(^5\) See Heidegger, Being and Time, 358–362 (§ 76).

\(^6\) Here Climacus echoes his discussion of history in Philosophical Crumbs, KW 7: 75–88; see also Either/Or, KW 4: 174. Jon Stewart offers an excellent discussion of Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegelian accounts of history, identifying Martensen as the main target; see Stewart, Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered, 359–368.
Climacus on the task of becoming a Christian

“a break with immanence” (CUP 295). This is not necessarily a claim about supernatural or metaphysical transcendence, and indeed the leap, as we shall see, is essentially connected to worldly life. Rather, the break with immanence signifies the difference, opening, or *inter-esse* within existence that constitutes the Christian’s task of becoming.

Like other Kierkegaardian pseudonyms, Climacus emphasizes the uncertainty and insecurity of Christian faith, which, he claims, is a function of “the continual becoming” (CUP 73) that grounds every existential perspective. He makes a distinction between the sphere of thinking, characterized by “positivity,” and the sphere of existence, characterized by “negativity.” To positivity belong “sense certainty, historical knowledge, speculative result”; however, Climacus inverts the traditional philosophical link between knowledge – in whichever of these forms – and truth, claiming on the contrary that “this positive element is precisely untruth” (CUP 68):

Sense certainty is . . . deceptive; historical knowledge is an illusion . . . the speculative result is a phantom . . . Just because the negative element is present in life and present everywhere (for life, existence, is constantly a coming to be), the only way of being saved from it is by being constantly aware of it. Being protected from it positively is precisely what it means to be deceived. (CUP 68–69)

For Kierkegaard, the delusory security gained from ‘knowledge’ is not only epistemological, but existential, and is thus manifested in the self-deceiving complacency that he diagnoses as the sickness of the modern age. Likewise, of course, the absolute uncertainty of faith is a feature not merely of the human intellect, but of the human condition. In the passage above, as elsewhere, he suggests that the only way to deal with this uncertainty is to maintain awareness of it, to ensure that it always accompanies faith, and conversely that faith continually strives with it. This is an indispensable aspect of the task of becoming a Christian, and of the difficulty and risk involved in such a task.

Even more than this, though, Climacus in the Postscript regards uncertainty not merely as unavoidable, but as a necessary condition of faith. If faith is a movement, he argues, then there has to be *room to move* – and this space is cleared and held open by uncertainty:

if I am truly to venture, and truly to strive for the highest good, there must be uncertainty and I must, if I may put it this way, have room to move. But the largest space I can move in, where there is room enough for the most intense gesture of the passion of the infinite, is uncertainty of knowledge regarding an eternal happiness, or the fact that the choice is in a finite sense madness; there, now there is room, now you can venture! And that is why eternal happiness as the
absolute good has the remarkable trait that it can be defined solely by the mode of acquisition . . . Concerning the eternal happiness nothing can be said except that it is the good which is to be attained by risking everything. (CUP 357–358, emphasis in original)

On Kierkegaard’s view, then, existence is structured in such a way as to facilitate movement: it has within itself an essential difference or deficiency, a “negative element” that affords space in which to move. It seems that in the passage above – and there are others like it in this respect – the content of Christian doctrine is made subservient to this interpretation of human existence. What is important is the gap between being a Christian in the determinate, finite sense – by assuming the Christian identity that is given, prescribed, by social custom and convention – and becoming a Christian with “the passion of the infinite,” for without this gap there is no “room to move,” and therefore no movement. The religious complacency that expresses itself in the presumption to be a Christian, or in the supposition to possess knowledge of the truth of Christianity, or in both of these, conceals this negativity, allows no room for movement – for the leap – and thus stifles individuals’ spiritual possibilities.

This concern about the possibility of movement is at the heart of Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegelian philosophy.7 Climacus acknowledges that “becoming” is a significant theme in Hegel’s thought, but he makes this a focus of his anti-Hegel polemic.8 Here he echoes earlier pseudonyms. In Repetition, Constantin Constantius raises the question of the possibility of repetition, a concept of movement that he proposes as a replacement for Hegelian mediation (KW 6: 148–149). In a lengthy letter written in response to Heiberg’s discussion of this book, Constantin complains that “in our days they [i.e. speculative philosophers] have even gone so far as to want to introduce motion into logic. There they have called repetition ‘mediation’. Motion, however, is a concept which logic cannot endure. Hence mediation must be understood in relation to immanence.”9 Similar claims are made in Fear and Trembling and The Concept of Anxiety,10 and at several points in the Postscript Climacus returns to this issue, emphasizing the immanence of Hegelian movement (see CUP 182) and arguing that mediation is

7 See Pattison, The Philosophy of Kierkegaard, especially 15–22, for a philosophical discussion of Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel in the Postscript.
8 See CUP 68. For Hegel’s discussion of becoming in logic, see Hegel’s Science of Logic, 105–107. This translation is based on the 1833 second edition of Hegel’s Wissenschaft der Logik, which Kierkegaard owned.
10 See, respectively, Fear and Trembling (KW 6: 421n) and The Concept of Anxiety (KW 8: 12–13, 30n). For an illuminating discussion of the issue of movement in logic in the latter text, see Stewart, Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered, 396–411.
not a genuine movement but a “mirage” (CUP 166), a “feigned decision” (CUP 190). His claim here is that in the sphere of reflection or abstract thought “everything is and nothing becomes,” and thus mediation – which he takes to be immanent to reflection – “cannot possibly have its place in abstraction, since it has movement as its presupposition” (CUP 166). Climacus often advances his critique of Hegelian mediation on the basis of the distinction between thinking, or abstraction, and existence. This strategy had already been employed in Either/Or (see KW 4: 173–174), and it has antecedents in Danish debates about Hegel’s logic during the 1830s. Climacus repeats Judge Williams’ insistence in Part Two of Either/Or that the spheres of thought and of existence should be clearly distinguished, and one of the key reasons for this is that motion is real only in the latter, and illusory in the former. “The language of abstraction,” Climacus insists, “cannot give to movement either time or space” (CUP 287). The argument of both pseudonyms on this point involves the laws of Aristotelian logic: the law of the excluded middle and the principle of contradiction, denoted interchangeably by the phrases “either/or” and “aut-aut” (CUP 255–257). Kierkegaard believed these laws to be valid in the sphere of existence, where they ground the possibility of decision. (One can either marry or not marry, for example, and the decision is based on recognition of these possibilities as distinct, mutually exclusive alternatives.) In short, “either/or” is a condition of real transition, and where this principle is valid, movement is possible.

Arguing that “the language of abstraction really does not allow the difficulty of existence and for the one who exists to emerge” (CUP 255), and that “there is something true for one who exists which is not true in abstraction” (CUP 256), Climacus attempts to “illustrate” this point by turning to the issue of contradiction and movement:

As everyone knows, the Hegelian philosophy has done away with the law of contradiction . . . Hegel is utterly and absolutely right in saying that . . . in the language of abstraction, in pure thought and pure being, there is no aut-aut. Where the devil should it be, once abstraction has taken away the contradiction? Hegel and the Hegelians should rather take the trouble to explain what is meant with the humbug of introducing contradiction, movement, transition, etc. into logic. (CUP 255–256)

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11 See Stewart, Kierkegaard’s Relations to Hegel Reconsidered, 197–203.
12 See also CUP 355: “[mediation is chimerical] when, for someone existing, there is supposed to be a mediation between existence and thought, since everything said for mediation may be true and glorious but becomes untrue in the mouth of someone existing, since as existing he is prevented from getting any foothold outside existence from which to mediate something which, besides being in the course of becoming, also eludes completion.”
According to Climacus, abstract thinking *per se* “disregards the concrete, the temporal, the becoming of existence, the predicament of the existing person due to his being a composite of the temporal and the eternal situated in existence” (CUP 252). He argues that abstraction is indifferent to, or disinterested in, existence, and furthermore he emphasizes that existence itself is characterized by the interest, and indeed passion, that is lacking from abstract thought. To exist is always already to have a relation to and involvement with one’s own being – and it is precisely this concernful reflexivity that abstraction draws away from. The passionate interest in question here is not merely a psychological phenomenon, for it is grounded in the existential *inter-esse* that gives an individual room in which to move. Climacus describes the human being as “infinitely interested in existing” (CUP 253), and here “infinitely” does not primarily designate a quantity (albeit unlimited) of interest, but its manner, its “how”: its indeterminacy, its irreducibility to whatever can be grasped. In this sense, existence transcends finitude.

Kierkegaard was not the first philosopher to criticize Hegel’s system for failing to accommodate genuine movement, and his discussion of this issue draws on various sources. During the late 1830s, when Kierkegaard was studying philosophy and theology at the University of Copenhagen, criticism of Hegelian ideas often focused on the Aristotelian laws of logic, which were invoked by opponents of the new speculative thought. Prominent among such critics were Bishop Mynster and Kierkegaard’s philosophy professor F. C. Sibbern. In 1838 the latter defended classical logic against Hegelian mediation in a review of *Perseus*, a “journal for the speculative idea” edited by Heiberg; in the following year Mynster published an article entitled “Rationalism, Supernaturalism” that defended the law of the excluded middle against Martensen’s Hegelian interpretation of Christian theology. Both Heiberg and Martensen responded to this article, and then in 1842 Mynster responded to them in turn. All four protagonists in this debate used the phrase “either/or,” or variations on it, and thus their exchange constitutes the context for Kierkegaard’s first major pseudonymous work. Having said this, although Mynster in particular argued that “either/or” grounds the individual’s choice between alternative forms of religious belief, in *Either/Or* the connection between movement and the law of the excluded middle – or, in other words, the

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identification of decision as a type of transition – emerges much more strongly, and thus as a distinctively Kierkegaardian contribution to the Danish debates.

Kierkegaard’s thematization of movement was also influenced by his study of works by two German Aristotelians: W. G. Tennemann and F. A. Trendelenburg. While reading Tennemann’s *Geschichte der Philosophie* he noted in his journal Aristotle’s conceptualization of *kinēsis* in terms of the transition from possibility to actuality, commenting that “all this deserves attention with respect to the movements in logic” (JP 1: 258). This insight into the importance of *kinēsis* for his polemic against Hegelian thought is alluded to in *Repetition*; but from 1844, when he studied Trendelenburg’s *Logische Untersuchungen*, Kierkegaard could formulate it in greater detail – for Trendelenburg was a critic of Hegel who argued that movement remains an unacknowledged presupposition of the latter’s thought. Trendelenburg is cited in the *Postscript* at the point where Climacus argues that “Hegel’s matchless and matchlessly applauded invention – having movement brought into logic . . . does nothing but confuse logic. And it is surely also strange to make movement the basis of a sphere in which movement is unthinkable; and to let movement explain logic when logic cannot explain movement” (CUP 92–93).

Another significant influence in relation to this issue was Schelling, with whom the extent of Kierkegaard’s engagement is difficult to establish, beyond his attendance at the German philosopher’s Berlin lectures in 1841–42. Shortly after this, in the response to Heiberg’s review of *Repetition*, Kierkegaard remarks that movement in the sphere of spirit – as opposed to the domains both of nature and of pure thought – “plays a major role” throughout Schelling’s philosophy: “What gives him the greatest trouble is precisely this, to include movement. But it is also to his credit that he wanted to include it, not in the ingenious sense in which it later gained a place in logic in Hegelian philosophy and where it added to the confusion by signifying too much in logic and too little outside it.” Furthermore, Kierkegaard reported that “the embryonic child of thought leapt for joy within me” on hearing Schelling, in his second Berlin lecture, mention the relation between possibility and actuality – “here perhaps clarity can be achieved,” adds the young writer.

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14 For the best recent discussion in English of Kierkegaard’s relation to Trendelenburg, see González, “Trendelenburg.” See also Come, *Trendelenburg’s Influence on Kierkegaard’s Modal Categories*.
15 For an account of Kierkegaard’s relation to Schelling, see Olesen, “Schelling,” especially 255–259 for discussion of the theme of movement.
16 “Supplement” to *Repetition*, KW 6: 310. See also KW 6: 322.
17 JP 5: 5535; PAP III a 179.
In several of the pseudonymous texts, Kierkegaard more or less explicitly takes up Aristotle’s conceptualization of κινήσις in terms of the transition from possibility (dunamis) to actuality (energeia),\(^\text{18}\) and relocates it in the spiritual, existential sphere, where he opposes it to Hegel’s principle of mediation.\(^\text{19}\) Climacus replays this philosophical move at a key point in the Postscript, just before his declaration that “subjectivity is truth”:

The transition from possibility to actuality is, as Aristotle rightly says, κινήσις, a movement. This just cannot be said in the language of abstraction, or understood in it, for that language cannot give to movement either time or space, which presuppose it, or which it presupposes . . . Considered abstractly there is no break, but then no transition either, for considered abstractly, everything is. On the other hand, when time is given to movement by existence and I follow suit, then the leap appears in the way that a leap can appear: that it might come or it has been . . . Subjectivity is truth; subjectivity is actuality. (CUP 287–288)

Climacus suggests that the subjective truth with which he is concerned – which constitutes the truth of Christianity insofar as it is lived, rather than merely conceptualized – is essentially dynamic: “Suppose someone wanted to impart the conviction that it is not truth that is truth but that the way is the truth, i.e., that the truth is only in the becoming, in the process of appropriation, that hence there is no result” (CUP 66). “Objective” truth may be located in the correspondence between propositions and reality, but spiritual truth is “a taking to heart”: a movement in an inward direction,\(^\text{20}\) “the subject’s transformation in himself” (CUP 33). If “truth is only in the becoming,” this becoming is interpreted by Kierkegaard as involving the transition from possibility to actuality. Sometimes in his authorship, actuality seems to be contrasted with “ideality,” which is allied with possibility and reflection. Climacus, however, defines actuality by unsettling the distinction between the two terms: “What, then, is actuality? It is the ideal. But aesthetically and intellectually ideality is possibility (the retracing ab esse ad posse). Ethically, the ideality is the actuality within the individual himself. Actuality is internality infinitely interested in existing, which the ethical individual is for himself” (CUP 272). And a few pages on: “What is actual is not the external action but


\(^{19}\) See Carlisle, “Kierkegaard’s Repetition” and Stack, “Aristotle and Kierkegaard’s Existential Ethics.”

\(^{20}\) The Danish word that is translated by Hannay as “taking to heart” is *Inderliggjørelse*, which means “making inward.” The Hongs translate *Inderliggjørelse* as “inward deepening,” while Swenson and Lowrie render it as “intensification of inwardness.”
an internality in which the individual cancels the possibility and identifies himself with what is thought, in order to exist in it. This is action” (CUP 284). Kierkegaardian kinèsis is the movement of decision: when a person makes a choice, she selects a possibility from several available to her in that moment, and actualizes it, brings it into existence. As an account of human freedom this is rather different from Aristotelian kinèsis, in which 

dunamis can be regarded as a singular potentiality that relates to a specific telos of a being: a seed is potentially a tree; a man is potentially a knower.

From Kierkegaard’s existential point of view, possibility is always multiple, and singularity comes from a process of actualization: a human being may become infinitely many things, but she will become a single individual only by choosing her path through life. The aesthetic sphere is characterized by the multiplicity of the possible, and by a lack of kinèsis: lost in reflection or imagination, the aesthete remains entranced by her myriad possibilities and is unwilling to choose or commit to any of them.

In some of his texts Kierkegaard’s kinèsis is itself named “repetition”: a transition from ideality (conceived as possibility) to actuality – a movement of “coming into existence” – that “goes in the opposite direction” to Platonic recollection, which moves from the individual’s situated existence to the eternal Ideas, or Forms. Both repetition and recollection are “the same movement” insofar as they are processes toward the truth. However, whereas recollection seeks the truth as knowledge, repetition seeks the truth as life, in the sense of an existential truth, or “being-true,” that is lived, and also in the sense of the Christian truth of an eternal life to come. While recollection moves backwards to an eternity that has always existed, repetition looks to a future eternity. This point, hinted at in Repetition, is elaborated more explicitly by Climacus: “Speculatively, it holds true that I, recollecting backward, am able to reach the eternal; it holds true that the eternal relates itself directly to the eternal, but an existing person can relate himself forward to the eternal only as the future” (CUP 424). It is this futurity, then, which constitutes the specifically Christian significance of repetition, in contrast with which Hegelian mediation is “a pagan reminiscence” (CUP 182; see also 315).

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21 See Repetition, KW 6: 131.
22 Mediation is sometimes aligned by Kierkegaard with recollection, at other times added as a third such process, a semblance of recollection which moves only within ideality, from one concept to another, and is thus not a genuine transition.
23 According to the pseudonym, this is “no doubt” why Christianity proclaims the eternal as the future, “preached, as it was, in existence” (CUP 257); this is another instance in which Christian teaching appears to be subservient to a philosophical interpretation of existence.
24 On the question of futurity in Hegelian philosophy, see Malabou, The Future of Hegel.
In the Postscript it becomes clear that, from a formal point of view, the figure of *kinésis* is the first element of a double repetition, since the movement of actualization must itself be repeated. It is this second repetition – or rather, repetition raised to the second power – that grounds the constancy of the self through time:

In the moment of passion’s decision, where the path branches off from objective knowledge, it seems as if the infinite decision had been made. But in that same instant, the one existing belongs to the temporal order, and the subjective “how” is transformed into a striving that, propelled and repeatedly renewed by the decisive passion of the infinite, is nevertheless a striving. (CUP 171)

The constancy attained through repetition is “renewal in the same” (CUP 217), “change in the same” (CUP 240). This signifies truth in the sense of *being true to* oneself, to another person, or to God – a truth that is, therefore, relational as much as inward. Repetition gives the “law” of this truth: “regarding truth as inwardness in existence... the law is: the same and yet changed and yet still the same” (CUP 240).

Climacus emphasizes that “the existing subjective thinker is constantly striving,” and he also insists that such striving is not directed toward “a goal in the finite sense... reaching which would mean he was finished. No, he strives infinitely, is constantly coming to be” (CUP 77). He likens this process to Platonic *erôs*, as described in the *Symposium*, since this does not just seek fulfillment (actualization; the first moment of repetition) but continued fulfillment (repeated actualization; the second moment of repetition).\(^{25}\) This means that there is no end to the movement: “Even if someone has reached the top, the repetition in which he must still fill out his life, if he is not to go backwards (or become a fantastic being), will again be a continued striving, because here again finality is put aside and postponed” (CUP 103). Accentuating both the intensive and extensive magnitude of the task of “becoming subjective,” Climacus points out that this “highest task” will occupy even the longest life, “since it has the curious trait that it is over only when life itself is over” (CUP 132). The end of life, however, is precisely the issue at stake in the Postscript: if ‘repetition’ as the individual’s inward spiritual movement lacks an end within life, this anticipates the absolute, “final” endlessness of the repetition – or restoration, or resurrection – that is promised to the Christian. A believing

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\(^{25}\) See CUP 78, 103. Plato’s *Symposium* is important for Kierkegaard not just because of its characterization of *erôs* in terms of lack, but also because it presents the view, attributed to Diotima, that a human being is “always being renewed” and “constantly passing away.” See *Symposium* 207d, trans. Howatson, 45.
person can be assured of her eternal happiness not once and for all but by “daily acquiring the certain spirit of faith through an infinite personal passionate interest” (CUP 48).

Climacus can thus write of the individual’s “absolute telos” while also denying that there is a goal to be reached that would be the end of movement. What is “decisive,” he argues, is not the telos regarded in itself, but a person’s relation to it – a dynamic, temporal relatedness which encompasses the telos, and indeed constitutes it. If the task of Christianity is relational in this way, then it is clear that repetition must be its essence: “The goal of motion for someone existing is decision and repetition” (CUP 313, emphasis added). Moreover, to “relate to one’s absolute τέλος once in a while is to relate relatively to one’s absolute τέλος, for here it is the relation that is decisive. The task is therefore to practice one’s relation to the absolute τέλος so as always to have it with one, while staying within the relative goals of existence” (CUP 343).

This last remark introduces another aspect of the task: its situatedness, its irreducible connection to the finite, the relative, and the worldly. Leaping means “to belong to the earth and to respect the law of gravity; so that the leap is only momentary” (CUP 105). For all his emphasis on transcendence in opposition to Hegelian immanence, Kierkegaard’s analysis of the Christian task in the Postscript is characterized by an absolute refusal to climb outside of life, outside of becoming; that is, a refusal to think beyond existence. Speculative philosophers are at several points in the text accused of grasping for objectivity at the expense of existence – and not merely existence in general, but their own existence, which renders their abstractions a despairing negation of life, a flight from becoming that is at once cowardly and hubristic. This ethically oriented critique of rationalist philosophy comes very close to that of Nietzsche, who equates the denial of the conditions of life – becoming, perspective, suffering – with nihilism. “The task,” urges Climacus, is “to acquire skill in renewing the passionate choice and in expressing it in existing. The individual, after all, is in the finite” (CUP 345). The movement required of the religious individual is “double” not only insofar as it involves two levels of repetition, but also because it expresses both renunciation and restoration of finite, worldly existence. Through “infinite resignation” an individual surrenders her claims to happiness and justice within the world, and thus makes herself receptive to the gift of faith, through which life itself is transfigured, even in its deepest suffering and most fearful anxiety. This dynamic figure

26 See, e.g., CUP 77, 257.
is described in *Fear and Trembling*, where Johannes de Silentio depicts Abraham as giving Isaac up in order to receive him back “a second time” as a gift from God (KW 6: 9). Climacus echoes the earlier pseudonym’s problematization of Abraham’s faith when he writes of the “strenuousness” of the repeated double movement, and of the “difficulty” of “preserving the absolute choice in finitude” (CUP 344–345) through the continued effort to resign everything.

**PATHOS: PASSIVITY, PASSION, SUFFERING**

Having identified two aspects of the Kierkegaardian double movement – the raising of repetition to the second power, and the oscillation between resignation and restoration, loss and gift – we can add a third: the coincidence of activity and passivity. This is encapsulated in Climacus’ rather paradoxical claim that “suffering is the highest action in the inner life” (CUP 363). In spite of the emphasis on decision in the Postscript – and also, of course, in the subsequent “existentialist” philosophies inspired by the text – the pseudonym insists that the transformation involved in becoming a Christian cannot be brought about by the individual alone, and is thus a being-moved rather than an autonomous movement. If faith is a decision, its precondition is a gift. The “pathos” of the task of Christianity is highlighted throughout the book, and is the focus of its lengthiest section – which Climacus begins by stating that the individual’s relation to an eternal happiness is “pathos-filled” (CUP 324).

The use of the term “pathos” in the Postscript encompasses its full significance as passivity, passion, and suffering. For Climacus, it is clear that the individual is not able to accomplish the task of becoming a Christian by her own efforts, and this conviction – if not of helplessness, then at least of dependence – is a basic tenet of Kierkegaardian Christianity. Speaking of how “the individual” is “changed...within himself,” Climacus describes the religious transition in the passive voice:

> The essential existential pathos relates to existing essentially; and to exist essentially is inwardness; and the action of inwardness is suffering, because changing himself is something the individual cannot do, it becomes a kind of putting on of airs, and that’s why suffering is the highest action in the inner life. (CUP 363)

This echoes Martin Luther’s reading of Romans 12:2, “be reformed by the renewing of your mind,” which draws on Aristotle’s analysis of natural growth in terms of five stages – non-being, becoming, being, action, and
Climacus on the task of becoming a Christian

being acted upon – and applies this to spiritual development. Luther suggests that passivity is the final stage of growth:

nonbeing is . . . a man in his sins; becoming is justification; being is righteousness; action is doing and living righteously; being acted upon is to be made perfect and complete . . . Through his new birth [man] moves from sin to righteousness, and thus from nonbeing through becoming to being. And when this has happened, he lives righteously. But from this new being, which is really a nonbeing, man proceeds and passes to another new being by being acted upon, that is, through becoming new, he proceeds to become better, and from this again into something new. Thus . . . man is always in privation, always in becoming or in potentiality, in matter, and always in action. Aristotle philosophizes about such matters, and he does it well, but people do not understand him well.27

While Luther emphasizes this passivity in opposition to the late medieval economy of salvation that, he believed, promoted a focus on works and indulgences to the detriment of individuals’ inward relationships to God, Kierkegaard’s concern is to challenge the ideal of human autonomy that is exemplified, in its philosophical development, by the pivotal contributions of Descartes, Kant, and Hegel. There is little doubt that Kierkegaard saw the modern philosophy of the subject as a symptom of increasing secularization and of spiritual decline. His intervention on this issue is perhaps most direct in *The Sickness Unto Death*, not least in the famous definition of the self as a relation established by and enduringly grounded in God (see KW 19: 13–14) – but Climacus is forceful too in insisting that “religiously, the task is to grasp that one is nothing at all before God, or to be nothing at all and be thereby before God” (CUP 387). The implicit equivalence between these two formulations is startling. Climacus remarks that the individual who undertakes the leap of faith “must surely do it alone, and also be alone in properly understanding that it is an impossibility” (CUP 86): even though the leap is inward and solitary, the religious person knows that she is not self-sufficient, that she is incapable of attaining faith by her own efforts. The suggestion that the leap is not just difficult but impossible radicalizes Climacus’ own attempt to accentuate the difficulty of the Christian task: this is not only a strategic, corrective challenge to the complacency of the present age, but the reiteration of an Augustinian–Lutheran anthropology.

Kierkegaard’s juxtaposition of decision and gift, of leaping and finding it impossible to leap, is at the heart of his account of the task of becoming a Christian, both in the *Postscript* and elsewhere. His philosophy makes

27 *Luther’s Works*, vol. xxv: *Lectures on Romans*, 434.
questionable the very distinction between activity and passivity: the decision of faith is, as the story of Abraham demonstrates, always attended by anguish at the possibility of being mistaken, and by the suffering of faith’s contradiction; conversely, the receptivity that enables divine gifts to be given freely is itself something that the individual must choose and repeat. The active contains the passive, and vice versa.

“Passion,” a key term in the Postscript, is a marker of this coincidence of activity and passivity, for passion, like love, is at once a feeling and a power. For Kierkegaard, passion is the essentially human element, and because passion thrives on paradox (see CUP 193) it is intensified by the relation to God. The paradox prevents the movement of faith from becoming “a transaction within the bargaining compass of the understanding” (CUP 196). Kierkegaard believed that the spiritual crisis of the nineteenth century was characterized by a substitution of cleverness for passion, and Climacus remarks that “modern pen-pushing speculation looks down on passion; yet, for the one who exists, passion is the very height of existence” (CUP 166). The passion in question here is spiritual, rather than sensual; while the latter “gets in the way of existence by transforming it into the instantaneous,” spiritual or “idealizing” passion provides “a concrete eternity in the one who exists” which ensures the “continuity of motion” (CUP 261–262). The argument is rather obscure here, but the pseudonym’s claim seems to be that continuity is the ground of motion, its telos and its measure, for if everything is in motion then there is no motion, or at least motion cannot be recognized as such. He suggests that passion is a subjective “approximation,” in the existential sphere, to the Aristotelian unmoved mover of the cosmos. In a draft of this part of the Postscript, Kierkegaard writes that passion is “the impetus of motion.” Without passion, the task of becoming a Christian cannot even begin, since it is at once the goal, energy, and criterion of the task.

If Kierkegaard regards passion as a response to paradox and contradiction, then in his view suffering – in the straightforward sense of the pain of existence – is what generates these, at least within the theistic worldview. Unlike those philosophers who present some kind of theodicy as a rejoinder to the “problem of evil,” he does not shirk from the fact that faith must contend with an unfathomable experience of suffering which contradicts belief that a just, loving God created and sustains the world. How can

28 See Fear and Trembling, KW 6: 121.
29 He uses the Greek words τέλος and μέτρον (metron); the Danish word Maal, translated as “goal,” can mean both end and measure.
30 See PAP vi 8 54:8 (1845).

existence be a gift from such a God, when it is full of anguish, grief, disappointment, and fear? Kierkegaard places this question at the heart of the Christian life, and of his own account of the difficulty of such a life. Instead of attempting to explain suffering away, he directs his reader’s attention to it throughout the pseudonymous works. While some of the earlier texts depict a suffering individual in the midst of crisis or trial, Climacus offers a cool-headed assessment of existential pathos: “Inwardness . . . grasps suffering as essential . . . From the religious viewpoint all human beings are suffering, and it is a matter precisely of entering into the suffering (not by plunging into it, but discovering that one is in it), not of escaping misfortune” (CUP 364–366). According to Climacus, the religious person not only continually has suffering with him, but desires suffering in the sense of wanting to recognize it – not just intellectually, but to feel it fully. This is because suffering belongs to spirit; it is a sign of difference between the ontological completeness of the self’s relation to God and the existential incompleteness of this relation as it is lived by a self always falling away from its ground. Suffering signifies a need for restoration, and is thus the starting point of the task of becoming a Christian.
CHAPTER 10

The epistemology of the Postscript

M. G. Piety

There have been two significant obstacles to determining the substance of Kierkegaard’s epistemology. The first is the barrier of language. It is relatively easy for scholars in the English-speaking world to learn languages such as German or French. By contrast, most Kierkegaard scholars are able to piece together only a rudimentary knowledge of Danish during short stays in Denmark facilitated by research fellowships. The second obstacle to understanding Kierkegaard’s views on knowledge is that his otherwise prodigious authorship includes no straightforward treatise on knowledge. The closest thing to such a treatise is, in fact, his Concluding Unscientific Postscript. A comprehensive account of the epistemological views contained in this work is beyond the scope of a brief essay. Such an account would require an entire book, and a substantial one at that. I argue elsewhere that Kierkegaard appears to subscribe in a very broad sense to the traditional view that knowledge amounts to justified true belief. A great deal of insight into the epistemology of the Postscript can thus be gained by looking closely at how the concept of truth functions in this work.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will focus on the concept of truth in the Postscript. It will also look in detail at the significance of some of the relevant Danish terminology. The end product, I hope, will help to give the reader greater insight into the substance of the epistemology of the Postscript than it has yet been possible to attain from any secondary work in English.

Most Kierkegaard scholars know that Kierkegaard distinguishes between subjective and objective truth. Very little work has been done, however, on precisely what distinguishes these two types of truth – and this has caused problems for Kierkegaard scholars. Some mistakenly reduce all types of truth

1 See Piety, Ways of Knowing.
truth in Kierkegaard to subjective truth, with the result that he appears more closely related to Sartrean existentialism than he actually is. Others mistakenly reduce all types of truth to objective truth, with the result that his views appear incoherent.

I am going to argue that one of the reasons scholars have had such difficulty understanding Kierkegaard’s views on truth is that some important distinctions Kierkegaard makes in this context do not come across in translations. This has been a particularly intractable problem for scholars interested in Kierkegaard’s epistemology, and it is undoubtedly one of the reasons that so little has been written on this subject in English. The problem is not restricted, however, to scholarly work in English. I will make special reference to the scholarship of Anton Hugli, whose otherwise excellent book, *Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität und die Objektivität des Erkennens*, is marred by a failure to appreciate some of Kierkegaard’s terminological distinctions. My main objective, however, is to show that one of the most important distinctions Kierkegaard makes between subjective and objective truth is obscured in English translations, which use the single word “approximation” to render two very different Danish terms: *Approximation* and *Tilnærmelse*.

Many theories of truth are reductionist in that they try to reduce the various senses of the expression “truth” to a single essence. This essence is sometimes spoken of as a correspondence to reality. “Reality” is problematic, however, in a way that is not often recognized in this context. That is, it is possible to speak of the reality of the way things are and the reality of the way they ought to be. The subject of the correspondence in question is thus also somewhat problematic. Many contemporary theorists consider that it is something like beliefs, or propositions, that are properly spoken of as corresponding or failing to correspond to reality. It is also possible, however, to think of things in themselves as the subjects of such correspondence. A chair, for example, may be spoken of as corresponding to reality in the sense that it agrees with the form of what a chair ought to be like.

Few people today consider that there is an eternal, unchanging form of chairness, or an idea of chairness in the mind of God, to which all actual chairs ought to correspond. Most people do believe, however, that there is a way people ought to behave, that there is something like a moral law, or norms of behavior that are not merely socially or culturally determined. If this is the case, then it seems possible to speak of an individual’s life as

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2 “Knowledge of Subjectivity and the Objectivity of Knowing.”
either corresponding or failing to correspond to the form it ought to have. A life that corresponded to the reality of the way things ought to be, then, could be spoken of as “true,” or as an expression of the truth.

If there is a way things ought to be, then it would seem reasonable to distinguish between what one could call “descriptive truth” and “prescriptive truth.” This distinction is precisely the one that Kierkegaard makes between what he refers to as “objective” and “subjective” truth.

Truth, according to Kierkegaard, is an agreement between thought and being, where “being” is synonymous with “reality” (CUP 159). Such agreement can be established, however, in two ways: by making thought conform to being, or by making being conform to thought. There are thus two types of truth according to Kierkegaard, as is apparent in his claim that “there is a difference between truth and truths.”

“Truths,” according to Kierkegaard, are the result of the accurate representation of being in thought. It is important to appreciate, however, that “being,” for Kierkegaard, encompasses both abstract and concrete entities. Hence truth, in the sense of “truths,” can be defined as agreement either between some abstract entity and thought, or between some concrete entity and thought. The former appears in Kierkegaard’s authorship as what one might call truth in the strict sense and the latter as what one might call truth in a looser sense in that it is never, on his view, more than an approximation.

The agreement between an abstract entity and thought appears tautological, according to Kierkegaard, because in this instance “thought and being [Tænken og Væren] mean one and the same” thing (CUP 160). That is, the correspondence of the one to the other is merely “an abstract self-identity” (CUP 160).

That is, the truth that, according to Kierkegaard, is an agreement between some abstract entity and thought is a “duplication” (CUP 160), or self-identity of what he calls “ideality.” This duplication is accomplished in language, of which, according to Kierkegaard, all thought consists, and which has the dual nature of being both ideal in itself and an expression of ideality. Abstract, or ideal, being is expressed in language, which is itself abstract. Hence truth, in the sense of “truths,” is a property of sentences or

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6 Johannes Climacus, KW 7: 168–171.

propositions. This is also the case when truth is considered as agreement between some actuality and thought. That is, truth is not what is the case about the world, but the agreement between a particular proposition about the world and what is the case. The fact, for example, that Caesar crossed the Rubicon is not a truth about Caesar, or about the past; it is rather the claim that accurately represents this fact which is true. This type of truth is referred to by Kierkegaard as “objective truth” (CUP 163). “Objectively,” explains Anton Hügli, “truth is – in the sense of the classical definition – an *adaequatio intellectus ad rem*.8 Objective truth, according to Kierkegaard, is quite properly indifferent to the existence of any particular individual (see, e.g., CUP 162–163). It is indeed this indifference, he argues, that “is precisely its objective validity [*Gyldighed*].”9 But what kinds of truth, according to Kierkegaard, may legitimately be viewed as objective?

“Objectively understood,” he asserts, truth can mean: (i) the historical truth, [or] (2) the philosophical truth. Looked at historically, the truth must be made out through a critical consideration of the various reports etc., in short, in the way that historical truth is ordinarily brought to light. In the case of philosophical truth, the inquiry turns on the relation of a historically given and ratified doctrine to the eternal truth. (CUP 19)

The reference above is specifically concerned with the truth of Christianity, but it may justly be extended to refer to all types of objective truth. That is, objective truth can signify either (i) an agreement between the past, or the present, as it is represented in thought and the reality of the past, or present; or (2) an agreement between a particular philosophical doctrine (e.g., Platonism), as it is represented in thought and in its eternal reality.

We know from Kierkegaard’s journals from 1842–43 that he was particularly interested in the distinction made by Leibniz between truths of reasoning and truths of fact.10 “Truths of reasoning,” argued Leibniz, “are necessary, and their opposite [*sic*] is impossible.”11

Truths of reason are equivalent to what was identified above as “philosophical truth.” The claim, for example, that the validity of an argument is distinguishable from its soundness was first articulated by Aristotle.12 That is, it was “historically given,” but it is not in itself a historical truth. That there is a distinction between an argument’s validity and its soundness is built into the definition of an argument (i.e., it is part of its essence); thus the correspondence to reality of the claim that there is such a distinction

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9 CUP 163. Translation modified.  
10 See PAP iv c 8–44, *passim*.  
is formally necessary. Such necessity means that it is inconceivable that this claim could fail to correspond to reality. The proposition that there is a difference between validity and soundness constitutes an adaequatio intellectus ad rem, or an agreement between reality and ideality (cf. CUP 159), where the reality in question is itself abstract or ideal.

We have just discussed objective truth in the strict sense. This section will explore objective truth in the looser sense.

While truths of reason are necessary, according to Leibniz, those of fact are contingent, which means that their opposites are formally possible. Establishing the correspondence of statements about actuality, whether the actuality in question is that of nature or of human events, to reality is thus problematic. No amount of investigation will reveal that a particular statement about actuality must correspond to reality because, unlike abstract entities, nothing actual is what it is necessarily.13

But if the correspondence of a statement about actuality to reality cannot be established definitively, then the agreement between this statement and reality which, according to Kierkegaard, constitutes truth, “is transformed into a desideratur [or desideratum] and everything then posed in terms of becoming [Vorden], since the empirical object is unfinished” (CUP 159). Statements about actuality cannot thus be true in an absolute sense. They are often referred to as “true,” but because the object of such statements is not finished, they can at best only approximate correspondence to the reality to which they refer. Hügli observes, however, that “the argument that the empirical object is unfinished undoubtedly applies to present actuality, which is still in the process of becoming [Werden], but . . . it does not apply to the past which, as Climacus asserts in Crumbs, is finished [abgeschlossen] and to this extent immutable.”14

However, the correspondence of claims about actuality to reality is an approximation, according to Kierkegaard, not because actuality is “unfinished” (CUP 73, 159), but because of the peculiar relation these empirical statements have to the facts to which they refer. No amount of data will establish that, for example, Caesar must have crossed the Rubicon, that no alternative course of action was possible, and thus that no other interpretation of the data could be correct. There will always remain at least

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13 In this context, “necessity” clearly refers to formal, or logical, necessity, not to causal necessity.

The formal possibility that the claim that he did cross the Rubicon is false. That is, it is conceivable that the claim could be false, even if it is in fact true.

The categories of thought, because of their abstract nature, cannot encompass concrete facts as such. According to Kierkegaard, the categories of thought are, again, linguistic categories; hence thought may be understood to be an expression of reality. The difficulty, as Hügli points out, is that “when the individual is expressed, that expression always says that it should not be an individual but something universal. The universal says nothing, however, about the individual as an individual, but on the contrary, only something about the individual in general.” Thus where the reality in question is concrete, or actual, rather than abstract, no expression of it is going to capture it in its uniqueness, or particularity, and thus preclude the possibility that it is other than it is represented as being. It is in this respect that one may understand the object of a statement about actuality as unfinished. That is, it is finished in itself. It is just not finished for thought. It is always possible to collect more information about it and thus to get a better picture of it.

This does not mean, however, that Kierkegaard is an idealist (or anti-realist). Hügli is right to point out that the past, as Kierkegaard insists in Crumbs, “is finished and to this extent immutable.” The difficulty is that Hügli confuses the past as it is in itself with the past as it is for thought. That is, although the past, according to Kierkegaard, is finished in itself, “as material for cognitive consideration [erfjendene Betragtning] it is incomplete; it is constantly coming into being through ever new observation and research” (CUP 125, emphasis added).

What is in the process of becoming (i Vorden) in statements about actuality is not actuality in itself, but actuality as it is for thought. This interpretation is supported not merely by Kierkegaard’s views on the nature of the truth in question (i.e., that as a property of propositions, or thought, it is abstract and thus cannot capture empirical reality – i.e., actuality – as

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15 Thus Slotty argues that, according to Kierkegaard, “to grasp means to transform into possibility, but then one does not have the object as an actuality and does not grasp it as that which it is” [begreifen heisse in Möglichkeit auflösen; dann halte man aber das Objekt nicht als Wirklichkeit fest und erfasse es nicht als das, was es sei]. Slotty, “Die Erkenntnislehre S. A. Kierkegaards,” 54.


17 Thus Hügli argues that, according to Kierkegaard, “language does not express reality but produces instead something new.” See Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität, 52–53. My translation.

18 Hügli, Die Erkenntnis der Subjectivität, 88 (my translation) and Philosophical Crumbs, in RPC 144.
such), but also by the fact that the expression for “becoming” Kierkegaard uses in this context is not *Tilblivelse*, the expression he uses in *Crumbs* to refer to the process of “coming to be,” but *Vorden*.\(^{19}\)

To become, according to Kierkegaard, in the sense of *at blive til* is to undergo a change in being (*Væren*) – i.e., to go from having been possible to being actual.\(^{20}\) Past events, on his view, have already undergone such a transition. The “becoming” (*Vorden*) that subsequently characterizes them – i.e., that characterizes them to the extent that they are objects of knowledge – concerns their essence (*Væsen*) rather than their being (*Væren*).\(^{21}\) That is, it represents the determination of their essence for thought. As objects of knowledge, past events are no longer what they were – i.e., actualities. As objects of knowledge, these past actualities are transformed into intellectual constructions whose correspondence to actuality can be established in only an approximate sense.

Hügli’s failure to appreciate the difference between *Vorden* and *Tilblivelse* stems, I believe, from the fact that both expressions are translated into German as *Werden*. The section of the “Interlude” that is entitled *Tilblivelse* (i.e., becoming) in Danish appears in German translations as *Das Werden*.\(^{22}\) *Tilblivelse* is clearly closer, however, to the German *Entstehen* than to *Werden*.\(^{23}\)

Hügli asserts that Kierkegaard’s claim that statements about actuality merely approximate truth “can be maintained only when one abandons the Aristotelian assumption, that is, when the concept is not anchored once and for all in the object, but is constituted in the course of the historical discussion between subject and object.”\(^{24}\) Kierkegaard himself says in *The Concept of Irony* that “if the object were not understandable . . . only in and with the phenomenon, then . . . knowledge (of the phenomenon) would be impossible, inasmuch as the actuality would be lacking” (KW 2: 241–242).

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\(^{21}\) Cf. *Philosophical Crumbs*, in RPC 151: “As soon as someone who comes later believes the past (not its truth; because that is an object of knowledge [*Erkjendelsens sag*], that concerns essence [*Væsen*], not being [*Væren*]; but believes that it was present by having come to be [*ved at være blevet til*],” then the uncertainty of becoming is there.”


\(^{23}\) See note 19 above.

It is clear, however, from what was said above, that actuality is lacking when it is expressed in language. Language, Kierkegaard argues, is an abstraction and thus “always presents the abstract rather than the concrete (i.e., the actual)” (JP 3: 2324). Hügli acknowledges this himself when he says, “language does not express reality, it produces instead something new.” Thus it would appear that Kierkegaard does, in fact, abandon Aristotle’s assumption that the concept is embodied (verankert) in its object.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the truth of statements about actuality is identified by Kierkegaard with “the course of the historical discussion between subject and object.” Such a view is consistent with his claims, cited above, about how historical truth is established, as well as with his observation that “with regard to all temporal, earthly, worldly goals the crowd can have its validity, even its validity as the decisive factor, that is, as the authority” – i.e., for determining truth. That is, no single scholar or scientist can alone determine that a particular historical or scientific theory corresponds to the reality to which it refers. Theories in science and scholarship are always the products of the cooperative efforts of various individuals throughout the history of these disciplines, and need, in order to continue to enjoy acceptance, to be continually verified within the evolving standards of verification agreed on by practitioners in these disciplines.

We have looked so far at Kierkegaard’s views on objective truth. I want to turn now to consider his views on subjective truth.

“Truths,” according to Kierkegaard, are the result of the accurate representation of being in thought, whether the being in question is ideal, as is the case with immanent metaphysical truths, or whether it is actual, as is the case, for example, with scholarly and scientific truths. “Truth,” on the other hand, is the result of the accurate representation of thought in being – i.e., actuality.

Kierkegaard occasionally speaks as if the meaning of “truth” were restricted to truth in the sense of “truths” (i.e., the representation of being in thought), as when he observes that “the trilogy – the beautiful, the good, the true – has to be conceived and represented in the sphere of the true (namely as knowledge),” or when he claims that the truth of the past is

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26 See note 16 above. 27 Kierkegaard, The Point of View, KW 22: 106n.
28 Thus Alastair Hannay argues that “in Kierkegaard we have the idea that the sensible world can itself come to bear the imprint of an ideal, even though the ‘source’ of that ideal remains ineradicably transcendent.” Kierkegaard, 257.
29 The Concept of Anxiety, KW 8: 11.
“an object of knowledge [Erkjendelsens Sag].” He observes, however, in *Practice in Christianity*, that though it is common now to associate truth with “cognition [Erkjendelsen], knowledge [Viden]... in original Christianity all the expressions were formed according to the view that truth is a (way of) being” (KW 20: 206); and this view of truth appears in his authorship as early as 1844.

The truth that is a property of actuality rather than of mental representations is restricted, according to Kierkegaard, to aspects of reality that relate to the existence of the individual as such – which, he argues, is the case with ethics and religion (see, e.g., CUP 166). Ethics and religion are essentially prescriptive, thus ethical and religious truth is an agreement between the ideality of ethical and religious prescriptions and the actuality of the individual’s existence. Ethically, explains Hügli, “the objective is not to express reality in ideality. The individual is in the truth only to the extent that he has ideality in himself. Truth, in the subjective sense, could thus be described as *adaequatio rei ad intellectum*.” This truth is referred to by Kierkegaard as “essential truth” (CUP 168n) because it is essentially related to the essence of an individual’s existence and is thus also referred to by him as “subjective truth” (CUP 19). The distinction Kierkegaard draws between truth and truths is thus the distinction between objective truth and subjective truth.

Just as there are two kinds of objective, or descriptive, truth according to Kierkegaard, so are there two kinds of subjective, or prescriptive, truth. That is, there is truth in the sense of an agreement between some ethical or religious prescription and the existence of a particular individual and then there is “truth” in the sense that eternally valid norms for human behavior may be referred to independently of their expression in the life of an individual. I am going to refer to the former as subjective truth proper and to the latter as subjective truth in the loose sense.

Subjective truth proper (hereafter referred to simply as subjective truth) is, according to Kierkegaard, a way of existing. It is an existence that instantiates what one could call the moral law. It is for this reason Kierkegaard argues Christianity demands not that one *know* the truth, but that one “be the truth.” To be truth in this way is to manifest in one’s

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31 See, e.g., *Concept of Anxiety* (KW 8: 138) and PAP v B 60.
33 Cf. Daise, “The Will to Truth in Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments*,” and Walker, “Ethical Beliefs.”
34 *Practice in Christianity*, KW 20: 205.
being – i.e., existence – the agreement between thought and being that was identified above as truth.

According to Kierkegaard, however, ethical and religious prescriptions are actualized by an individual, not in the sense that his “historical externality” (CUP 482) is made to correspond to them, but in the sense that he has truly willed such correspondence. To agree with the substance of ethical and religious prescriptions is to make a conscious, or inward, effort to bring one’s existence into conformity with them.

Kierkegaard argues, however, that

[i]t is not for a single moment forgotten here that the subject is existing, that existing is a becoming and that the notion of truth as the identity of thought and being is a chimera of abstraction and truly only a longing on the part of creation, not because truth is not so, but because the knower is one who exists and thus as long as he exists, the truth cannot be so for him. (CUP 165)

No human being, according to Kierkegaard, is in “absolute possession” of ethical and religious truth. The difficulty is that the individual “is constantly coming to be [i Vorden]” (CUP 77). “Truth,” argues Kierkegaard, “is for the particular individual, only as he produces it in action.” Every action of an individual must “produce” truth, if his existence is to be an expression of truth. As long as an individual exists, however, his future is before him. This means that he is not finished acting and that his existence cannot thus be understood to be a complete expression of the truth.

We saw above that Kierkegaard speaks of objective truth in both a strict sense and a loose sense and that truth, and by extension knowledge, in

35 Cf. Hugli’s observation that what he refers to as äussere Wirklichkeit (external actuality) is not under the control of the individual and that, considered as a candidate for ethical action, “it is unethical to be concerned about that which is not itself dependent upon the ethical.” Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität, 216 (my translation). Thus, he concludes, only the intention, the will, remains as a candidate for ethical action.

36 Cf. Romans 8:19.

37 KW 18: 83. Cf. Slotty’s observation that according to Kierkegaard, “For the existing subject, truth cannot be obtained once and for all in the eternity of pure being, is not absolutely constituted. Truth, for someone who exists, is rather only in the passionate anticipation of eternity, exists only in an approach.” Slotty, “Die Erkenntnislehre S. A. Kierkegaards,” 38. My translation.

38 That the Danish expression Kierkegaard uses here is Vorden rather than Tilblivelsen might appear at first to contradict my earlier claim concerning the terminological difference between Vorden and Tilblivelsen. I believe, however, that the “coming to be” (or “becoming”) Kierkegaard intends the reader to understand here is precisely a determination of the individual’s essence (Væsen) rather than being (Væren). That is, there is a gradual accretion of facts about the individual represented by his actions over time. We “come to be” (blive til) according to Kierkegaard when we are born (CUP 490). We may “come to be” again, but only through a personal encounter with Christ as described in Crumbs (cf. RPC 96–103.)

this latter sense is referred to by him as an approximation (see CUP 21–22, 27–43, 68). It appears, however, that there is a sense in which even subjective truth proper, to the extent that it is expressed in the life of an individual, may be understood to be an approximation.\footnote{See The Book on Adler, KW 24: 91–92.} In other words, as Kierkegaard argues in Practice in Christianity,

[t]he being of truth is the redoubling of truth within yourself, within me, within him, that your life, my life, his life expresses the truth \textit{approximately} in the striving for it, that your life, my life, his life is \textit{approximately} the being of the truth in the striving for it, just as the truth was in Christ, a \textit{life}, for he was the truth.\footnote{KW 20: 205, emphasis added.}

The sense in which one can approximate ethical or religious truth differs, however, from the sense in which one can approximate objective truth. In both instances, according to Kierkegaard, truth in an absolute sense may be defined as a \textit{desideratum}. In the latter case, however, one has no guarantee that the apparent probability of the correspondence of a particular statement about actuality to the reality to which it refers is objectively vindicated – in the sense that, the more probable the correspondence appears, the closer he is to its absolute determination. That is, an increase in the apparent probability of the correspondence brings the subject no closer to establishing genuine correspondence.

To approximate ethical and religious truth, according to Kierkegaard, is precisely to “approach” it. This can be seen if we look at the Danish expression he uses to refer to this sort of approximation. The expression in question is not \textit{Approximation}, the one he uses in the context of his discussion of objective truth (cf. CUP 21–43), but \textit{Tilnærmelse} (see, e.g., KW 20: 205; 21: 208). \textit{Tilnærmelse} is composed of two words, \textit{Nærmelse}, which translates literally as “the act or movement, to approach, to come closer to,” and the preposition \textit{til}, which translates as “to.”\footnote{Cf. J. S. Ferrall and T. G. Repp, A Danish–English Dictionary (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1845) and Christian Molbech, Dansk Ordbog [Danish Dictionary] (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1859).} \textit{Tilnærmelse} may thus be translated as either “approximation” or “approach,” and it appears to be the latter that Kierkegaard has in mind. That is because it was customary in theological circles in Copenhagen in the mid-nineteenth century to speak of “approaching God.” J. P. Mynster, the Bishop of Zealand during most of Kierkegaard’s adult life, argued, for example, that “\textit{Tilnærmelsen til Gud} kann ikke finde Sted uden Betragtning af Gud” (One cannot approach God without contemplating God).\footnote{Mynster, Blandede Skrifter, 1: 49. My translation.}
One has an access, according to Kierkegaard, to ethical-religious reality that one does not have to actuality more generally. That is, one is assumed, on his view, to have insight into the substance of ethical-religious prescriptions through one’s conscience which, he asserts, is one’s “co-knowledge [Samviden] with God” (CUP 129). It is thus possible, according to Kierkegaard, to approach ethical or religious – i.e., prescriptive – truth in the striving for it, in a sense that it is not possible to approach objective, or descriptive, truth through probability.

Kierkegaard is not a subjectivist. His claim that “truth is subjectivity” (CUP 159–251) is not meant to refer to truth in general, but is made in the context of his examination of a specific kind of truth – i.e., a truth that is essentially related to the existence of the individual knower as such. This does not mean, however, that while Kierkegaard believed there was objective truth in scholarship and science, he was a subjectivist with regard to ethical and religious truth, as one might infer from his claim that with respect to ethics and religion, “subjectivity itself becomes the mark of the truth” (CUP 212).

That subjectivity becomes “a sign of the truth” here is not in the least mysterious. It is a formal consequence of the fact that there are two ways in which thought and being may be understood, according to Kierkegaard, to “agree.” Subjectivity does not become a sign of truth in general, but only when the truth in question is of the subjective sort. That is, when truth is prescriptive, then the way that the individual’s existence represents an actualization of these prescriptions becomes a sign of the truth. Such agreement is the result of an individual’s having accepted ethical-religious prescriptions in the sense that he has willed to bring his existence into conformity with them.

Kierkegaard’s claim that truth is subjectivity means no more than that when “truth” is prescriptive of an individual’s existence, the substance of the prescription ought to be expressed in that existence, not that Christianity may be “true” for one person and Buddhism, for example, “true” for another. There is, according to Kierkegaard, one genuine set of

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44 Hannay has “co-consciousness” rather than “co-knowledge.” I have taken the liberty of modifying the translation to “co-knowledge” because the Danish is Samviden and “knowledge” is the preferred translation of Viden. This more literal translation also makes the resultant expression “co-knowledge” a cognate of the Latin conscientia.

45 Cf. CUP 334, 351n, 440–441; see also Kierkegaard, Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses, KW 5: 306.


47 Cf. The Book on Adler (KW 24: 117–118) and Slotty, “Die Erkenntnislehre S. A. Kierkegaards,” 62. This point may seem to be at odds with Kierkegaard’s claim in the Postscript that one may pray in truth to God “though he worships an idol,” so long as one “prays with all the passion of the infinite” (CUP 169). The point of this example, however, is precisely that prayer concerns how one relates to
 ethical-religious prescriptions which, when actualized, constitutes truth in the subjective sense. He never tries to defend this view, however, or to develop criteria for determining the “truth,” in the sense of the objective truth, of Christianity, because he believes this is formally impossible.\footnote{It is not even possible, according to Kierkegaard, to prove that there is a God: see, e.g., CUP 279–280 and Philosophical Crumbs, in RPC 113–117.}

The question of the truth of Christianity can become an object of mere contemplation. Kierkegaard argues, however, that such a disinterested relation to “the truth, or truths, of Christianity is precisely untruth” (CUP 188). That is, to fail to express the substance of these truths in one’s existence is to transform Christianity, “which is essentially a way of life, into a way of speaking [Talemaade],” which, he argues, “it least of all wants to be.”\footnote{KW 21: 159. Translation modified. “Platitude” is the word used by the Hongs to translate Talemaade; it is not an acceptable translation of this expression, however, as it was used in the first half of the nineteenth century. Talemaade was defined simply as a “mode of expression or phrase” (see Ferrall and Repp, A Danish–English Dictionary). The Hongs’ translation is misleading to the extent that “platitude” has pejorative connotations in English, and the emphasis here is clearly on the distinction between saying and doing, rather than on the substance of what is said.}

That is, to fail to express Christian truth in one’s existence is to relegate to the realm of abstraction something which by its very nature – i.e., as prescriptive – demands to be made concrete.

Objective “truth,” as we have seen, was something with respect to which the crowd, according to Kierkegaard, was considered to have validity, “even validity as the decisive factor”; this is not the case, however, with subjective “truth.”\footnote{KW 22: 159.} The latter view of truth, he asserts, “holds that wherever the crowd is, untruth is” (KW 22: 106). This view of truth is, according to Kierkegaard, precisely that of ethics and religion.\footnote{See ibid., KW 22: 106 and following.} That is, ethics and religion are concerned with the manner in which the individual ought to exist and this is something, according to Kierkegaard, with respect to which the crowd can have no significance.

CONCLUSION

Readers familiar with the Postscript will be aware that Kierkegaard speaks there not only of subjective and objective truth, but also of subjective and objective knowledge. These two types of knowledge relate predictably to

God, not whether it is the true God to whom one is related. Kierkegaard’s concern throughout the Postscript was not whether Christianity was true, but whether he was a true Christian. He is able to make the transition from the fact that one is praying in truth to the claim that it is thus to the true God one prays, because he never questions that the God of the Christian religion is the true God. To pray in truth is thus necessarily to pray to the true God. Cf. Hügli, Die Erkenntnis der Subjektivität, 159.
these two types of truth, and each has its own form of justification which is relative to the particular nature of its object. In fact, just as there is objective truth in the strict sense and objective truth in an approximate sense, so will the reader discover that there is objective knowledge in the strict sense and in an approximate sense. The same sorts of distinctions apply to subjective knowledge. There is subjective knowledge proper and then there is what one could call pseudo-knowledge, or an objective grasp of truths whose nature is essentially prescriptive, divorced from the actions, or way of life, that they prescribe.

It should be clear by now that, although Kierkegaard never wrote an epistemological treatise as such, his views on knowledge are far more sophisticated and well thought out than has traditionally been appreciated, and that the Postscript is one of the richest sources of information about these views in all of Kierkegaard’s authorship.
Kierkegaard’s views on the relationship of faith to reason are usually counted among the most important and distinctive contributions of his thought. Since *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (hereafter *Postscript*) is often regarded as one of his most significant philosophical works, it certainly makes sense to give careful attention to how faith and reason are viewed in this book. Surprisingly, however, although there is much in this work about reason and much about faith, there is actually very little attention paid to their relationship. The major discussion is found in only one section of *Postscript*, which appears late in the chapter on “The Problem of the Crumbs,” under the heading “The Dialectical Aspect” (CUP 470–488). The relative brevity of this section is perhaps to be explained by the fact that Johannes Climacus, the pseudonymous author, has already given decisive attention to these issues in his earlier *Philosophical Crumbs*;¹ and in this section of *Postscript* he frequently refers back to that previous work. Though the full title of *Postscript* is rarely used in citations of the book, it is worth recalling that the book is a kind of sequel, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs*. Hence, in looking at *Postscript*, I shall also refer back to *Crumbs* at many points.

Although the relevant section of *Postscript* is relatively brief, given the massive size of the book, it is nevertheless replete with interpretive problems. The major issue I wish to address concerns the stance of faith toward reason. Kierkegaard is frequently described as an irrationalist, and even more frequently as a fideist, because it is believed that he holds that faith and reason are essentially at loggerheads. I shall argue that these common textbook characterizations of Kierkegaard are misleading: although Kierkegaard certainly holds that the relation between faith and reason is often one of tension, the conflict is not a necessary or essential conflict. It is possible for faith and reason to be on good terms. Thus, it is a mistake to

¹ The Danish title, *Philosophiske Smuler*, has commonly been translated as *Philosophical Fragments*.
think that faith is an irrational stance, and if Kierkegaard is to be described as a fideist, the term must be carefully defined and nuanced.²

PRELIMINARY ISSUES

Before I address the main issues, there are two preliminary questions that must be dealt with. The first concerns the pseudonymity of Postscript and the second is whether “reason” must be distinguished from “the understanding” in Kierkegaard’s thought.

As already noted, Kierkegaard attributed Postscript to Johannes Climacus, the pseudonymous author of Philosophical Crumbs, although Kierkegaard did put his own name on the title page of both books as “editor.” This raises the question of whether it is a mistake to develop an understanding of Kierkegaard’s views on faith and reason from these works, since it certainly seems possible that Johannes Climacus, as an invented character, might have views that differ from Kierkegaard’s own. Given that Kierkegaard expressly requests his readers, at the end of Postscript (CUP 529), to attribute any quotations from the pseudonymous books to their pseudonymous authors, a practice I shall honor in this chapter, we cannot automatically assume that Kierkegaard shares the views of Climacus.

I believe that there are good reasons to take the pseudonymous character of Climacus as a “humorist” into account, and recognize that he does indeed say things that Kierkegaard would not say, as well as saying some things in a different way than Kierkegaard would say them, even if the views expressed are similar.³ However, although a radical divergence between Kierkegaard and Climacus is a theoretical possibility, we do have good evidence that on this issue there is no radical divergence. That evidence consists partly of Kierkegaard’s own comments about Postscript in his journals. In a crucial passage that I will later discuss at some length, quoted by the Hongs in the Supplement to their edition, Kierkegaard appropriates the book’s claims about faith and reason as his own. Here Kierkegaard quotes Hugh of St. Victor to the effect that even though reason does not really grasp what faith believes, there is still something that obligates reason to honor faith. Kierkegaard then registers his agreement and claims that this is the view that he developed in Postscript, saying: “This is what I have developed (for

² I have made a start toward this nuancing through the distinction I make between “irrational fideism” and “responsible fideism” in my Faith Beyond Reason.
³ For more on my views of Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms generally, and Johannes Climacus in particular, see my Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript, chapter 1, and Passionate Reason, chapter 1.
example, in *Concluding Postscript* — that not every absurdity is the absurd or the paradox.”

In any case, the claim that Kierkegaard is an irrationalist or a fideist of an objectionable sort is often based partly on the Climacus writings. If it can be shown that Climacus neither is an irrationalist nor holds an objectionable form of fideism, this will remove one major reason for ascribing these labels to Kierkegaard as well.

The second preliminary issue I wish to address concerns a possible distinction between reason and understanding. If these are different, then the relation of faith to reason might be different from the relation between faith and the understanding. The possibility of such a distinction must be considered, since it is one made by Kant, who carefully distinguishes understanding (German *Verstand*), the faculty that forms judgments, from reason (German *Vernunft*), the faculty that carries out inferences. Hegel and his followers had argued that the limits of reason that Kant had insisted upon were limits of understanding, and that when reason was understood as dialectical reason, the deliverances of reason were not limited to appearances, as Kant had thought, but could reach absolute knowledge. Hence, for a Hegelian the distinction between reason and the understanding is of the utmost importance.

Is this the case for Kierkegaard as well? Certainly, there is in nineteenth-century Danish a linguistic distinction between reason (*Fornunft*) and understanding (*Forstand*) that corresponds to the distinction in German. When Johannes Climacus wishes to discuss faith and the intellect, the term that he most frequently uses is *Forstanden*, which is properly translated as “the understanding.” Is it possible then that the tension that Climacus sees between faith and the intellect is only a tension between faith and the “lower” faculty of the understanding, leaving open the idea of a harmonious relation between faith and the “higher” reason?

I think the answer to this question must be negative. The chief reason is that a major theme of the decisive section of *Postscript* is a scathing attack on anyone who thinks that the incomprehensibility of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, understood as the absolute paradox, can be comprehended from some “higher” vantage point. Climacus pours ridicule on the person he describes as “reborn,” who claims to have a “higher understanding” of the Paradox (CUP 475). It is unlikely that the revivalist Climacus has in mind here is identical with the philosophical followers of Hegel, but the claim that the incarnation is essentially incomprehensible to

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Faith and reason in Concluding Unscientific Postscript

Humans nevertheless undermines any claim that there is a human faculty called “reason” for which the Paradox is understandable.

Support for this conclusion is also found in the fact that Kierkegaard himself, in the key journal passage discussed above, seems to assume that Hugh of St. Victor, in writing about faith and reason, is writing about the same issue that Kierkegaard himself had discussed in Postscript using the language of “understanding.” It is also worth noting that David Swenson’s earlier translation of Philosophical Crumbs usually renders Forstanden as “reason.” Swenson grew up speaking both English and Norwegian, and the Norwegian he learned as a child would have been very similar to Kierkegaard’s Danish. It must have seemed plausible to him that Kierkegaard used Forstanden much as English speakers use “reason,” and his intuitions here carry some weight. I conclude that, even though there are differences in associations and connotations between Fornunft and Forstand in Danish, there is no reason to think that Kierkegaard believed that the distinction between reason and the understanding has any important bearing on the question of how faith is related to the human intellect.

The interpretive problem: is faith against or above reason?

The major interpretive problem that faces the reader of the relevant section of Postscript is that Climacus appears to waffle on the question as to whether faith and reason are essentially opposed. For Climacus the relationship between human reason and Christian faith centers on the incarnation, which lies at the heart of Christianity and which Climacus consistently describes as “the absolute paradox” (CUP 183–184, 318). Climacus seems to give quite ambivalent statements about the relation between human reason and belief in the incarnation. On the one hand, Climacus insists that the believing Christian always believes “against the understanding” (CUP 476). This naturally suggests that the content of what a Christian believes is something that is opposed to reason. If faith requires a belief that is opposed to reason, then faith does appear to be irrational, and it is understandable that Climacus describes faith as requiring a “crucifixion of the understanding” (CUP 472). If one focuses solely on this kind of passage, the common reading of Kierkegaard as an irrational fideist appears justified.

Further support for this reading is provided by the claim of Climacus that the incarnation itself involves a “contradiction” (CUP 486), in that

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it involves the belief that the eternal has become historical. Such a belief “goes against all thinking” because the eternal can only become historical “against its own nature” (CUP 485). One can certainly see why many have taken this to mean that the claim that the incarnation has occurred involves a logical contradiction, and thus can only be believed by going against reason.\footnote{For a clear argument that Kierkegaard does understand Christian faith as involving belief in a logical contradiction, see Hannay, \textit{Kierkegaard}, 105–109.}

However, Climacus also seems to want to absolve the believing Christian of the charge of irrationality. Although he claims that the Christian believes what is “incomprehensible,” he nonetheless also claims that this incomprehensible content must be distinguished from “nonsense” (CUP 476). In fact, the Christian is protected against “nonsense” by a certain use of the understanding: “Nonsense, therefore, he cannot believe against the understanding, as one might fear, for the understanding will precisely see nonsense for what it is and prevent him from believing it; but he makes as much use of the understanding as is needed to become aware of the incomprehensible, and then relates to this, believing against the understanding” (CUP 476).

So, although the content of Christian faith must be believed “against the understanding,” that content must be distinguished from “nonsense,” and it is the understanding that makes this important distinction. What might Climacus mean by this? In what sense does Christian faith take as its object “the incomprehensible,” and how is this distinguished from “nonsense”? If the incarnation is taken to be a logical contradiction, it is hard to see how it could be distinguished from other logical contradictions, which certainly do appear to be nonsensical.

There is other evidence that counts significantly against the irrationalist interpretation as well. One is the journal entry mentioned above, which I now quote:

Hugo de St. Victor states a correct thesis (Helfferich, \textit{Mystik}, Vol. 1, p. 368): “Faith is really not supported by the things that go beyond reason, by any reason, because reason does not comprehend what faith believes; but nevertheless there is something here by which reason becomes determined or is conditioned to honor the faith that it still does not perfectly succeed in grasping.”

This is what I have developed (for example, in \textit{Concluding Postscript}) – that not every absurdity is the absurd or the paradox. The activity of reason is to distinguish the paradox negatively – but no more.\footnote{Again, this is KW 12\textsuperscript{2}: 98; PAP x\textsuperscript{2} A 354.}
Kierkegaard goes on to say several other things that are relevant to this issue. First of all, he equates the absurd with the improbable, rather than what is logically contradictory; secondly, he adds that this “absurd” is a distinctive concept to be distinguished from “all sorts of absurdities.”

Third, he maintains that this concept of the absurd “is composed in such a way that reason has no power to . . . prove that it is nonsense”; on the contrary, it is “a symbol, a riddle, a compounded riddle about which reason must say: I cannot solve it, it cannot be understood, but it does not follow that it is nonsense.” If the incarnation were simply a logical contradiction, it is hard to see how these claims could be true.

One might object that this is a retrospective understanding on Kierkegaard’s part. Perhaps he has had second thoughts about the irrationalism espoused by Climacus and wishes to reinterpret his earlier work. However, what Climacus himself says in Philosophical Crumbs ought to undermine such a worry. For there Climacus makes it perfectly plain that there is no necessary opposition between reason and faith. Rather than a necessary opposition between faith and reason, Climacus defends what I have called the “no neutrality” thesis. When reason encounters the paradox (the incarnation), one of two passionate responses must occur: faith or offense. Climacus affixes an “Appendix” to Chapter 3 of Crumbs that deals with offense at some length.

The main thrust of this section is that faith and offense are contrasting passionate responses to the paradox. Offense wants to see itself as providing a rational critique of the paradox and thus it would like to see itself as a disinterested party. This is, however, an illusion. In reality, according to Climacus, the accusations that the offended reason hurls at the incarnation are an echo: all that reason says about the incarnation it has actually learned from revelation. However, offense is not the only possible response. It is also possible for a human person to respond in faith, and, when this happens, reason and the paradox are on good terms: “the encounter is a happy one” (KW 7: 49). This requires the understanding to “surrender itself” while the paradox “gives itself” (KW 7: 54). Since both faith and offense are passionate responses, it does not appear that either response is more “rational” than the other. It looks therefore as if both Climacus and

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8 Ibid. 9 “Supplement,” KW 122: 99. 10 I have used this terminology before: see Faith Beyond Reason, 18–19, 46, 134. For my defense of the claim that reason, according to Climacus, cannot be neutral with respect to the incarnation but necessarily responds either with the passion of faith or with the passion of offense, see Passionate Reason, especially 58–118. 11 Philosophical Fragments, KW 7: 49–54.
Kierkegaard think that the tension between faith and reason, when belief in the incarnation is present, is not a necessary opposition.

RESOLVING THE INTERPRETIVE DILEMMA: FAITH AS ABOVE AND AGAINST REASON

Given the evidence that Kierkegaard does not see reason and faith as necessarily conflicting, it is not surprising that many commentators have challenged the view that Kierkegaard is an irrational fideist.12 This is territory that I have myself explored on a number of occasions and I will here draw on some of that earlier work.13 I shall attempt to lay out the interpretive path I take on the issue, and along the way marshal some of the evidence that supports this reading. The crucial desiderata for such an account include giving an explanation of why there is tension between faith and reason (why one must believe “against the understanding”) while at the same time showing how the tension is not a necessary conflict (why it is possible for there to be a “happy relation” between reason and the paradox).

The key point is that the “contradiction” that the incarnation involves must not be seen as a formal or logical contradiction. If belief in the incarnation includes a belief in what is logically contradictory, then such a belief is necessarily or essentially irrational. It cannot be rational to believe what is known to be logically impossible. However, there is very strong evidence that the “contradiction” Climacus describes is not a formal or logical contradiction. The terms “contradiction” (Modsigelse) and “self-contradiction” (Selvmodsigelse) are used frequently by Climacus, almost always in reference to instances that are not formal or logical contradictions. One of the most important instances is that human existence itself is frequently described as a contradiction or as involving a contradiction. “Existence itself, existing, is a striving and is just as pathetic as comic: pathetic because the striving is infinite, i.e., directed towards the infinite, is an infinitizing, which is the highest pathos; comic because the striving involves a self-contradiction” (CUP 78). The “contradiction” in this case is that human existence itself is a synthesis of “the infinite and the finite, the

12 David Swenson’s own Something About Kierkegaard provided one of the earliest defenses against the charge that Kierkegaard was an irrationalist. For other important examples, see MacKinnon, “Kierkegaard: Paradox and Irrationalism” and his “Kierkegaard’s Irrationalism Revisited.” See also Fabro, “Faith and Reason in Kierkegaard’s Dialectic,” and Soe, “Kierkegaard’s Doctrine of the Paradox.”

13 Evans, “Is Kierkegaard an Irrationalist?” This essay is reprinted in Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self, 117–132. See also my books Faith Beyond Reason, Passionate Reason, and Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript.
eternal and the temporal” (CUP 78). But these are precisely the qualities that make the incarnation a “contradiction” for Climacus. Whatever the “contradiction” of the incarnation involves, it mirrors or in some way has a correlate in the nature of human existence itself. The importance of this will be made clear below.

A second important use of “contradiction,” which overlaps with the first, is that Climacus consistently describes the “comic” as centering on a contradiction, and “humor” as the “painless perception” of this contradiction. “The comic is present in every stage of life (except that the position differs), for wherever there is life there is contradiction, and where there is contradiction the comic is present” (CUP 431; emphasis in original). Climacus appends to this statement an extended footnote consisting almost entirely of jokes and descriptions of comic situations. For example, a man who falls into a cellar in front of a shop while looking up at the shop window is said to be comical because of the “contradiction” between his upward gaze and the downward trajectory of his body (CUP 432–433).

It should be evident from these examples that by “contradiction” Climacus usually intends to refer to what we should today term an “incongruity.” There is no logical contradiction between a man’s upward gaze and his body’s downward flight, but there is an experienced tension between them. We do not normally expect to see a person who is looking up vanish from our sight by going downwards, and thus there is a sense in which what we are seeing in such a case “contradicts” our expectations, rooted as they are in past experience. It is thus possible that the “contradiction” that the incarnation involves is not a logical or formal one. This at least opens up the possibility that belief in the incarnation is not belief in what is logically impossible.

This possibility is confirmed by an important passage in *Philosophical Crumbs*, one of the few places where Climacus does speak about a formal or logical contradiction. In the course of a discussion about how individuals might become disciples of an incarnate deity, Climacus defends the claim that this can only happen if a person receives faith directly from the God who is the object of faith. He then considers and rejects the claim that a person could receive faith from some other disciple of the God, on the grounds that this would involve a “contradiction.” The contradiction in this case is clearly logical, since the problem is that the disciple who is supposed to give another disciple the condition of faith would have to be God and also not to be God: he would have to be God to give another the

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14 *Philosophical Crumbs*, KW 7: 101.
condition of faith, but he would have to not be God in order to receive
the condition of faith himself. Furthermore, the “contradiction” in this
case is, he says, a different kind of contradiction from the one involved
in the incarnation. The contradiction in the case where the individual is
both god and not-god results in “meaninglessness,” but his concept of
the incarnation as a paradox “contains no self-contradiction” and is not
meaningless.\(^\text{15}\) So the incarnation is not a logical contradiction and is at
least a possible object of faith.

But why is the incarnation said to be a paradox, and why is belief in it
“against” the understanding? On my reading, the incarnation is a paradox
in the sense that it contradicts our human expectations. For Kierkegaard,
as for empiricist philosophers such as Hume, our sense of what is likely or
probable is determined by our prior experience. Human existence itself is
a constant attempt to actualize possibilities that we perceive as ideals. That
is what Climacus means by speaking of human existence as an attempted
synthesis of the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal (CUP
78). Our ideals, as possibilities, are timeless and complete. Our realiza-
tions of those ideals are always successive and incomplete. The incarnation
involves the claim that one human being, Jesus of Nazareth, realized the
ideals completely, while remaining fully temporal. While living a life of
temporal succession, he nonetheless lived a life of infinite, eternal perfec-
tion. We can now see the importance of the fact that the “contradiction”
contained in the incarnation mirrors a contradiction that all of us experi-
ence. To believe that Christ is God is to believe that he succeeds in perfectly
realizing what is ideal.

All of our experience suggests that this cannot be done, or at least that it
is extremely improbable. Climacus uses precisely this language in Crumbs:
“The offense remains outside the paradox and retains probability; whereas
the paradox is the most improbable.”\(^\text{16}\) Since the paradox contains no “self-
contradiction” (in the logical sense), “thought can become preoccupied
with it as the strangest thing of all” (KW 7: 101). We cannot understand how
God could become human and our own experience as humans uniformly
supports the view that this is not possible. The incarnation is thus the most
improbable, “strange” event that we can conceive (KW 7: 47). But such a
view is based on our experience, which (as Hume points out) is the ground
of our sense of what is probable and what is improbable.

One might object that our understanding of the impossibility of the
incarnation must be based on something stronger than experience. A critic

\(^{15}\) Ibid. \(^{16}\) KW 7: 52; emphasis added.
might say that in this case we are facing conceptual or logical impossibility, and not merely improbability. We can know a priori that what is eternal cannot be temporal; God cannot be human. However, it is crucial to see that Climacus denies that we have any such a priori knowledge. In order to know that the concepts of “God” and “human” (or “the eternal” and “the temporal”) are logically incompatible, we would have to have a clear understanding of both concepts. We do know that a round square is logically impossible, because we have a clear understanding of what it is to be square and what it is to be round. However, the whole of Chapter 3 of Crumbs is an extended argument that we have no clear understanding of what it means to be God. The incarnation appears to us to be something that is impossible because our experience speaks uniformly against it. However, our conviction in this case does not rest on a clear and distinct intuition about the nature of God, because we have no reliable intuitions about God. Climacus thinks that it is possible that God might reveal to us that the incarnation is possible by actually becoming incarnate (CUP 177), thereby showing us that what is true does not have to conform to what we humans think is likely or probable.

There is one other important fact to consider at this point. The reason that the incarnation appears to be impossible to us is that God and humans are absolutely different (see, e.g., CUP 406). We do not understand how something so different from us can become like us. However, even this understanding of God as “absolutely different” is derived from God’s revelation of himself in the incarnation as absolutely different. “Just to come to know that the god is the different, man needs the god and then comes to know that the god is absolutely different from him.” The “offended” human reason takes this absolute difference as a reason not to believe (CUP 451–452n). Climacus, however, insists that this “objection” is not really an objection at all, but an “echo,” an “acoustic illusion,” in which human reason repeats what it has learned from God’s revelation, but puts it forward as if it were reason’s own discovery (KW 7: 49). This is why in the end offense must be understood as passive, something that is not the work of an autonomous reason, but a response created by revelation.

It is also vital to have a clear view as to what this “absolute difference” is. It is tempting for a philosopher, especially one who is engaged in a priori speculation about God’s attributes, to think that the differences must be metaphysical in nature. God is infinitely powerful; humans are finite in power. God is timelessly eternal, while humans are temporally successive.

17 KW 7: 46–47.
However, Climacus denies that this is the case. He says that the absolute difference is not to be located in the fact that humans are creatures, while God is the creator. On the contrary, the creature–creator relation makes God and humans “akin” (KW 7: 47). The absolute difference must rather be rooted in some characteristic humans have brought upon themselves, and this characteristic can only be sin (KW 7: 47, and see also CUP 490). So the difference between God and humans that makes it appear impossible for an incarnation to occur is that we are sinful and God is not. This fits precisely with my earlier claim that it is our own experience of failing to realize our ideals that makes the incarnation appear so improbable or unlikely.

WHY THE INCARNATION IS “AGAINST” HUMAN REASON

We now are in a position to see why the incarnation, even though it is not a logical contradiction, is still in some sense “against” human reason. Human reason as a pure, logical faculty does not exist for Kierkegaard. A major theme in Postscript is that “pure thought,” as a kind of completely abstract and disinterested reasoning, is impossible for humans (CUP 263). Human reason is rather a concrete, historical faculty possessed by actual human beings. The character of their reason reflects their character as human persons, including their passions. Since human beings are sinful creatures, human thought is shaped by two vices: selfishness and pride. Both have implications for the way that human reason will tend to respond to the incarnation.

Let us consider selfishness first. The incarnation, as Kierkegaard understands it and as Climacus presents it, is an example of love that is pure and unselfish. Unlike a human teacher who gains an identity from the benefits given to his students, God in no way needs humans. In becoming a human being God endures all the trials of human existence and risks disappointment, all for the good of the humans he loves. Humans, as sinful creatures, do not love this way, and we have, apart from the incarnation, no experience of such love. Hence, we cannot but judge it to be the most strange and improbable thing we can imagine.

To this picture we must add the fact that sin gives humans a prideful desire to be independent and autonomous. Though we are in reality completely dependent on God for our very being, we are rebels, constantly

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18 Climacus draws an interesting contrast on this point between human teachers, including Socrates, and God. See KW 7: 23–26.
declaring our independence. This trait means that we want to rely on ourselves; we do not like to acknowledge our dependence on others since it makes us inferior. God as the one who is “wholly different” from us cannot be understood if we rely solely on our own reason. We can only come to know him when he reveals himself to us, granting us the condition which makes it possible to grasp the truth. However, our natural tendency, the “default position,” as it were, is to assume that our powers are adequate to understand the truth on our own. When confronted by God’s paradoxical revelation in the incarnation, this produces offense, which is simply a judgment that what I cannot understand must be “absurd” – although, as we have seen, Climacus claims that this “objection” on the part of reason is in reality an echo of what reason has learned from revelation (KW 7: 52; cf. CUP 491–492).

The close connection between human understanding or reason and probabilities known from experience is illuminated by an interesting analogy Climacus draws between a person with faith in the incarnation and an ethically heroic individual. “An enthusiastic ethical individuality uses understanding to discover what is the most prudent thing in order then not to do it; for what we generally call the most prudent thing is seldom the noble thing” (CUP 476). The implication is that the person who relies on the understanding to decide what to do will be governed by what experience judges to be most likely in the best interest of the agent. Climacus says that a truly ethical person knows what would be “prudent” or reasonable to do in a situation but chooses not to do it, because of his or her ethical passion (477). In a similar way, a believer in the incarnation understands why the incarnation appears to be paradoxical, unlikely, even impossible, but still manages to believe in the reality of the God’s appearance in time.

**Faith as the “Happy Passion” in which Reason and the Paradox Are on “Good Terms”**

But how is it possible to believe what seems unlikely or improbable? One can understand why a person might choose to do an act that will not bring any selfish benefits, but beliefs seem to be different from actions. A person can decide to do what is unlikely to succeed, and certainly what is unlikely to offer any benefits to that individual. But surely a belief is a belief in what is true, and one cannot simply decide to believe what one knows to be false. And it seems only a little easier to believe what one knows is highly unlikely or improbable. Given that faith is “against” the understanding, how is faith even possible?
In an earlier work, *Faith Beyond Reason*, I have argued that “reason,” like many other terms in epistemology as well as ethics, is partly a normative concept and partly descriptive.\(^{19}\) As a normative concept, “reason” refers to those practices of thought that we humans ought to follow, because they are practices that will most likely lead to truth. However, like other normative terms, “reason” must also have some descriptive content; every society has practices that it sees as “reasonable” because they are the practices that will be most likely to reach the truth. However, it is possible for some radical reformer to become convinced that the concrete practices that are described as “reasonable” in a given context are in fact not “reasonable” in the normative sense. Such an individual becomes convinced that these practices do not in fact lead to truth.

This is exactly what happens, according to Kierkegaard and Climacus, in the case of Christian faith. A person who has faith has become convinced that what seems unlikely from the perspective of human reason, shaped by selfishness and prideful autonomy, is in fact true. God has become a human being to reveal to humans their own sinfulness and to provide a way to repair the damage that sinfulness creates. The Christian believes what is “against the understanding” not out of perversity or a disregard for truth, but because he or she has become convinced that human understanding is incapable of achieving the essential truth about life on its own, and must be given that truth by God.

I have noted that Climacus thinks that a person must respond to the incarnation either in faith or in offense. But what is it that produces one response rather than the other? The answer he gives is that the precondition for faith is “sin-consciousness.” This “is a change of the subject himself, which shows that, outside the individual, there must be the power that makes clear to him that in coming into existence he has become another than he was, has become a sinner. This power is the god in time” (CUP 491; trans. modified). Climacus at this point refers the reader back to Chapter 1 of *Philosophical Crumbs*, which also says that the consciousness of sin is something that must be revealed to the individual by the incarnate god. The earlier work also maintains, however, that this learning about sin constitutes the “one and only analogy to the Socratic” in the new “incarnational hypothesis” that Climacus pretends to invent. Thus, with respect to sin, “the teacher is only an occasion, whoever he may be, even if he is a god, because I can discover my own untruth only by myself” (KW 7: 14). So, even though sin can be discovered only through a revelation, the revelation does not make this knowledge inevitable.

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\(^{19}\) Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason*, 22, 92–100.
The answer of Climacus to the puzzle about why some respond in faith and some are offended lies here. To respond in faith, a person must understand the limits of reason, and see that the descriptive practices that we call “reasonable” are not in fact truth-conducive. Such a person will voluntarily receive the gift of faith that God is offering. However, the individual who refuses to recognize his or her own sinfulness will see no reason to become self-critical in this way. Such an individual will think that the truth is something he or she is competent to discover without outside help, and will see the Christian story as a kind of insult: “If I cannot make sense of this story, then it must be absurd; it cannot be true.” Thus says the offended reason that has no consciousness of sin. The person of faith responds differently: “I cannot understand this miracle that God has done for me, but that is precisely what is needed to heal my sinfulness: a miracle I cannot understand. The fact that I cannot understand is in fact a sign that this is a true revelation from God.”

We can now understand why, even though faith is “against” reason, the tension between reason and faith is not a necessary opposition. A harmonious relation is possible between reason and the beliefs of Christianity when faith is present. Sin is universal among humans, except for Christ. As a Lutheran, Kierkegaard believes that even Christian believers retain a sinful human nature. Hence, the tendency or disposition in human reason to think that the incarnation is unlikely or improbable is strong and never disappears completely. However, for the believer this ceases to be a problem. The believer thinks that this characteristic is exactly what one should expect in a true revelation from God. To the believer, the response of the offended consciousness is a kind of indirect confirmation of the truth of the incarnation (KW 7: 51).

The idea here is not that it is human sin that makes the incarnation into something that reason cannot understand. Finitude alone is a barrier to a human’s fully understanding God, even apart from sinfulness. The person of faith clings tightly to the conviction that what God has done is in some sense incomprehensible (CUP 476). The incarnation would be incomprehensible even if humans were an unfallen race, yet the idea is that, if it were not for sin, this lack of understanding would not be problematic. An unfallen person would not say, “I do not understand this; it must not be true.” Rather, such a person would naturally say, “I do not understand this, but of course it is God’s doing so it is right and proper that I do not understand it.”

We can now understand why Climacus insists that a happy relation between reason and the paradox is possible. Since one of the normative goals of reason is truth, there is a sense in which human reason is fulfilled...
when gripped by the passion of faith, even while its limitations are being made plain — for it is faith that allows reason to reach the truth it was seeking all along. This helps us understand the analogy Climacus makes between the relation of self-love to love and the relation between the understanding and the paradox. Climacus asserts in *Philosophical Crumbs* that self-love “lies at the basis of love” but that “at its peak its [self-love’s] paradoxical passion wills its own downfall,” something that love wishes for also (KW 7: 48).

I think the idea that lies behind this is that the happiness that love seeks is inspired, at least initially, by self-love. I want to be with the one I love because that person makes me happy. However, when love becomes powerful, self-love is dethroned; I find happiness in pleasing the one I love. Paradoxically, the limitation of self-love leads to its fulfillment.

In a similar way, the passion that drives reason is a passion that seeks truth. For this passion to be satisfied, reason must be dethroned; its limitations must become evident and it must welcome God’s revelation. But when it does this, it finds that its passion for truth has been fulfilled, and thus in its paradoxical passion it wills its own downfall. That is why, in the happy passion that Climacus calls “faith,” it is important that reason must set itself aside (see CUP 195). Reason itself, then, comes to see the reasonableness of accepting the limits of reason.

We can now also understand better the journal passage in which Kierkegaard connects the content of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* with Hugh of St. Victor’s claim that the content of faith is above reason, rather than being opposed to reason. For the person of faith, the incarnation remains, as we have said, something that reason cannot understand. But it is no longer something absurd. It is above reason, and against the dispositions of sinful reason, but it is not opposed to reason insofar as reason is gripped by the passion of faith. Kierkegaard therefore says that faith provides a higher perspective on the matter:

But, of course, if faith is completely abolished, the whole sphere is dropped, and then reason becomes conceited and perhaps concludes that, ergo, the paradox is nonsense. What concern there would be if in another realm the skilled class were extinct and then the unskilled found this thing and that to be nonsense — but in regard to the paradox faith is the skilled.\(^\text{20}\)

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20 KW 12\(^2\): 99; PAP X\(^2\) A 354.
Any attempt to identify the “theology” of Concluding Unscientific Postscript is confronted from the outset by several difficulties. First, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym Johannes Climacus can hardly be said to be a theologian in any conventional sense of the word. He repeatedly emphasizes that he is not a Christian but a “dialectician,” “humorist,” and “psychologist” (CUP 378, 391, 405), who is concerned only to consider what steps he must take to acquire the “eternal happiness” promised by Christianity.

Secondly, the student of Climacus’ theology is confronted by the challenge of the dialectical character of Postscript. Even a casual reader will be struck by how different this book is from conventional works of Christian theology. A glance at a selection of theological manuals published both in Kierkegaard’s day and in our own age will confirm this impression. In such nearly contemporary works as J. P. Mynster’s Betragtninger over de Christelige Troeslærdomme (1833) (Observations on the Doctrines of the Christian Faith) and H. L. Martensen’s Christelige Dogmatik (1849) (Christian Dogmatics) we find Christian doctrines treated in a systematic and orderly way, beginning with definitions of religion, Christianity, and theology, before turning to the classic doctrines of the Christian faith such as revelation, God, Trinity, Christology, providence, sin, reconciliation, and so on. Similar approaches can be found in the work of more recent theologians. To take just one example, Wilfried Härle’s Dogmatik opens with a discussion of dogmatics and the “science” of theology, before considering the individual doctrines that comprise Christianity.

When we turn to Postscript, however, we find a work organized along very different lines. Instead of an orderly discussion of the classic Christian doctrines, Climacus touches playfully on the core beliefs of the Christian faith not in order to “explain” them, but in order to make the reader aware of the existential decision of faith or offense with which Christianity confronts every human being.
A third difficulty that confronts any attempt to identify the “theology” of Postscript is the presence of what appears to be an anti-theological strand in Climacus’ thought. Climacus very rarely mentions “theology” and “theologians,” but, when he does, it is either as a passing remark or as a criticism. Thus he criticizes “theological learning” for playing into the hands of unbelief by attempting to prove to the individual what that individual should believe in the passion of faith (CUP 27).

Despite these reservations, however, it is possible to speak of a Climacan theology in two ways. First, in his critique of “speculative philosophers” and “ecclesiastical speakers” for confusing Christian and non-Christian categories, Climacus implies the possibility of a “theological learning” which avoids this confusion. Secondly, underlying his critique of contemporary theology and philosophy, as well as his own treatment of Christianity in Postscript, is a distinct understanding of God, Christ, sin, and other central Christian concepts. Climacus’ “theology,” however, is developed not from the perspective of faith, but by an interested onlooker standing at the boundaries of Christianity, who has yet to enter the sphere of Christian religiousness.

The danger of attempting to isolate and identify the theological elements in Postscript is that we reduce Climacus’ “theology” to precisely the type of theology that he was anxious to subvert. In mapping out Climacus’ theology in a systematic, orderly way we risk removing precisely that which makes it so distinctive, namely the dialectical. This could be taken as an indication of the impossibility of a Climacan theology, and those readers who think this would be best advised to stop reading now. The only defense I can offer is that a study of this kind may provide a roadmap that will help the reader to orientate herself in the complexity of Postscript. Just as tracing the route on a map is no substitute to making the journey oneself, however, so too is an exposition of Postscript no substitute for engaging with the work itself and allowing oneself to be challenged by the decisive existential questions Climacus poses to his readers. Our first task in orientating ourselves in the “theology” of Postscript is to consider Climacus’ understanding of Christianity.

CLIMACUS’ CONCEPTION OF CHRISTIANITY

In Postscript Climacus explores how the individual should relate himself to the notion of Christianity advanced in his earlier work Philosophical Crumbs. Crumbs was concerned to delineate what Christianity is by distinguishing it from the alternative, “Socratic” view of the truth. The
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springboard for considering this was the question of whether a historical point of departure can be the basis for an eternal happiness. In Postscript Climacus fulfills the promise he made in Crumbs “to call the matter by its proper name and clothe the issue in its historical costume” (KW 7: 109; cf. CUP 11, 237). In fact, investing the problem in its historical costume is a straightforward task (CUP 12), for a single word will suffice, namely, Christianity (CUP 18; see also 16).

In one sense, then, a sequel to Crumbs is unnecessary. Crumbs has already elucidated the problem with dialectical clarity (CUP 12) and, other than stating that the historical manifestation of the thought-experiment of Crumbs is Christianity, no more needs to be said. A sequel is needed, however, not to add more historical detail to Christianity, but to bring to the fore how the individual should come into a relationship to Christianity and the eternal happiness it promises; or, as Climacus puts it in more personal terms, “how can I, Johannes Climacus, share in the happiness that Christianity promises?” (CUP 18).

It is this concern with the problem of the relationship to Christianity that accounts for the structure of Postscript. In Part One Climacus provides the promised sequel, in which he gives the thought-experiment of Crumbs its historical costume and takes issue with various contemporary treatments of Christianity. The second, much lengthier part of the book is “a renewed attempt on the same lines,” or “a new approach to the problem of the Crumbs” (CUP 18). This new approach focuses on bringing out the individual’s relation to Christianity. It is this question of the relationship to Christianity that is Climacus’ central concern and which determines the way he treats Christianity in Postscript.

This question of the individual’s relationship to Christianity stems from the character of Christianity. Christianity is not a system of thought, but an “existence-task,” and if we fail to recognize this, then, regardless of how extensive our knowledge of Christianity might be, we have fundamentally failed to grasp what Christianity is. This notion of Christianity as an existence-task leads Climacus to state that Christianity is not a doctrine (CUP 273), but an existence-communication (CUP 318, 319n, 321, 468–469, 471, 473, 478). It is not sufficient merely to think Christianity. Truly to grasp Christianity, one must exist in it.

Although Climacus repeatedly states that Christianity is not a doctrine but an existence-communication, this should not be taken to mean that he holds that Christianity lacks doctrinal content. Such a view “is mere chicanery,” for “when the believer exists in faith, his existence has enormous content but not in the sense that yields a §” (CUP 319). Climacus rejects
the application of “doctrine” to Christianity because he associates the term with an improper *philosophical* approach to Christianity. The problem with doctrine, understood philosophically, is twofold. First, it reverses the relation the individual should have to Christianity, for it privileges thought over existence, whereas the task with which Christianity confronts the existing individual is that not of thinking Christianity but of existing in it (CUP 319). Secondly, when it is understood as a philosophical doctrine, Christianity is subordinated to and absorbed by speculation (CUP 318–319).

These considerations prompt Climacus to make a distinction between doctrine understood philosophically and what we might term “doctrine understood existentially,” although Climacus himself does not use this phrase. He writes: “Surely a philosophical doctrine which wants to be grasped and speculatively understood is one thing, and a doctrine that proposes to be realized in existence another” (CUP 318n). With this latter, “existential” type of doctrine, “understanding” consists not in grasping it intellectually, but in “understanding that the task is to exist in it, in understanding how difficult that is and what an enormous existence-task such a doctrine sets the learner” (CUP 318–319n). If we understand doctrine as something to be realized in existence, Climacus is prepared to concede that the term may be applicable to Christianity, stating that “Christianity is a doctrine of this kind,” namely not a doctrine that one speculates upon, but a doctrine that one is called to exist in (CUP 319n). Doctrine in this sense is synonymous with the notion of existence-communication.

CLIMACUS’ CRITIQUE OF CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

This notion of Christianity as an existence-communication forms the basis of Climacus’ critique of contemporary theology, for it is precisely the existential character of the Christian faith that contemporary theological approaches overlook. Climacus devotes his discussion of “the objective problem of Christianity’s truth” in Part One of *Postscript* (CUP 19–50) to exposing the weaknesses of these approaches, namely “the Bible theory,” “the Church theory,” the “proof of the centuries” approach, and the philosophical or “speculative view.” These approaches fail because they treat Christianity *objectively*, in the sense that they see the problem posed by Christianity to be that of establishing its objective truth. This is achieved either by ascertaining the reliability of the Bible, appealing to the existence of the church, citing the historical impact of Christianity as evidence of its truth, or providing a philosophical elucidation of the contents of the Christian faith. Once Christianity’s objective truth has been established,
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the individual’s relationship to that truth is understood to follow as a matter of course (CUP 20, 33, 107–108, 234, 245). These attempts to prove the “objective truth” of the Christian faith, however, constitute a fundamental misunderstanding of the sort of truth that Christianity is, namely spirit. A truth that is spirit requires that the human being who wishes to come into a relationship with it takes it to heart. That is, it is a truth that the individual should appropriate into his or her very being and make his or her own. Treating Christianity as a collection of objective propositions thwarts this “taking to heart” by interpreting Christianity as a problem for thought rather than for existence (CUP 33), thereby preventing the existential decision from arising that is crucial for a genuine relationship to Christianity (CUP 62). Indeed, Climacus suspects that objectivity is a stratagem employed by cunning human beings to avoid “the pain and crisis of decision” (CUP 107). Becoming a Christian does not follow automatically once Christianity’s objective truth has been secured, but comes about only through the decision of the single individual. It is, however, precisely this decision and the subjectivity upon which it is based that is removed by the objective treatment of Christianity.

A further problem with objective approaches is that they disregard or suppress the fact that Christianity is paradoxical. Christianity makes the astounding claim that the eternal, infinite God has entered existence as an individual human being. Although this was a historical event and Christianity is therefore a historical phenomenon, it is an event which by virtue of God’s presence in time is a qualitatively different type of historical event from all others. As Climacus puts it in Crumbs, God’s entry into time is not “a simple historical fact,” but “an absolute fact” which can never be reduced to the purely historical, precisely because it is the unique point in time at which the eternal has entered time and become a human being (KW 7: 99–100). This paradoxical character of Christianity means that it can never be grasped objectively. As Climacus puts it, the difficulty is that “due to its paradoxical form the truth of Christianity has something in common with the nettle: when trying in this way without further ado to seize hold of it, the trusty subjectivity merely succeeds in stinging himself. Or rather . . . he does not seize hold of it at all; he seizes hold of its objective truth so objectively that he himself remains outside” (CUP 41).

Of all the Christian concepts that have been confused in modern thought, “faith” has been the most badly misunderstood. Climacus complains of the “wonderful confusion-mongering in speaking of faith” (CUP 195), which misunderstands faith as an insufficiently justified form of knowledge. Climacus attacks two versions of this misunderstanding in
Postscript. First, there is the view of faith as merely the passive response to what is currently improbable. Faith in this sense is merely a concession to lack of understanding, but this is only a temporary state of affairs which will be superseded as human ingenuity makes the improbable and the paradoxical ever more probable and less paradoxical (CUP 195). This attempt to make the improbability and paradoxicality of Christianity ever more probable is a fundamental misunderstanding of faith, however, for faith consists precisely in holding fast to the paradox despite its improbability (CUP 196).

A second major misunderstanding is to conceive of faith as a lower stage of knowledge. This is the Hegelian view, which understands the task posed by faith to be the translation of the inadequate formulations of religious discourse into the higher, more abstract conceptuality of philosophical thought. For Climacus, however, faith is not an inferior form of knowledge which needs to be transcended: it is in a completely different sphere unique to itself.

Contemporary misunderstanding of Christianity is compounded by the widespread confusion of Christianity with non-Christian existence-spheres and the consequent misuse of Christian categories in existence-spheres to which they do not belong (CUP 271). Christianity’s “calm, profound and unfathomable” terminology has through misuse become “life-worn” (CUP 304), “well-nigh breathless and without meaning” (CUP 304–305). Consequently, “the modern discourse about Christianity has lost the biting power of a vigorous terminology – and it is all toothless twaddling” (CUP 305). Climacus condemns the clergy for contributing to this enervation of the decisive Christian concepts by their confusion of Christian categories with “pagan-aesthetic” categories (CUP 208), and by such practices as infant baptism, which confuse the Christian with the merely human, so that to be a Christian is simply to be a human being (CUP 305; see also 311).

The conflation of the categories, the misuse of Christian terminology, and the enervation of the key Christian concepts have resulted in Christianity becoming easy. When Christianity first came into the world, it was difficult to be a Christian (CUP 311). This was how it should be, for “being a Christian has nothing to do with a life of ease” (CUP 308). But now it takes no effort to become a Christian. It is something one becomes as a matter of course. Yet this eliminates precisely the decision and passion that are decisive for a genuine relationship to Christianity. The task is therefore to shake so-called Christians out of their complacency. This requires overcoming human beings’ excessive familiarity with Christianity and creating distance
between the individual and Christianity, so that the individual can again recognize and respond to the decision before which Christianity places him or her (CUP 307). And this means adopting precisely the reverse approach to that of contemporary theology. It means not reducing Christianity to a collection of propositions, but treating Christianity as a mode of existence. It means not being objective, but being subjective. It means not eliminating existential decision, but cultivating the existential decisiveness that is the essential prerequisite for faith. We turn now to consider how Climacus develops his reversal of the key concepts of contemporary theology in his own distinctive theological approach.

**QUALITATIVE DIALECTICS**

As we saw earlier, Christianity has a paradoxical form and stings the subjectivity of the individual who seeks to grasp it. A major concern in *Postscript* is how to cultivate Christianity’s sting and, in so doing, to foster the subjectivity and inwardness that are the basis for a genuine relationship to Christianity. A mode of thought is thus needed which leads toward subjectivity and which assists the individual in fostering the inwardness that is crucial for a relationship to the eternal happiness promised by Christianity. This mode of thought is described by Climacus as subjective thought.

Subjective thought or reflection is thought which centers on the subjectivity of the existing individual. The task is not to prove the objective validity of whatever it is that is claimed to be the truth, but to focus on the individual’s relationship to that which is taken to be the truth (CUP 168). The distinctive feature of subjective thought is that the subjective thinker “is, as existing, essentially interested in his own thinking, is existing in it” (CUP 62). In order to assist the subjective thinker in thinking about his existence and existing in his thinking, a new type of dialectic is needed, namely what Climacus calls “the Greek or the existence-dialectic” (CUP 259), “concrete dialectics” (CUP 299), or, more frequently, “qualitative dialectics” (CUP 396, 404, 470). These dialectics are in direct opposition to the “abstract dialectics” (CUP 376n, 462) and “world-historical dialectics” (CUP 293–294) which are responsible for the confused understanding of existence and Christianity that bedevils modern Denmark.

Qualitative dialectics comprises two elements. First, in contrast to Hegelian dialectics, it does not mediate, but differentiates, holding categories apart so they are not confused. This regime requires a “qualitative distinction” between categories that have been conflated. Secondly, qualitative dialectics thinks within existence and with relation to existence. The
task is to think in existence and to exist in what one thinks. This means that the second aspect of qualitative dialectics is the subjective thinker’s “putting together” of existential possibilities within his or her own concrete existence. As Climacus puts it, “it is in putting together that all deepening in existence consists” (CUP 443). The task is to assist the subjective thinker in cultivating a relationship in his or her own existence to the existential possibilities identified by the employment of the qualitative distinction or disjunction.

THE QUALITATIVE DISJUNCTION

Qualitative dialectics wants to do away with easy transitions that allow the individual to slip into becoming a Christian without effort. It is thus concerned to separate the various existence-spheres and keep them apart (CUP 326, 366, 433). Each existence-sphere or life-view is characterized by specific existential categories. Confusion arises when these spheres are conflated and their categories used in the wrong sphere. In view of the existential character of the categories he wishes to clarify, Climacus’ tactic is not to define the categories but rather to introduce them through usage. This is an aspect of Climacus’ strategy of indirect communication, which prompts the individual in his or her encounter with the text to acquire an intuitive, “subjective” insight into the categories rather than an “objective” understanding. On the basis of Climacus’ usage, we can divide the categories into three basic types: objective, subjective, and totality categories.

Objective categories are characterized by having an external reference. Among these categories are “sense certainty, historical knowledge, speculative result” (CUP 68), “purely metaphysical categories” such as “the immanence of cause and effect, ground and consequent,” and the “metaphysically aesthetic categories of the great and the important” (CUP 129–130). The relationship of the existing individual to the objectivity to which these categories refer is either of no significance or follows as a matter of course.

Subjective categories are existential categories. They express something crucial about existence and must be realized in existence if they are genuinely to be grasped. In Postscript Climacus introduces a variety of different but closely related categories, all of which are intended to bring out the existential task facing the single individual. Key existential categories are decision (CUP 84), choice (CUP 225), freedom (CUP 216), and leap (CUP 84, 89), all of which express the insight that with regard to the modes of existence open to human beings there is no immediate transition, but rather “the category of transition is itself a break with immanence, a leap.”
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(CUP 247). Of central importance is a cluster of categories that address some aspect of the individual’s religious existence. These are the categories of the infinite, eternal, religious (CUP 55), and spirit (CUP 452, 461–463).

Totality categories are categories according to which the individual orients his or her entire existence (CUP 365, 450–451) and are closely related to Climacus’ notion of the “absolute telos.” This is the goal toward which the individual orients and reforms his or her existence in order thereby to come into a relationship with an eternal happiness. The task confronting each human being is to sustain an absolute relation to the absolute telos and a relative relation to relative ends. Qualitative dialectics and its use of totality categories are the means by which the subjective thinker identifies the absolute telos and separates it from the relative ends with which it is frequently confused in contemporary thought. Totality categories, then, are the means by which the subjective thinker orients her existence toward the absolute telos and measures whether she is relating herself absolutely to the absolute telos.

The problem is that contemporary society either has forgotten subjective and totality categories or has mistakenly transformed them into something else. Climacus complains that “most people have complacent categories for everyday use and resort to the categories of the infinite only on solemn occasions; that is to say, they never really have them” (CUP 73n). Totality categories and comparative categories have been confused and conflated, so that existing in comparative categories has been misunderstood as the expression and realization of totality categories. An example of this is the individual who brings the notion of God into his life only on special occasions, such as in church on Sundays (CUP 397–398), rather than allowing the concept of God to permeate and determine his entire existence. The concept of God is treated as merely one thing alongside many others and is thereby robbed of its status as a totality category.

The qualitative disjunction plays an important role in identifying the key existential categories, by separating them out from the aesthetic, abstract-metaphysical, and objective categories with which they have been confused and conflated in contemporary thought. Climacus emphasizes, however, that qualitative dialectics cannot of itself lead to faith. Dialectics is a means not of “proving” faith, but of clearing away the impediments that obscure its object. As he puts it, dialectics is a benevolent power, for it assists in finding where the absolute object of faith and worship is (CUP 411). Dialectics leads to the point where worship can begin (CUP 412), but beyond this it cannot go. The next step is a leap that only each single individual can make for him or herself.
Qualitative dialectics is concerned not only with the problem of identifying the absolute *telos*: it also aims to ensure that the human being sustains a *relationship* to the absolute *telos in existence*. Climacus’ term for this relationship is *pathos*.

The type of pathos Climacus wishes his reader to cultivate is what he calls “existential pathos,” which he defines as “action or the transformation of existence” (CUP 361). With regard to an eternal happiness, pathos is “the transformation in which, in existing, the existing person changes everything in his existence in relation to that highest good” (CUP 327). This pathos-filled relationship to the absolute *telos* is not an occasional relationship, however. A relation to the absolute *telos* is not something one sustains only on special occasions, such as once a week in church. If the relation to the absolute *telos* does not totally transform his or her existence, then the individual is living only in aesthetic pathos (CUP 325). Anything other than the individual’s attempt to transform his or her existence in relation to the absolute *telos* is unworthy of the absolute *telos* and reduces it to a relativity. Climacus writes that, “unless it transforms [one’s] existence absolutely,” one is not relating to it as an absolute *telos* (CUP 330).

Having shown that the task is to relate absolutely to the absolute *telos* and relatively to relative ends (CUP 361), Climacus states that “this task must now be understood more clearly in its concrete difficulty,” otherwise “existential pathos is repealed into aesthetic pathos, as if it were existential pathos merely to say this once for all, or once a month, with the passion of immediacy unchanged” (CUP 362). That is, it is necessary to trace in *concrete* terms how the existing individual goes about relating herself absolutely to an absolute *telos*. Climacus does this by breaking down the essential existential pathos required for an absolute relation to the absolute *telos* into renunciation, suffering, and guilt.

The “initial expression” of existential pathos is “the absolute orientation (respect) towards the absolute τελος, actively expressed in the reshaping of existence” (CUP 325). This absolute orientation toward the absolute *telos* requires renunciation. Pathos involves renunciation because the individual cannot without further ado relate himself to the absolute *telos*, but must first disengage himself from relative ends so that he can relate himself absolutely to the absolute *telos* and relatively to relative ends (CUP 362). When the individual has renounced relative ends, “only then can there be a question of the ideal task: relating at one time absolutely to the absolute and relatively to the relative” (CUP 362).
The “essential expression” of pathos is suffering (CUP 362, 364). Suffering arises from the individual’s continued and sustained renunciation of relative ends in his or her absolute orientation toward the absolute telos. Without suffering, the individual cannot sustain a relation to eternal happiness, because without suffering he or she cannot make the break with immediacy, i.e., with the relative ends in which each human being naturally has his or her life. This is why it is crucial to continue to exist in suffering and not to avoid it. In contrast to the aesthetic individual, who “suffers” only when an external impediment intervenes to interrupt his or her happiness, the religious individual “has suffering constantly with him, demands suffering just as the immediate individual demands good fortune, and demands and has suffering even when misfortune is existentially absent” (CUP 364–365). Suffering is the existence category for the religious (CUP 248–249n) and consequently, from a religious viewpoint, when suffering ends so too does religious existence (CUP 375).

The “decisive expression” of existential pathos is guilt-consciousness (CUP 440). Prior to the individual’s decision to orientate herself absolutely to the absolute telos, time was wasted which should have been spent in an absolute relation to the absolute telos; hence, the individual becomes conscious of guilt. The individual comes to see her existence as guilty, precisely because this wasted time means that it is now impossible to achieve an absolute relation to the absolute telos. Guilt-consciousness is a totality category (CUP 460) which, once posited, extends itself back in time: “once posited,” it “eternally presupposes itself” (CUP 463n). This guilt-consciousness constitutes the highest intensity of existential pathos in relation to the absolute telos.

**Religiousness “a” and “b”**

Climacus describes this absolute orientation of the individual to the absolute telos by renunciation, suffering, and guilt-consciousness as “the religion of immediacy” (CUP 481) or “religiousness A” (CUP 465–470). The distinctive feature of this form of religiousness is that it is based on the assumption that the human being has an inherent relation to the eternal, but that this relation is obscured through the human being’s status as an existing single individual situated in concrete, temporal, finite existence (CUP 478). It is this continuity between eternity and existence which underlies the human being’s relation to an eternal happiness and which makes the human being’s relation to this eternal happiness possible. Climacus describes the individual’s implicit but obscured relation to the eternal
as “the contradiction within immanence,” which he defines as follows: “the human being is potentially eternal and becomes conscious of this in time” (CUP 486; cf. 480–481). This potential eternal nature of the human being is something from which the human being has come. Therefore Religiousness A looks back and attempts by “recollection” to recover a relation to the eternal from which the individual has fallen away through coming into existence. Renunciation, suffering, and guilt-consciousness are the means by which one comes to express ever more fully a relation to the eternal, which constitutes the highest goal for human existence.

In Religiousness A the contradiction between eternity and existence lies within immanence and their dialectical relationship consists in the individual’s task of expressing in his or her concrete existence the knowledge that he or she is eternal. This is the dialectic in the first place. If existential pathos is to be intensified beyond what is possible in Religiousness A, there must be a breach of immanence, so that it is not possible by means of recollection to relate oneself in existence to the eternal. Such a breach can come about not only when it is the relation between existence and eternity that is dialectical, but when the eternal happiness itself is dialectical. As Climacus puts it, the relationship to an eternal happiness has the dialectical in second place (CUP 465–466). The difficulty of sustaining a relationship to an eternal happiness that is dialectical in itself intensifies the dialectic of relationship beyond what is encountered in Religiousness A.

This dialectic in second place arises through the eternal itself entering temporal existence (CUP 477). Because the eternal now exists within finite, temporal existence, the individual does not relate to it by recollecting the eternal that lies “behind” existence, but must sustain a relation to the eternal as it has manifested itself in existence (CUP 478). It only makes sense to relate to the eternal-in-time if one does not have the eternal within oneself. Climacus calls this relationship to an eternal happiness where the eternal has itself become dialectical “paradoxical religiousness” or “religiousness B.” On his view, it is this form of religiousness that characterizes Christianity.

The fact that, according to Religiousness B, the individual does not sustain a relationship to the eternal, but must establish this relationship within existence through a relationship to a historical point of departure, means that great weight is placed on existence. Existence is no longer an impediment which obscures the human being’s innate relationship to the eternal, but is the place where the individual first comes to know the eternal. Existence thus becomes of immense importance. The task is not to recollect oneself out of existence and into the eternal, but to establish a relationship to the eternal within and through existence itself (CUP 481).
Now that the existence-spheres and their categories have been clarified and the paradoxical religiousness that is Christianity has been distinguished from the many non-Christian existence-spheres and categories with which it has been confused, it is possible to reintroduce certain aspects of Christian doctrine.

A key feature of Climacus’ “theology” is that the categories of Christianity must be derived from the paradox of eternity’s entry into temporal existence, and must on no account attempt to go beyond this paradox. If a thinker attempts to go beyond the paradox or to explain away Christianity’s paradoxical character, then “every dogmatic determination is a philosophem that has entered into the heart of man and is to be thought immanently” (CUP 88–89). It is therefore necessary to speak of Christian doctrines in a way that retains and indeed fosters their paradoxical nature. This must be done, however, in a way that does not revert to the aesthetic, objective, and metaphysical approaches that Climacus believes have distorted the contemporary understanding of Christianity, but rather accentuates their existential and paradoxical character.

This aim determines Climacus’ selection of Christian doctrines for discussion. Only those that express some aspect of the existential relationship to the paradox that is Christianity come into his view. The following is an attempt to sketch the Climacan understanding of some of Christianity’s central doctrines.

**Inspiration, providence, and revelation**

In his discussion of objective approaches to Christianity in Part One of *Postscript* Climacus touches briefly on inspiration, providence, and revelation. These doctrines are not objective propositions, the validity of which can be proved or disproved by the exercise of objective thought, but are matters of faith.

(a) The *inspiration* of the Bible is not objectively apparent in the text itself and for that reason can never be established by means of philological and historical scholarship. There is a disrelationship between the study of the text and the existential investment the individual makes in the text, which can be overcome only by faith. Climacus writes that “the disproportion between inspiration and critical inquiry is like that between eternal happiness and deliberative critique, since inspiration is only an object of faith” (CUP 22n). The inspired status of the
Bible is thus not something that can be secured by means of critical scholarship. Indeed, for the believer who accepts that the Bible is inspired, critical appraisals of the inspiration of the Bible are “a kind of temptation” (CUP 23–24). On the other hand, there is no way that “inspiration” can be the end result of a critical appraisal of the biblical texts by the individual who lacks faith (CUP 24). The inspiration of the Bible is the result of the individual’s response of faith to the Bible and its teaching and can be neither proved nor disproved by biblical scholarship. As Climacus puts it, “inspiration is an object of faith, qualitatively dialectical, and not to be reached by quantitative means” (CUP 25).

(b) Providence is another doctrine that can be grasped only through faith. According to Climacus, it is a doctrine that can only be believed in an imperfect world. He does not expatiate on this comment, but his point seems to be that in a perfect world divine providence would be so obvious it could be taken as an objective empirical fact. It is only in an ambiguous world like ours, where both good and evil exist, that faith is needed to believe in God’s providential care. In such a world it takes passionate commitment to believe in God’s guidance, whereas no such passion would be necessary in a world that was absolutely perfect (CUP 26–27; cf. 171).

(c) The paradoxical character of Christianity means that revelation cannot be understood as the direct communication of the truth, but must be understood dialectically. First, the paradoxical nature of Christianity means that revelation itself is paradoxical, which means that revelation in the Christian sense is a secret. In his discussion of the paradox Climacus asks us to “suppose that a revelation sensu strictissimo has to be the secret, and be identifiable exactly in virtue purely and simply of its being the secret, whereas a revelation sensu laxiori, recollection’s withdrawal into the eternal, was a revelation in the direct sense” (CUP 179–180). Climacus does not elaborate on this comment, but his point appears to be that the paradox prevents the straightforward comprehension of the truth revealed in eternity’s entry into temporal existence. The path of understanding, i.e., the recollection of one’s immanent possession of the truth, is no longer an option for the existing individual. The individual must relate “forward” in time to the paradox of the eternal-in-time, which is an event that can never be recollected or grasped by human thought. The Christian revelation, then, is paradoxically a revelation that forever remains a secret because it is not open to human understanding.
The second way in which revelation is dialectical is in the individual’s relation to revelation. Climacus states that the human being’s concern for his or her eternal happiness has “in all just one distinguishing mark: that the dialectic accompanies it everywhere” (CUP 31n). Revelation is dialectical because it requires the individual not merely to think it, but to appropriate and actualize it in his or her own existence. This, however, makes existence strenuous, for appropriation and actualization are not one-off acts, but actions which must be constantly repeated throughout the human being’s existence. If this dialectic of appropriation is removed, then revelation becomes an objective communication to which the individual sustains merely an external relationship, which for Climacus is superstition. He writes: “as soon as I take away the dialectical I become superstitious and cheat God of each moment’s strenuous reacquisition of what was once acquired” (CUP 31n).

The doctrine of God

In line with his strategy of indirect communication Climacus does not present his reader with a systematic and comprehensive doctrine of God. God cannot be captured in human thought and language, and it is presumptuous of human beings to attempt to do so. As Climacus puts it, “God is a supreme conception not to be explained through something else but only by deepening oneself in the very conception” (CUP 185). Consequently, Climacus sets himself the task not of “explaining” God, but of providing the reader with impulses for reflecting on the relationship each of us should sustain to God.

God is not an object but is subject. God is not an object because he is not an external reality: “God is not something external like a wife whom I can ask whether she is now satisfied with me” (CUP 136). Climacus mocks those who would believe in God only if God made himself objectively noticeable, such as if God adopted “the form of a rare, enormously large green bird with a red beak” (CUP 205) or revealed himself as a man twelve feet high (CUP 206). God is not an object that stands over against us to which we relate as a matter of course.

Treating God as an object creates the wrong type of relationship to God, namely an objective relationship. When God is treated as an object, the task becomes that of establishing the reality of this objective being and sustaining a relationship to the object that is God. Yet God is not an object: on the contrary, “God is subject and therefore for subjectivity in inwardness” (CUP 168; emphasis added). We might make Climacus’
point here by employing Martin Buber’s terminology and saying that the
correct relationship of the human being to God is not an “I–It” relationship
(the objective relationship), but an “I–Thou” relationship (the subjective
relationship). That is, God is a person and we relate to him in a way that
is analogous to the way we relate to human persons. Just as we only truly
know other human beings not by treating them as objects but by entering
into relationships with them, so too can we only “know” God not by
treating him as an object to be proved or disproved by objective reflection
but only by entering into a relationship with him. To sustain a relationship
with something, one must relate in a way that is appropriate to the kind of
reality that something is. Because God is subject, an objective relationship
is inappropriate to God’s reality.

God is subject. Therefore the appropriate relationship is a subjective
relationship. But this does not mean that God is a feature of human
existence. We might say that the view that God is a feature of human
existence is the position of Religiousness A, where the God-relationship is
understood as a potentiality within human existence. In Religiousness B,
subjectivity remains the means by which the individual sustains a God-
relationship, but this does not mean that God is merely an element of
human subjectivity or is something that can be discovered within the
human subject. To state that God is subject and knowable only through
a subjective relationship is not to state that God is merely a product
of the human imagination and has no existence independent of human
subjectivity. Climacus makes this clear when he comments that, “in the
infinite passion and interest for its eternal happiness, subjectivity is in its
extreme exertion, at the extremity, not indeed where there is no object
(the imperfect and undialectical distinction), but where God is negatively
present in the subjectivity, which in this interest is the form of the eternal
happiness” (CUP 47). God is an object of a special kind that is available
not objectively but only when the human being embarks on a relation-
ship with God as subject. Climacus expresses this distinctive character of
God’s objectivity by describing God as a postulate which the individual is
compelled to posit in the intensity of his or her subjective relationship to
God (CUP 168n). As the human being seeks to sustain an absolute rela-
tionship to God, so that “every moment in which he does not have God
is wasted” (CUP 168), he posits God as the absolute reality with which
he is called upon to relate himself. This positing of God as a “necessity”
arises not out of philosophical reflection, however, but from the individ-
ual’s subjective commitment, which is expressed in its most intense form
as faith.
A further reason why the believer postulates God as an “object” is that although subjectivity is the way the human being relates to God, God is not to be discovered by means of subjectivity, precisely because there is an absolute difference between God and humankind. We might say that as the individual relates himself ever more fully and intensely to the absolute telos, the ultimate result is that the individual encounters a vacuum where the absolute telos was thought to be, for there is no immanent relationship between the human being and the eternal. From the perspective of Religiousness B, immersing oneself ever more deeply in one’s subjectivity is to immerse oneself ever more deeply in one’s separation from God. God is “posited” when the individual relates passionately to God as something that the individual does not have, when the individual relates in infinite passion to God as the absolutely different. Precisely in the human being’s recognition of this distance, however, the foundations are laid for a God-relationship, for the human being has now come to understand him or herself as he or she truly is: utterly separated from God or, in the language of Religiousness B, as a sinner.

The language of absolute difference, however, may again create the impression that God is an object that stands over against human beings. In one sense this is true, for God cannot be reduced to a feature of human subjectivity and is never at the human being’s disposal. In another sense, however, it is untrue to state that God is an object, because God is never a reality to which the human being can relate by means of an objective relationship. We might say that God is a “negative object.” He is an object in the sense that he is not a product of human subjectivity and can never be reduced to an element within human subjectivity. He is not an object in that he is never a reality to which the individual has an external relationship, but a subject with whom the human being can relate only by means of an I–Thou relationship.

**Christology**

In *Postscript* Climacus occasionally touches on traditional Christological formulations. For example, he mentions briefly in passing the doctrine that Christ bears the sins of the whole world (CUP 208). Usually, however, Climacus avoids traditional Christological terms and instead creates circumlocutions in order to describe the Christ-event. There are two reasons for this. First, it is consistent with the aim expressed in *Crumbs* of treating Christianity as a thought-experiment and attempting to derive Christianity by considering an alternative to the Socratic understanding of truth.
Having said this, we might expect on the basis of the promise made at the end of *Crumbs* that Climacus would introduce overtly Christian concepts and doctrines in *Postscript*. Climacus, however, only partially fulfills his promise in Part One of *Postscript*, but without going into detail and without any exposition of the key Christian doctrines. Instead, he turns in Part Two of *Postscript* to consider how the individual should go about sustaining a relationship to Christianity. He does this not by reflecting on how the individual should cultivate a God-relationship in the light of the core doctrines of the Christian faith, but by reverting to the notion of an eternal happiness based on a historical actuality, and considering the problem of the individual’s relation to Christianity in these terms.

Secondly, the reason for Climacus’ avoidance of overtly Christian terminology may be because he considers himself not to be a Christian, but to be somebody who stands at the boundary of the Christian sphere. For this reason he is more concerned to examine the paths that lead to the decision to become a Christian than to consider Christian doctrines from within the sphere of Christian existence. With regard to Christology, this means that Climacus reflects primarily on the individual’s relation to the god’s paradoxical entry into time.

The dominant “Christological” term in *Postscript* is “paradox,” which appears in absolute form as the absolute paradox when the eternal enters temporal existence as an individual human being. Climacus employs a variety of different approaches to articulate the paradoxical character of the paradox, which can be divided broadly into philosophical and theological approaches – that is, into approaches which draw on philosophical concepts to sketch the paradoxical character of the paradox and approaches which articulate the paradoxical character of the paradox in more overtly theological language.

Climacus discusses the paradox in philosophical terms by drawing on the language of possibility and actuality, eternity, time, and existence. Understood in terms of the relation between time and eternity, the paradox arises from the eternal breaking into time, so that the eternal becomes subject to temporality and finitude while nevertheless continuing to remain the eternal. As Climacus puts it, “To suppose that time, or existence in time, should be decisive for an eternal happiness is in general so paradoxical that paganism is unable to think it” (CUP 309).

Alongside his discussion of the paradox in terms of eternity and time, Climacus also describes the paradox in terms of the relation between the divine and the human. He writes, “the proposition that God has come into being in human form, was born, grew up, etc., is surely the paradox *sensu
Making Christianity difficult

strictissimo, the absolute paradox” (CUP 182–183; cf. 486). To capture this understanding of the paradox, Climacus sometimes employs terms such as “the god-in-time,” “the god-in-existence,” or simply “the god-man.”

Climacus emphasizes that God’s presence in existence should not be understood immanently in the sense characteristic of Religiousness A, namely, that God undergirds or lies behind existence. Nor should God’s presence in existence be understood in the Hegelian sense as an eternal god-becoming (CUP 485). To interpret the god-in-time in such terms eliminates the radical accentuation of existence that God’s presence in time brings about. For Climacus, however, God’s presence in existence means that “existence is accentuated paradoxically as sin and eternity paradoxically as the god in time” (CUP 297). The problem facing each individual is that of sustaining a relation to the paradox of the god-in-time, not attempting to resolve the contradiction and cancel the paradox by transferring both oneself and the god-in-time into the realm of abstract thought where the contradiction between existence and eternity, divinity and humanity does not exist.

Because of his emphasis on the paradox as the eternal God’s entry into existence, Climacus rarely mentions the historical details of the life of the god-man. When he does so, it is in order to heighten the paradox still further, by drawing out those historical events in the life of the god-in-time which intensify the paradoxicality of the god’s presence in existence as an individual human being. Thus Climacus writes: “So what is the absurd? The absurd is that the eternal truth has come about in time, that God has come about, has been born, has grown up, etc., has come about just as the single human being, indistinguishable from any other, since all immediate recognizability is pre-Socratic paganism and from the Jewish point of view idolatry” (CUP 177). The crucifixion heightens the paradoxicality of the god-man still further, for the fact that God allowed himself to be crucified flies in the face of all worldly wisdom (CUP 340; cf. 233).

These thinly disguised references to the doctrine of the incarnation raise the question of Climacus’ understanding of the person of Christ. His use of such formulations as “the god-in-time,” “the god-in-existence,” and “the god-man” makes it clear that he subscribes to a high Christology. The god-man is no mere human being, but is God himself, who has descended to earth and assumed the form of a human being. Climacus provides little discussion, however, of how the divine and human natures are united in the person of the god-man. Nor is there any explicit reference to the Chalcedonian Definition that Christ is two natures united in one person. There is what could be taken to be a passing reference to the two-natures
doctrine in Climacus’ comment that “Christianity is no doctrine of the unity of the divine and human, or subject–object, not to mention the further transcriptions of Christianity into logic” (CUP 273). From this passage, Climacus would seem to be placing the Chalcedonian Definition on a par with speculative philosophy and condemning it as one of several inappropriate objective approaches to Christianity. For Climacus, the problem is not one of thinking through how divine and human natures can be united in the person of Jesus Christ, but of relating oneself to the paradox of the god-in-time. Climacus’ apparent rejection of the two-natures doctrine in the passage above would seem to indicate that he sees orthodox Christology as another attempt on the part of human beings to avoid the real challenge of Christianity. At the same time, however, Climacus’ view of the god-man as the paradox is possible only on the basis of the implicit acceptance of the two-natures doctrine. If the god-man is not both divine and human, there can be no paradox. We might say that Climacus accepts the two-natures doctrine, but not the attempts to explain how these natures are united in the person of Christ.

**SIN**

In *Postscript* Climacus approaches sin from two distinct perspectives. First, he introduces the notion of sin in his discussion of his thesis that *subjectivity is the truth*. Second, he describes the relation of the believer to the paradox of eternity’s entry into time in terms of *sin-consciousness*.

**Sin and subjectivity**

The thesis “subjectivity is the truth” corresponds to Climacus’ discussion in *Crumbs* of the Socratic truth, where truth is understood to be innate but obscured in the human being, and the task is to “bring to birth” and make manifest this innate truth. But, Climacus asks both in *Crumbs* and in *Postscript*, what if the human being does not possess an innate relation to the truth? This would mean that the individual’s process of working him or herself ever more deeply into the truth would be an ever increasing immersion in the *untruth* (CUP 207).

By stating that subjectivity may be untruth Climacus does not want to revoke his previous argument concerning the truth of subjectivity, however. Subjectivity remains the truth in the sense that it is the existential task of every human being to actualize in his own subjectivity and concrete existence the understanding of truth to which he has committed himself.
The importance of subjectivity as a relationship to what is taken to be the truth remains in place. What is put in question is the status of the truth which the individual strives to actualize in his or her subjectivity and the very capacity of the individual to discover and sustain a relation to the truth. Climacus suggests that we should call the individual’s untruth *sin* (CUP 175).\(^1\)

It is thus Climacus’ discussion of the relation of the individual to the truth that allows him to introduce a notion that is distinctive to Christian religiousness, namely sin. At this stage in his argument, however, sin is primarily an existential category that expresses the character of the subjectivity of the existing individual. It has yet to receive the distinctively Christian grounding in the absolute paradox that constitutes Religiousness B. This will come later. At this point Climacus turns to the question of responsibility for sin. He stresses that the untruth of the individual is something for which he or she must take responsibility, for the act of becoming the untruth is an act which has taken place in time. He writes, “but the subject cannot be untruth eternally, or be presupposed eternally to have been so; he must have become that in time, or becomes that in time” (CUP 174). And he continues:

Viewed eternally, [the individual] cannot be in sin, or be presupposed eternally to have been in it. Accordingly, it is by coming to be (since the beginning was that subjectivity is untruth) that he becomes a sinner. He is not born a sinner in the sense that his being a sinner is presupposed before he was born, but he is born in sin and as a sinner. We might call this *original sin.* (CUP 175)

On coming into existence, then, the human being becomes a sinner and is responsible for doing so.

Sin prevents the individual from employing the Socratic strategy of recollection. The individual is no longer able to recollect himself back into eternity. This has a twofold effect on the individual’s relationship to the truth. First, the impossibility of recollection intensifies the inwardness of the individual still further: “the more difficult it is made for him to take himself out of existence in recollecting, the more inward his existing can become in existence; and when it is made impossible for him, when he is so placed in existence the back door of recollection is closed forever, and then inwardness will be at its most profound” (CUP 175). Second, the individual can no longer relate himself to the truth as something existing behind him in eternity accessible by means of recollection. That road to

\(^1\) Cf. *Philosophical Crumbs*, KW 7: 15.
the truth has now been closed off by the intervention of sin. Consequently, the individual “must go forward; going back is impossible” (CUP 175).

Sin-consciousness

The relation of the individual to the absolute paradox of God’s presence in time heightens the pathos of the individual. That is, the dialectic of relationship is sharpened still further by the fact that the human being must relate herself to something which is itself dialectical. This sharpened pathos, Climacus claims, “more closely defined, is: sin-consciousness” (CUP 490).

Sin-consciousness is itself dialectical and comprises several elements. First, sin-consciousness “is the expression of the paradoxical transformation of existence” (CUP 490). Through God’s entry into existence as a human being “sin is the new existence-medium” (CUP 490). Climacus explains the genesis of this new existence-medium as follows: “to exist,” he explains, now “means that having come about, he has become a sinner” (CUP 490). The human being’s coming into existence, then, is not a value-neutral transition from non-being to being, but is a transition to existing in the wrong way. Coming into being means existing as that which one should not be.

Climacus develops this point by considering the question of whether existence is a predicate. He writes: “usually, ‘existing’ is not a more closely defining predicate but the form of all the more closely defining predicates; one does not become something by coming about, but now, coming about is becoming a sinner” (CUP 490). Existence is not usually understood as a predicate, but rather is the condition for something being able to have predicates. It makes little sense to attribute predicates such as height, weight, color, etc., to something that has no existence, and therefore cannot possess such attributes.

Christianly understood, however, existence is a predicate. The transition of coming into existence is not value-neutral, but attributes a specific character to the human being, namely sin. Climacus emphasizes that the human being is “the being who is planned for eternity” and that “from eternity, the individual is not a sinner” (CUP 490). On coming into existence, however, the human being “becomes a sinner at birth or is born a sinner” (CUP 490). Christianly understood, then, existence is indeed a predicate. Coming into existence results in one’s being stamped with a specific character, for in coming into existence something is “added” to the human being, namely something that one should not be. The term
“existence” does not usually say anything other than that something exists. It does not say in what way that which has come into existence has come into existence. Now it is different. “Existence,” then, denotes that one has come into existence in a particular way, namely, in an illegitimate way that constitutes a falling away from what one should be. The Christian term for this falling away is *sin*. As Climacus puts it, the predicate “sinner” is attached to the human being “at the moment of coming about,” and it “acquires such an overwhelming power that the coming about makes him another” (CUP 490). Climacus also expresses this point in terms of identity. Whereas “in guilt-consciousness the subject’s self-identity is preserved,” sin “is a change of the subject himself” (CUP 491).

To shed light on this, Climacus compares sin-consciousness with guilt-consciousness. Guilt-consciousness is a category of immanence. It is based on the assumption that the existing individual has an underlying though obscured relation to the eternal. The task is to reform one’s existence in such a way that it comes ever more fully to express the relation to the eternal. Guilt-consciousness is the highest expression of this relationship: “In the totality of guilt-consciousness, existence asserts itself as strongly as it can within immanence” (CUP 490). In sin-consciousness, however, there is no such relationship. There is no underlying relation to the eternal. On the contrary, this relation has been broken through the human being’s having come into existence. Sin, then, is the break with the eternal. Consequently, the path of immanence that characterizes Religiousness A is, from the Christian perspective, not a deeper expression of the underlying relation to the eternal, but an ever more profound expression of the human being’s separation from the eternal.

The utter break with the eternal that the human being experiences on coming into existence, despite the fact that the human being is planned for eternity and is not from eternity a sinner, means that the human being’s coming into existence constitutes a transformation of the human being. Coming into existence, then, results not in the instantiation of the eternal, which it is then the existing individual’s task to actualize by subordinating his existence ever more fully to the eternal, but in an utter break with the eternal, so that in coming into existence the individual is absolutely separated from his eternal nature as conceived of in eternity. The transition to existence thus results in the human being ceasing to be eternal, so that attempting to sustain a relation to the eternal by means of recollecting one’s eternal origin and actualizing it in existence becomes impossible.

This raises a new question. If through coming into existence the human being becomes a sinner, then how can he or she know this? If sin is the
existence-medium of the human being, then from the human perspective it appears to be the natural mode of existence for the human being. The human being knows no other mode of existence and since the human being’s thinking is also conditioned by his being a sinner, the human being can have no way of discovering that sin is his existence-medium. Sin is so much the “natural” element of the human being that we are simply unaware of it: we have no criterion or external point of reference against which we can measure our existence. Left to their own devices, then, human beings cannot discover that their existence-medium is sin and that they are sinners. Simply to discover that one is a sinner requires external assistance. Someone must reveal to human beings that they are sinners.

It is at this point that we encounter a problem with Climacus’ argument. We might expect on the basis of the discussion thus far that he would go on to state that it is the god-man who reveals to human beings their sin. The way he formulates his argument, however, creates the impression that the god’s entry into temporal existence causes sin, for he writes that the human being’s becoming a sinner is “the consequence of the god’s appearance in time, which prevents the individual from relating backwards to the eternal, since he is now, in a forward direction, coming to be eternal in time through the relation to the god in time” (CUP 490–491). The choice of the term “consequence” is unfortunate, for it makes it sound as if the god-man brought about the sinful status of human beings – as if, were it not for the god’s appearance in existence, human beings would have been able to live their lives free of sin. A similar problem arises with Climacus’ statement that “the god’s appearance in time . . . prevents the individual from relating backwards to the eternal” (CUP 490–491; emphasis added). Taken at face value, this passage could appear to mean that if it were not for the god-man human beings would have been able to relate themselves backwards to the eternal. If this were the case, then the god’s appearance in history would be a curse rather than a blessing. Climacus surely does not want us to draw this conclusion.

The problem arises from the conflation of two distinct questions. First, what is the existence-medium of the human being? The answer to this question is: sin. Second, how does the human being come to know that sin is his or her existence-medium? The answer to this question is: through the god’s appearance in time. The terseness of Climacus’ argument, however, leads to the conflation of these two issues and accounts for why he can glide between the terms “sin-consciousness” and “sin.” His first argument is that Christianity regards all human beings as sinners and the existence-medium
of human beings as sin. Sin is, as Climacus puts it, an “existence-category” (CUP 491). It is an existence-category, because sin determines the concrete existence of every human being. This existential condition is something the human being has chosen, in the sense previously explained, and therefore is something for which the human being must take responsibility. Climacus’ second point is that the human being cannot learn the truth about the character of his existence, but needs to have it revealed to him. This is therefore an epistemological issue, and “sin-consciousness” is an epistemological category.

Armed with this distinction we can rephrase Climacus’ argument as follows. The existence-medium of human beings is sin. This is a state each human being enters on coming into existence and which constitutes a change in the identity of the human being, who has now become something that he or she was not intended to be. It is the god’s appearance in time which makes human beings aware of this, and it is through the god that the human being receives sin-consciousness. As Climacus puts it, “outside the individual, there must be the power that makes clear to him that in coming about he has become another than he was, has become a sinner. This power is the god in time” (CUP 491). Climacus also expresses this point by stating that the historical circumstance of the god’s appearance in time “is the condition of sin-consciousness” (CUP 491; emphasis added). On this basis we can tidy up Climacus’ argument by reformulating his statement that “sin-consciousness . . . is a change of the subject himself” as “sin-consciousness is the expression of the change of the subject himself.” This reformulation ties in well with Climacus’ opening sentence in the section on sin-consciousness, which runs: “This consciousness [of sin] is the expression of the paradoxical transformation of existence” (CUP 490).

This reformulation of Climacus’ argument also gives us the clue to understanding in what sense the god’s appearance prevents the human being from relating backwards to the eternal. What the god-man reveals is the futility of human attempts to sustain a relationship to the eternal, precisely because as sinners human beings do not possess the condition for such a relationship.

Climacus concludes his discussion of sin-consciousness by emphasizing that “sin is no teaching or doctrine for thinkers,” but “is an existence-category and one that precisely cannot be thought” (CUP 491). This heightens pathos beyond what is possible in Religiousness A, so that having one’s existence determined by sin is “sharpened pathos” (CUP 491).
The forgiveness of sins reflects the two dialectical relationships that constitute Religiousness B, namely the dialectic of relationship and the dialectic in the second instance. First, “forgiveness is a paradox in the Socratic sense, in so far as the eternal truth relates to someone existing” (CUP 188). That is, forgiveness of sins is a paradox sensu laxiori because it calls upon the human being to relate in existence to the eternal. A further Socratic feature of forgiveness is that the human being’s consciousness of his or her need for forgiveness is an expression of his or her subjectivity and deepening inwardness. As Climacus puts it, “The individual human being has to feel himself a sinner” (CUP 188). To feel oneself to be a sinner, however, occurs “not objectively, which is nonsense, but subjectively, and that is the most profound suffering” (CUP 188). Forgiveness is a paradox in the Socratic sense, then, because the sin-consciousness which makes forgiveness necessary forms part of the suffering that we undergo as we attempt to relate ourselves absolutely to the absolute telos.

Forgiveness is not only a paradox in the Socratic sense, however, but is also a paradox sensu strictiori or in the distinctively Christian sense. This paradox stems from the fact that forgiveness of sins is an expression of the paradox of God’s coming into existence and shares its paradoxical characteristics. Climacus writes:

Forgiveness is a paradox [in the strict sense] because the one existing is a sinner, which . . . marks out existence a second time [and] is connected to God having existed in time . . . With the understanding directly opposed to it, the inwardness of faith must grasp the paradox; and this struggle on the part of faith . . . is precisely the tension of inwardness. (CUP 188–189)

Forgiveness of sins becomes an issue as a consequence of the breach in immanence which cuts off the human being’s recourse to the eternal by means of recollection and posits the new existence-medium of sin.

Secondly, the forgiveness of sins is paradoxical because it is connected to God having existed in time. The god’s entry into time is paradoxical because it is a contradiction for the eternal, infinite God to become a finite human being situated in temporal existence. It is equally paradoxical for God to wish to reestablish within temporal existence the human being’s broken relation to the eternal by means of the forgiveness of sins. Because forgiveness is paradoxical the human being cannot understand it, but must accept forgiveness against the understanding. The only way that the human being can grasp the forgiveness of sins is by faith.
It is striking that in his brief discussion of forgiveness Climacus makes no mention of who is responsible for forgiving human sins. Nor does he ascribe forgiveness of sins to Christ’s suffering and crucifixion: he merely states that it is connected to the god having existed in time. On this basis, it would appear that Climacus conceives of the atonement as situated in the incarnation rather than in any notion of Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross. To draw this conclusion, however, would be to push Climacus too far. He is interested not in theories of atonement but in the existential significance of the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness is first and foremost an existential category, rather than a doctrine. The task facing the individual is to reform his or her existence in the light of his or her faith in the paradoxical gift of the forgiveness of sins, not to construct theories that attempt to explain how forgiveness of sins is possible and therefore intelligible. To do the former is to accept forgiveness of sins as an existential category determinative of one’s concrete existence; to do the latter is to reduce forgiveness of sins to a problem for thought and to rob it of its power to transform the life of the believing human being.\(^2\)

**CONCLUSION: CLIMACUS’ EXISTENTIALIST THEOLOGY**

Climacus is not a systematic theologian. He is suspicious of doctrine as one of the many stratagems human beings employ to evade the challenging paradox of eternity’s entry into existence, God’s appearance in time as an individual human being. Insofar as doctrine attempts to explain (away) the paradox, it is to be rejected as a temptation. Climacus’ rejection of doctrine, however, does not mean that he holds that Christianity has no content or that Christianity is anything the passionately committed individual chooses it to be. Christianity does indeed have content, but the problem is that modern human beings no longer know how to relate to this content. They have lost a sense of the life-transforming character of Christianity by assimilating it to the values of contemporary society. As a result, the decisive Christian categories have been conflated with objective and aesthetic categories and the distinctively Christian sphere of existence has been emptied of its power. The only way to rectify this lamentable

\(^2\) The paradoxical transformation of the human being into something he was not – namely, someone who sustains a relation to the eternal – is described by Climacus as “new creation” (CUP 483). I have limited room to explore this doctrine here, but the chief idea is this: because the human being does not possess an innate relationship to eternity, he or she requires the condition for such a relationship to be provided by God himself. This is tantamount to *new creation* because the individual who was incapable of sustaining a relationship to the eternal has now become capable of such a relationship by virtue of being given the condition by God.
state of affairs is by recovering the existential character of Christianity. What Climacus is offering the reader, then, is what would later be called existentialist theology. Indeed, Climacus is arguably the initiator of this new theological approach, and Postscript is the first significant example of this genre.

Climacus’ emphasis on the existential character of Christianity colors his treatment of Christian doctrine in two ways. First, the treatment of doctrine must be consistent with the paradoxical character of Christianity. This means that Christian doctrines must themselves express the paradox and present the paradox to each individual as a decision between faith and offense. Secondly, individual Christian doctrines must be presented in a way which brings out their existential character. These “doctrines” are first and foremost not problems of thought but problems of existence. This emphasis on the paradoxical and existential character of Christian doctrines accounts for the patchy treatment of Christian doctrine in Postscript. Climacus is concerned primarily with the problem of how each of us individually can come to sustain a relation to the eternal happiness promised to us by Christianity. This concern with the relationship to Christianity means that doctrines that are not central to this concern drop out of view or are touched on only briefly and in passing.

In conclusion, we can speak of a Climacan “theology” if we understand theology not as the ordering and explanation of doctrines but as the clarification of concepts, so that the existential choice posed by Christianity – offense or faith – becomes apparent. Theology should not strive to ease people into the Christian faith as gently and effortlessly as possible. The task is to shake human beings out of their complacency, to “sting” them with the paradoxicality of Christianity’s astonishing claim that God has come among us as a human being, and to confront each and every one of us with the most important decision of all: will you or will you not become a Christian?
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