

ABSTRACT

Kierkegaard's Practice of Edification:
Indirect Communication, the Virtues, and Christianity

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Mentor: Robert C. Roberts, Ph.D.

The ultimate aim of Kierkegaard's authorship is to build up his reader's character. Kierkegaard's signed, religious works suggest this reading, but some interpreters say that the more indirect, pseudonymous character of many of Kierkegaard's works undermines such an interpretation. I argue against recent deconstructive interpretations of Kierkegaard's indirect communication that would refute the character-building reading. These interpretations are based upon undialectical conceptions of indirect communication and uncharitable views of Kierkegaard's stated intentions. To demonstrate Kierkegaard's character-building interests, I consider his clarification of the virtue of faith in several of his most important pseudonymous writings. Finally, I consider some possible implications of Kierkegaard's methods for contemporary moral philosophy.

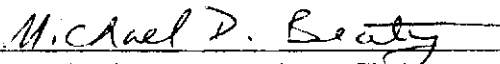
Kierkegaard's Practice of Edification:
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by

Mark A. Tietjen, B.S., M.Div., Th.M., M.A.

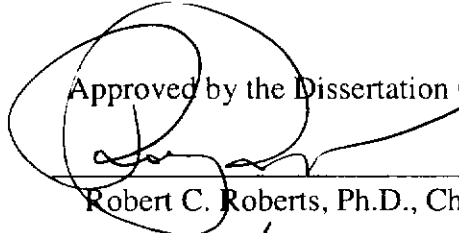
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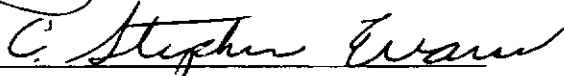
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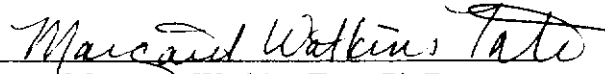

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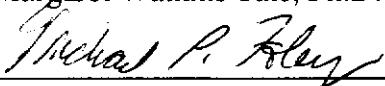
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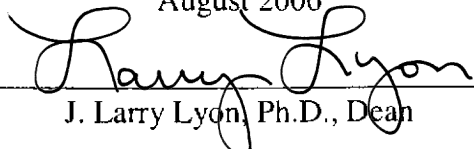

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	vi
DEDICATION.....	viii
Chapter	
1. Kierkegaard, Conceptual Clarification, and the Virtue Tradition.....	1
Introduction	
A Preliminary Glance at Edification	
Conceptual Clarification	
Kierkegaard and the Virtue Tradition	
Objection One: Kierkegaard Opposes the Classical Tradition	
Objection Two: Kierkegaard Opposes Virtue	
Looking Ahead	
2. ‘Différance’ or Dialectic: ‘Blunt Reading,’ the Pseudonyms, and the Importance of the Existence-Spheres.....	31
Roger Poole on Kierkegaard’s Indirect Communication	
Introduction	
Poole’s Charge of ‘Blunt Reading’	
Clearing Away the Blunt Reading, Part I: Privileging the Literary	
“Clearing,” Part II: ‘Undecidability’ and ‘Différance’	
“Clearing,” Part III: ‘Différance’ and the Pseudonyms	
Overcoming Poole’s Undialectical Reading	
An Alternative to ‘Différance,’ Part I: Kierkegaard’s Existence- Spheres	
An Alternative to ‘Différance,’ Part II: Kierkegaardian Dialectic	

3. Indirect Communication in Kierkegaard's Lectures and <i>The Point of View</i>	89
Introduction	
Indirect Communication in the Lectures	
"The Ethical as Universal" and Communication	
Communication's Mediums: Imagination and Actuality	
Indirect Communication and the Maieutic	
The Special Case of Christian Communication	
Deconstructing <i>The Point of View</i>	
Fenger on Kierkegaard's Mythic Religious Beginnings	
Garff's Deconstructive Point of View	
Deconstructive Conclusions	
Virtue in <i>The Point of View</i>	
Reading the Authorship Virtuously: A Hermeneutic of Belief	
Writing the Authorship Virtuously: Kierkegaard's Maieutic Practice	
Living the Authorship Virtuously: Kierkegaard before Humanity and Kierkegaard before God	
Conclusion: Kierkegaard's Christian Witness	
4. Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Dialectic of Faith.....	161
Introduction	
Kierkegaard as Poet-Dialectician	
Preliminaries	
Johannes de silentio and "Existential Faith"	
Faith Is a Passion	

Faith Gives Up ‘the World’ and Gets Back ‘the World’

Johannes Climacus and Faith: An Imaginary Construction and An Historical Costume

Faith Is a Passion, Part Two

(As a Passion) Faith Is Against the Understanding

Faith Is a Task for Life

Faith Is a Gift from God

Faith Is an Ongoing Relationship with Christ

Faith Has a Historical Point of Departure

Anti-Climacus and “the Ideal” of Faith

Faith’s Alternative is the Possibility of Offense at Christ

Faith Is Rest in God

Conclusion

5. Kierkegaard and Contemporary Moral Philosophy..... 215

Introduction

Kierkegaard and Williams

Williams’s Critique of Reductionism in Ethics

Reflectiveness as a Problem for Ethics

Kierkegaard and ‘the Loss of the Individual’

MacIntyre, Austen, and Kierkegaard

Conclusion: “Radical Virtue Ethics” and the Possibility of Edification

SOURCES CONSULTED..... 264

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To Dr. Loder

CHAPTER ONE

Kierkegaard, Conceptual Clarification, and the Virtue Tradition

Introduction

In this dissertation I will defend the thesis that the ultimate aim of Kierkegaard's authorship is the edification of his reader and that the signed *and* pseudonymous works are directed toward this common end. Clearly those pieces he calls 'upbuilding' (as well as many others that lacked that title—though not his signature) are directed toward the reader's edification; however, I shall argue that not only those, but also the pseudonymous writings share this aim. I am not defending a reading that will (or would) analyze passage after passage to show how, for example, A's thoughts on Mozart are themselves edifying. (In fact, I do not think they are). Rather, my intention is to present a way of reading the authorship, including these passages, *in light of* Kierkegaard's larger, global aim of edification.¹ In claiming that Kierkegaard's entire authorship² is

¹Interestingly, in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Johannes Climacus interprets *Either/Or* in just this light. "That *Either/Or* ends precisely with the upbuilding truth (yet without so much as italicizing the words, to say nothing of didacticizing) was remarkable to me. I could wish to see it emphasized more definitely in order that each particular point on the way to existing Christianly-religiously could become clear. The Christian truth as inwardness is also upbuilding, but this by no means implies that every upbuilding truth is Christian; the upbuilding is a wider category" (Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 256).

²In *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* Kierkegaard excludes from the authorship his master's thesis and two literary reviews, *From the Papers of One Still Living* and *Two Ages* (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 29). Nevertheless, I think it is plausible to consider the reviews as works which, on the whole, contribute toward the end of edification. This suggestion will gain warrant upon our examination of *Two Ages* in chapter five. While the later polemical writings (compiled in *The Moment*) take a much stronger tone than Kierkegaard's earlier works, I am inclined to think that they too may be included in my thesis as well. There are differing opinions on what to do with these writings and I will avoid that discussion here.

concerned with the edification of his reader, I am suggesting we read it as a ‘work of love.’³ For all of Kierkegaard’s polemicizing against a variety of targets, these arguments are, more than anything, works of love. Just as Socrates sought to disabuse his interlocutors of hubris *so that* they would genuinely care for virtue, Kierkegaard’s *apparently* ‘unedifying’ or ‘nonedifying’ works (i.e. the pseudonymous, the ironical, the indirect, etc.) can be seen as having a similar Socratic aim.⁴

In this chapter I shall first expound what I mean by the notion of edification in Kierkegaard. Then I will explore the theme of conceptual clarification that runs throughout the authorship, and I will suggest that this philosophical practice has as its primary aim the end of edification. Since many of the concepts Kierkegaard explores are virtues, I will then consider the possibility of interpreting Kierkegaard in light of the virtue tradition. I will conclude the chapter by previewing the arguments to follow in the subsequent chapters.

A Preliminary Glance at Edification

What does Kierkegaard mean by edification?⁵ The Danish word *opbyggelig* is directly rendered ‘upbuilding,’ a word lacking in the English language (although the latest English translations have chosen to employ it instead of ‘edification’). I will use the terms interchangeably, and this practice is justified by their common etymological

³This phrase is the title of Kierkegaard’s most important ethical work, and it is not unlike his own description of his various literary endeavors. See Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 10n.

⁴I call their aims “similar” because of their common objective of edification. Of course the content or “dialectic” of Christian edification differs from Socratic edification in that, for instance, it directs the reader toward seeking first the kingdom of God (Mt. 6:33).

⁵The notion of edification will be filled out in the course of the dissertation and especially chapter five.

meanings of constructing an edifice or building. For Kierkegaard the object of upbuilding is the individual human, and in particular, the individual's moral and religious character. So, for instance, when through his discourse entitled "The Expectancy of Faith" he aims to edify, he does so with the specific intention of building up the reader's faith, hope, courage, perseverance, and patience. Concluding this discourse in the first person, Kierkegaard invites his reader to make these upbuilding thoughts his own:

And today, on the first day of the year, when the thought of the future presses in upon me, I will not enervate my soul with multifarious expectancy, will not break it up into all sorts of notions; I will integrate it sound and happy and, if possible, face the future. Let it bring what it will and must bring. Many an expectancy will be disappointed, many fulfilled—so it will be; experience has taught me this. But there is one expectancy that will not be disappointed—experience has not taught me this, but neither has it ever had the authority to deny it—this is the expectancy of faith, and this is victory.⁶

In another discourse, "Strengthening in the Inner Being," Kierkegaard aims to edify by building up the reader's steadfastness, resolve, integrity, and once again, faith. Consider the petition in the opening prayer of this discourse:

Give everyone his allotted share as it is well pleasing to you, but also give everyone the assurance that everything comes from you, so that joy will not tear us away from you in the forgetfulness of pleasure, so that sorrow will not separate you from us, but in joy we may go to you and in sorrow remain with you, so that when our days are numbered and the outer being is wasting away, death may not come in its own name, cold and terrible, but gentle and friendly, with greetings and news, with witness from you, our Father who is in heaven!⁷

⁶Søren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 27-8. The selections from this compilation of Kierkegaard's early edifying writings as well as other works like *Purity of Heart* are, while edifying, not explicitly Christian. While many of these discourses have scripture as their point of departure, the religious views expressed are immanent, characteristic of the views of Religiousness A (for a full discussion of Kierkegaard's stages see chapter two below). Thus, while I will argue that Kierkegaard's edifying aims are ultimately directed toward his reader becoming a Christian, this does not preclude his seeking to draw the reader along, step by step, from the aesthetic to the ethical, from the ethical to Religiousness A, and then from Religiousness A to Religiousness B, or Christianity. While from the perspective of Religiousness B the 'immanent discourses' are nevertheless edifying, I would reject the view that such discourses are, for Kierkegaard, a terminus in themselves.

⁷*Ibid.*, 79.

Consider also the benediction from the end of the same discourse, “blessed is the person who could truthfully say: God in heaven was my first love; blessed is the person whose life was a beneficent strengthening of this love; blessed is the person who, even though in his life he made the mistake of taking the outer instead of the inner, even though his soul in many ways was ensnared by the world, yet was again renewed in the inner being by turning back to his God, strengthened in the inner being.”⁸ These passages illustrate Kierkegaard’s upbuilding in action, and are representative of the sort of writing common to the “upbuilding discourses.” They show how, through the clarification of aspects of virtuous character and the exhortation to appropriate such character, Kierkegaard conceives of upbuilding as assisting others in their relationship to God.

Given the passion and conviction characteristic of the upbuilding discourses, it is not surprising that Kierkegaard himself was edified through his own writing. “‘Before God,’ religiously, when I speak with myself, I call my whole work as an author my own upbringing and development, but not in the sense as if I were now complete or completely finished with regard to needing upbringing and development.”⁹ This sense that Kierkegaard’s religious development is unfinished resonates with his admitted reliance upon Governance or Providence with respect to the writing of his authorship.¹⁰ But it also expresses that he has yet to realize his ‘complete self,’ or, in Johannes Climacus’s terms, that he is still in the process of becoming. On the relationship between

⁸Ibid., 101.

⁹Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 12. I thank Gordon Marino for bringing this point to my attention.

¹⁰Kierkegaard’s view of Governance’s role in the authorship is especially problematic for interpretations unsympathetic to Kierkegaard’s religious claims or status (for instance, deconstructive interpretations). We will consider the notion of Governance in chapter three.

his authorship and his development as a person, Kierkegaard writes the following entry in his journals around the time of *Postscript*: “I dare not say of myself that I have had a clear panorama of the whole plan of production from the outset; I must rather say, as I have continually acknowledged, that I myself have been brought up or educated and developed in the process of my work, that personally I have become committed more and more to Christianity than I was.”¹¹ It is no wonder that Kierkegaard’s own upbringing as a Christian comes as he seeks to build up his contemporaries in their Christian faith.

Kierkegaard borrows the metaphor of edification from at least two scriptural passages. First, the Apostle Paul claims that one of love’s many actions is that it builds up.¹² Kierkegaard understands the notion of upbuilding as coterminous with Christian love. “Wherever upbuilding is, there is love, and wherever love is, there is upbuilding.”¹³ To care for another’s character, to assist her in moral growth, to be concerned with her flourishing as a human—this is just to love her. We may then infer that in Kierkegaard’s own upbuilding discourses on faith or patience or hope, he demonstrates Christian love toward his reader in his quest to edify her. Second, Christ tells his listeners that those who hear and heed his teachings are like a person who builds his house upon a firm foundation.¹⁴ From this analogy Kierkegaard gleams the idea that the activity of upbuilding comes only after a particular ground or foundation has been laid. “It is God,

¹¹Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 7 vols. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967-78), 6:42 (#6231).

¹²1 Cor. 8:1 (and 1 Cor. 14).

¹³Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 214.

¹⁴Mt. 7:24-27.

the Creator, who must implant love in each human being, he who himself is Love. Thus it is specifically unloving and not at all upbuilding if someone arrogantly deludes himself into believing that he wants and is able to create love in another person.”¹⁵ Kierkegaard’s efforts at upbuilding are not primitive or creative; rather, they presuppose a foundation that God has “built” or created. They presuppose a theological conception of human nature where love is somehow fundamental to what it means to be human.

Conceptual Clarification

How does Kierkegaard foster edification? The primary procedure of the authorship involves the clarification of concepts central to the ethical and religious life. This practice might sound academic or even unrelated to the notion of edification. The idea of edification evokes practical considerations, and it might seem that an investigation into ethical or religious concepts is removed from such practical matters. Kierkegaard reflects this concern in a well-known journal entry written at the age of twenty-two: “What I really need is to get clear about *what I must do*, not what I must know....”¹⁶ While this comment captures a truth that, in some sense, Kierkegaard maintains throughout his authorship,¹⁷ Kierkegaard comes to believe that not until one properly understands the concepts that underlie a particular form of life can one actually live a good life.¹⁸ For

¹⁵Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 216.

¹⁶Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 5:34 (#5100).

¹⁷*Either/Or* is not written for another eight years.

¹⁸By ‘understanding,’ I do not mean that one can provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for what counts as, for instance, temperance or humility. Instead, we might describe this sort of understanding as practical wisdom or the ability to know the virtuous (e.g. temperate, humble) thing to do in an actual situation. Thus what is required is not formal, secondary education, but rather, as he says in *The Book on Adler*, an upbringing in the Christian concepts. See especially chapter four of Søren Kierkegaard, *The Book*

example, if one misunderstands the concept of neighbor love, if one confuses it with some sort of preferential friendship, then one's ability to obey Christ's command to love the neighbor is severely impeded. Or from the reverse angle, if someone backstabs a friend by gossiping about her to someone else, she demonstrates a lack of understanding of loyalty.

Concepts in need of elucidation extend beyond virtue concepts. Commenting on the prevailing misconceptions about the doctrine of infant baptism, Johannes Climacus goes so far as to suggest, "In short: *it is easier to become a Christian if I am not a Christian than to become a Christian if I am one* [i.e. if I am baptized as an infant]."¹⁹ In other words, a person born in Christendom and baptized as an infant faces more difficulty in truly orienting her life toward Christ than a pagan who had no previous knowledge of Christianity.²⁰ The misconception of infant baptism is just one of a family of misconceptions that includes "religious faith," "religious education," "citizen of Denmark," "child of God," and most importantly, "Christian." Climacus describes one facet of the resulting, confused state of Christendom in the following way: "Just as an old man who has lost his teeth now munches with the help of the stumps, so the modern Christian language about Christianity has lost the power of the energetic terminology to

on Adler, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

¹⁹Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 366. See also chapter four of *The Book on Adler*. Notice the complementary accounts present in these two works—one pseudonymous and the other signed. This sort of complementary relationship will become important for my argument against Poole in chapter two.

²⁰I will address the 'difficulty' of Christian upbringing and education for those in Christendom in chapter five.

bite—and the whole thing is toothless ‘maundering.’”²¹ Thus, we can begin to grasp why conceptual clarification is of utmost importance for Kierkegaard. In *Practice in Christianity* Anti-Climacus heads off an objection that would downplay the importance of getting such concepts clear.

Do not say that these are quibbling comments about words, anything but upbuilding. Believe me, it is very important for a person that his language be precise and true, because that means his thinking is that also. Furthermore, even though understanding and speaking correctly are not everything, since acting correctly is indeed also required, yet understanding in relation to acting is like the springboard from which the diver makes his leap—the clearer, the more precise, the more passionate (in the good sense) the understanding is, the more it rises to action, or the easier it is to rise to action for the one who is to act, just as it is easier for the bird to rise from the swinging branch whose pliancy is most closely related to and forms the easiest transition to flying.²²

This concern for getting moral and religious definitions correct is a constant theme, present both in Kierkegaard’s signed writings and, as we have seen, in the mouths of his pseudonyms as well.²³ In *Either/Or*, Judge William addresses a whole host of concepts that he feels A deeply misunderstands, e.g. love and duty. In *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes de silentio²⁴ attempts to clarify what faith is and what it is not, and while he does not have faith himself, he betrays what we can only consider Kierkegaard’s own concern by criticizing those who would ‘go further’ than faith.²⁵ Deliberating on “the

²¹Ibid., 363.

²²Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 158.

²³In chapter two I will discuss Kierkegaard’s practice of dialectic, the exploration of a concept from multiple angles.

²⁴In Kierkegaard’s journals and on the original title page of *Fear and Trembling*, he spells the pseudonym’s name with a lower case ‘s.’ Following the English convention of capitalizing names, the Hongs have capitalized the ‘s’ in their translations. I will stick with Kierkegaard’s own practice.

²⁵On this theme, see also Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 227.

dogmatic issue of hereditary sin,” Vigilius Haufniensis elucidates the concept of anxiety in a book of the same title. In the *Postscript*, Climacus shares his fellow Johannes’ concern: “...in our day terminologies and the like are so muddled that it is almost impossible to safeguard oneself against confusion.”²⁶

In the upbuilding discourses published concurrently with the aforementioned pseudonymous pieces we find discourse after discourse expounding virtue concepts like faith, hope, courage, patience, obedience, long-suffering, humility, and joy. In the *Book on Adler*, Kierkegaard targets a particular instance where Christian language is misunderstood and thus misused—particularly the concepts of revelation and authority. “In order to be able to express oneself Christianly, proficiency and schooling in the Christian conceptual definitions are also required in addition to the more universal heart language of deep emotion, just as it is of course assumed that the deep emotion is of a specific qualitative kind, is Christian emotion.”²⁷ *Works of Love* is a comprehensive elucidation of the concept of Christian love, particularly as it stands in contrast to erotic love and friendship. In *Without Authority*, Kierkegaard lays blame for conceptual imprecision: “What is it that the erroneous exegesis and speculative thought have done to confuse the essentially Christian, or by what means have they confused the essentially Christian? ...they have achieved the result that every Christian term ... can now, in a reduced state, serve as a brilliant expression that means all sorts of things.”²⁸ In *For Self-Examination*, Kierkegaard writes, “We human beings are not very precise with words; we

²⁶Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 206n.

²⁷Kierkegaard, *Book on Adler*, 114.

²⁸Søren Kierkegaard, *Without Authority*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 93.

often talk about faith when in the strictly Christian sense it is not faith.”²⁹ In *Judge for Yourself!* Kierkegaard reminds us that, “the world and Christianity have completely opposite conceptions.”³⁰ In *Armed Neutrality*, Kierkegaard reviews his authorship to that point³¹ and asserts that by holding up ‘the ideal’ of Christianity and what it means to be a Christian, he hoped to ‘corrode’ the misconceptions that, he felt, plagued Christendom. He writes, “I do not say of myself that I am a remarkable Christian... But I do maintain that I know with uncommon clarity and definiteness what Christianity is, what can be required of the Christian, what it means to be a Christian.”³²

Kierkegaard’s journals also confirm his interest in conceptual clarification. In an entry from 1850 he writes, “My activity with regard to the essentially Christian. It is to nail down the Christian qualifications in such a way that no doubt, no reflection, shall be able to get hold of them. It is like locking the door and throwing away the key; thus the Christian qualifications are made inaccessible to reflection.”³³ Only the choice remains: will you believe or will you not believe, but the chatter of reflection cannot get hold of it.”³⁴ And a few years later,

²⁹Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination; Judge for Yourself!*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 81.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 96.

³¹1849.

³²Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 138.

³³He has in mind the sort of reflection characterized by the speculative (Hegelian) philosophy of his day. In chapters four and five I will distinguish between different sorts of reflection.

³⁴Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 1:213 (#522).

I understand it as my very particular task assigned by Governance, for which I was selected very early and was educated very slowly, and in which I am only now fully in compliance, also because I have always understood that this really would be about the same as having to be a sacrifice—I understand it as my task to extricate the Christian concepts from the illusions in which we have entangled them, and in so doing work toward an awakening with all the power the Omnipotent One may have granted me and with the willingness to suffer that he may have loved forth in my soul both by severity and by leniency.³⁵

In suggesting that Kierkegaard's authorship is largely concerned with clarifying ethical and religious concepts, I will adopt a view of him as 'moral grammarian' that Robert C. Roberts has offered, adapting a term from Wittgenstein. A moral grammarian engages in what Roberts calls "conceptual therapy" by assisting a moral community to understand concepts that undergird that community's tradition.³⁶ As it turns out, moral communities (and in Wittgenstein's opinion, the general community of philosophy) continue to employ concepts in everyday use long after knowledge of those concepts and what makes them important has worn thin.³⁷ The moral grammarian explores the 'depth grammar' of the tradition with the aim of charging the tradition's underlying concepts with renewed meaning. In Wittgenstein's case this involves reorienting members of the philosophical community to the way words are used every day (in language games). Just as Wittgenstein might help the philosophical community recover everyday concepts from

³⁵Ibid., 6:554 (#6943).

³⁶Robert C. Roberts, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of 'Virtue Ethics'," in *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. Martin J. Matušík and Merold Westphal (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 146.

³⁷In a similar vein, Elizabeth Anscombe indicts modern moral philosophy for holding fast to a particular conception of obligation that makes sense only in light of a divine lawgiver, whereas in point of fact, these philosophers have for the most part given up belief in the divine. See "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy*, 33 (1958).

a Platonic influence, so Kierkegaard's practices might be described as "archeology"³⁸ in their aims to unearth and communicate the original meaning of Christianity's concepts.

In an early journal entry Kierkegaard expresses frustration over the persistent misuse of Christianity's concepts.

every Christian concept has become so volatilized, so completely dissolved in a mass of fog, that it is beyond all recognition. To the concepts of faith, incarnation, tradition, inspiration, which in the Christian sphere are to lead to a particular historical fact, the philosophers choose to give an entirely different, ordinary meaning, whereby faith has become the immediate consciousness, which essentially is nothing other than the *vitale Fluidam* [vital fluid] of mental life, its atmosphere, and tradition has become the content of a certain experience of the world, while inspiration has become nothing more than God's breathing of the life-spirit into man, and incarnation no more than the presence of one or another idea in one or more individuals.³⁹

According to Roberts, the moral grammarian views the practice of philosophical ethics as the practice of wisdom, the exploration of moral concepts as the quest for wisdom, and the dispensing of those renewed concepts to one's community as the dispensing of wisdom. The moral grammarian engages in "a kind of discourse that can improve persons by speaking to their hearts."⁴⁰ This assumes on the part of the philosopher that first, she cares for wisdom, and second, she can effectively communicate wisdom. Such philosophical efforts are "driven and oriented by love, by an enthusiasm for those goods, a participant's concern that they should be realized in human lives."⁴¹ As we will see, Kierkegaard masterfully blends the skills of conceptual analysis and

³⁸Roberts uses this term in "Søren Kierkegaard as Philosopher of Religion," in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Paul Copan and Chad V. Meister, forthcoming, 5.

³⁹Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 5:81 (#5181).

⁴⁰Roberts, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of 'Virtue Ethics'," 143.

⁴¹Ibid.

literary artistry, indeed speaking to the heart with the help of the mind.⁴² Because of the natural connection between genuine concern for elucidating virtue (and other ethical and religious) concepts and a concern to edify the reader, we may wonder what relationship Kierkegaard has to the virtue tradition.

*Kierkegaard and the Virtue Tradition*⁴³

Roberts commends to us the thesis that "...Kierkegaard is pre-eminently a 'virtue ethicist,' and that in his grammatical analysis of various virtues we find a model for the central method of virtue ethics, a method largely neglected by present-day practitioners of the discipline."⁴⁴ Is this view correct? If so, *what kind* of virtue ethicist is Kierkegaard?⁴⁵ While Kierkegaard clearly has interest in the virtues and their elucidation, some scholars have expressed hesitation over placing Kierkegaard in the broad tradition of "virtue thinkers" that extends from Plato to Hume and resumes in the twentieth century with Anscombe and MacIntyre.

After MacIntyre credited (or blamed) Kierkegaard for destroying "the whole tradition of a rational moral culture" in *After Virtue*, Kierkegaard scholars sought to

⁴²In chapter four we will consider Kierkegaard's self-description as 'poet-dialectician.'

⁴³Another recent interpretation of Kierkegaard's ethics that is compatible with my claims about Kierkegaard's edification is that of divine command ethics (see Philip Quinn's "Kierkegaard's Christian Ethics" in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and C. Stephen Evans's *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)). While some stronger forms of divine command theory are incompatible with certain forms of virtue theory, one can read Kierkegaard's view of love and emphasize that in Christianity love is a commanded disposition, or one can emphasize that it is a virtue to be received from the Holy Spirit and cultivated through effort and practice.

⁴⁴Roberts, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of 'Virtue Ethics,'" 148.

⁴⁵In my discussion of Kierkegaard's relevance to contemporary ethics in chapter five, I will argue that Kierkegaard is best understood as a 'radical virtue ethicist,' to employ a term David Solomon uses in a recent article.

correct some of MacIntyre's missteps in his discussion of Kierkegaard.⁴⁶ The culmination of these efforts is a collection of essays entitled *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre*.⁴⁷ This book also helpfully goes beyond MacIntyre's reading of Kierkegaard to explore the *positive* connections between these two philosophers⁴⁸ as well as possibilities for dialogue between Kierkegaard and the virtue tradition. While that collection of essays sparked interest in Kierkegaard's relation to the virtue tradition, it is important to note that Roberts,⁴⁹ David Gouwens,⁵⁰ and Edward Mooney⁵¹ had previously defended readings of Kierkegaard as a kind of virtue thinker. Along with them, I will argue that Kierkegaard has more in common with the virtue tradition than previously thought. However, at the outset I should state that my goal is not to claim decisively that Kierkegaard is a virtue theorist, but rather to examine helpful ways in which Kierkegaard 'as virtue thinker' can illumine and expand our understanding of his philosophy, and the task of philosophy in general.⁵²

⁴⁶Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 41.

⁴⁷*Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, ed. John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Chicago: Open Court, 2001).

⁴⁸See for example John Davenport's "Towards an Existential Virtue Ethics: Kierkegaard and MacIntyre," (Ibid., 270-276).

⁴⁹See Robert C. Roberts, "Existence, Emotion, and Virtue: Classical Themes in Kierkegaard," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 177-206.

⁵⁰See David Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁵¹See, for example, chapter three of Mooney's *Selves in Discord and Resolve: Kierkegaard's Moral-Religious Psychology from Either/Or to The Sickness Unto Death* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 27-40.

⁵²I use 'thinker' instead of 'theorist' because I do not want to give the impression that Kierkegaard understood his work as constructing any sort of theory of ethics. Furthermore, I have no interest in arguments that claim Kierkegaard to be this theorist or that theorist (regardless of how Kierkegaard would

Before saying more about how Kierkegaard might be viewed in light of the virtue tradition, let us head off two objections Bruce Kirmmse makes in “Kierkegaard and MacIntyre: Possibilities for Dialogue.” The first concerns the general question of Kierkegaard’s relation to antiquity and classical philosophy. I will argue that Kierkegaard’s philosophy has more in common with classical thought than Kirmmse allows. The second (and related) objection is that Kierkegaard’s view of faith, being both Protestant and orthodox, is incompatible with a strong concern for the virtues. If salvation comes through faith alone by God’s grace alone, then to speak of it as a virtue one can ‘work on’ or cultivate seems to suggest the Pelagian notion that one can contribute to one’s salvation. I will argue that this Pelagian problem does not follow from a conception of faith as a virtue. As part of my response to these objections, I will conclude with a brief exposition of Kierkegaard’s view of faith (and the related problem of salvation by grace) as presented in *For Self-Examination*, thereby anticipating chapter four’s examination of the concept of faith in five pseudonymous works.

Objection One: Kierkegaard Opposes the Classical Tradition

An important part of MacIntyre’s critique of modernity in *After Virtue* involves accusations he makes against Kierkegaard as a proponent of an ethic of radical choice. Roberts describes MacIntyre’s view: “This Sartrean Kierkegaard is the anti-hero of Alasdair MacIntyre’s saga of the Enlightenment project of finding a rational foundation for morality.”⁵³ Kirmmse convincingly demonstrates how MacIntyre’s charges rest on a

view himself). I only argue that our readings of Kierkegaard will be enriched if we consider him as a virtue thinker—that is, a thinker strongly concerned with virtues and related (in a sense that will be discussed below) to the broad tradition of other ‘virtue thinkers.’ More will be said on the issue of ethical theory in chapter five.

⁵³Roberts, “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of ‘Virtue Ethics’,” 148-9.

misunderstanding. Kierkegaard, too, was highly critical of modernity—namely, the ethical theories that immediately preceded him in Kant and Hegel—and what Kirmmse calls “Romantic philhellenism.”⁵⁴

According to Kirmmse, Kierkegaard “was unable to feel much nostalgia” for the classical tradition and its forms of life that determine the roles we humans play.⁵⁵ Kierkegaard reads Greek life as full of anxiety based in significant part on the ancient conception of fate. While Socrates breaks with the traditional answer to the Euthyphro question, mainstream Greek culture largely felt that its well-being was a function of the moods of the gods—what Kirmmse calls “zero-sum fatalism.”⁵⁶ Socrates best epitomizes the zero-sum approach when on his deathbed he asks Crito to sacrifice a cock to Asclepius. Kirmmse notes Socrates’ “witheringly ironic insistence that life itself is an illness, while death is deliverance, healing.”⁵⁷ On this view, the ancients get no further than this bleak outlook on life. (Kirmmse agrees with MacIntyre that Kant gets no further, either.) Kirmmse believes that Kierkegaard would have criticized MacIntyre “for being insufficiently cognizant of the radical difference between Christianity and classical culture.”⁵⁸

⁵⁴Bruce Kirmmse, “Kierkegaard and MacIntyre: Possibilities for Dialogue,” in *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre*, 193.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 193. Kirmmse here contrasts Kierkegaard with MacIntyre who, Kirmmse implies, *does* feel nostalgia for the classical tradition. Needless to say, MacIntyre would take offense to such a suggestion.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 194.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 193.

For Kierkegaard, says Kirmmse, “the crisis of classical fatalism” can only be fixed by Christianity, “which teaches that existence is more than a zero-sum game.”⁵⁹ Christianity’s primary distinction from paganism is that God supplies the condition, something outside of us, that provides meaning for life. Kirmmse continues, “just as MacIntyre draws his great divide between the classical-medieval and modern periods, Kierkegaard draws *his* great divide between classical and Christian.”⁶⁰

While distinctions between Greek life and thought and Christianity should not be underestimated, Kirmmse seems mistaken in this comment about Kierkegaard.⁶¹ Kierkegaard rarely polemicizes against the Greeks, but rather treats them as, at times, relatively innocent pagans (innocent in that they lacked the Christian revelation and especially the concept of sin).⁶² While Kierkegaard might not seem as nostalgic as Kirmmse claims MacIntyre to be, it seems too strong to attribute to Kierkegaard an out-and-out rejection of ancient Greece. For one thing, throughout the authorship Kierkegaard views Socrates not as a zero-sum fatalist,⁶³ but as a masterful ethicist: one

⁵⁹Ibid., 194.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Kirmmse defends this reading of Kierkegaard’s view of the Greeks by depending almost exclusively (at least as far as references go) on *The Concept of Anxiety*. As Kierkegaard reminds us at the end of Climacus’s *Postscript*, however, we should hesitate to allow Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms (in this case, Vigilius Haufniensis) to speak for Kierkegaard, or to represent his views. While I am sympathetic to finding agreement between Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms, Kirmmse’s case would be stronger if he relied more on signed works (including the journals).

⁶²One thinks of Climacus’s pagan (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 201) who relates to the wrong deity in the right way, and in Climacus’s mind, is closer to truth than the Christian who relates the wrong way to the right deity.

⁶³Again, Kirmmse’s reading of Kierkegaard’s view of Socrates depends almost exclusively on the view presented in *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard’s dissertation. Besides the fact that Kierkegaard does not consider this book part of his authorship proper, there is significant consensus that Kierkegaard’s view of Socrates changes significantly after the dissertation. That is, nowhere else after that point does this

who cares for virtue and whose life-work is devoted to persuading others to care for virtue. Kierkegaard holds Socrates in high esteem not just in the pseudonymous works⁶⁴ but in the signed, religious writings too.⁶⁵ Second, if Kierkegaard's 'great divide' is between Christianity and the classical world, what are we to do with the modern period? After all, Kierkegaard directs his 'attacks' not against the Greeks but against Hegelianism and its infiltration into the Danish Lutheran church. Climacus directs *his own* attacks against modern philosophy (especially Descartes and Hegel) *with the aid of* Greek philosophy and especially Socrates.⁶⁶

If we must view Kierkegaard's thought in terms of a dichotomy, surely the modern era cannot be assimilated with classical thought, because, for one thing, it has developed within a "Christian" Europe. But modernity clearly does not fall on the Christian side of the divide, either. That is the primary problem Kierkegaard's authorship addresses: Christianity contaminated by modernity. It is bizarre that Kirmmse sets up a

negative view of Socrates surface. For an early example of this view, see James Collins, *The Mind of Kierkegaard* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 151 (originally published in 1953). See also David Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 44 n.45, and John Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 146. In chapter three I will explore similarities between Socrates' and Kierkegaard's maieutic methods.

⁶⁴E.g. "Yet it is possible that in the Socratic ignorance there was more truth in Socrates than in the objective truth of the entire system that flirts with the demands of the times and adapts itself to assistant professors" (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 202). See also pages 131, 147, 162, and 207.

⁶⁵E.g. Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses; The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 241; *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 37, 133; *Works of Love*, 276-77; and *For Self-Examination*, 9-10.

⁶⁶"This much, however, is certain, that with speculative thought everything goes backward, back past the Socratic, which at least comprehended that for an existing person existing is the essential" (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 212). And, "...Socrates politely and indirectly took the untruth away from the learner and gave him the truth, whereas speculative thought politely and indirectly takes the truth away from the learner and gives him the untruth" (Ibid., 219).

Kierkegaardian dichotomy at all,⁶⁷ but it is especially bizarre that he ignores modernity *here*, precisely because elsewhere he argues that Kierkegaard is a more radical critic of modernity than MacIntyre himself.⁶⁸ I would argue that *if* we have to force Kierkegaard into positing some divide, it would be between Christianity and paganism, where paganism takes on all stripes that include the pre-Christian Greeks *as well as* the post-Christian Hegelians. Perhaps we are better off without such attempts at simplification.

Kirmmse is right to point out that many concepts of Christianity stand in opposition to classical ones in many ways, but what about the similarities? Roberts argues that Kierkegaard can be read within the general virtue tradition because his writing shares many features common to that tradition, widely construed. These include the notions that humans are “capable of having a stable character,” that they possess “a given human nature independently of our trait development,” that “traits are dispositions to passive or quasi-passive episodic states of the subject such as emotions, perceptions, and thoughts,” and that these traits are interconnected and “make or fail to make for the well-being, happiness, eudaimonia, or flourishing of those who possess them and those who associate with those who possess them.”⁶⁹ Another feature common among virtue thinkers and particularly notable for the current study of Kierkegaard is that virtue thinkers “are typically preoccupied with moral and spiritual education, upbringing, upbuilding,

⁶⁷I suspect that he does so to facilitate a comparison of Kierkegaard to MacIntyre.

⁶⁸See Kirmmse, “Kierkegaard and MacIntyre: Possibilities for Dialogue,” 191, 193, 202-3.

⁶⁹Robert C. Roberts, “The Virtue of Hope in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, vol. 5, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 187-88.

formation, deep psychological development.”⁷⁰ When we consider the emphasis Kierkegaard places on getting our moral and religious concepts correct, it is clear that this last feature is of utmost importance in his writing. To ignore these likenesses is to exaggerate Kierkegaard’s differences with classical philosophy. Certainly, as Roberts argues, Kierkegaard shares much more with Aristotle than he does with Camus or Sartre.⁷¹

Objection Two: Kierkegaard Opposes Virtue

So far I have contested a general objection that Kierkegaard’s primary opponent is classical philosophy. The second objection concerns the specific concept of a virtue. On an Aristotelian account, a virtue is an excellence that one attains through forming a habit or disposition to act in an appropriate manner at an appropriate time for an appropriate reason. While, importantly, one needs the right sort of community—especially good teachers and parents—and external goods like wealth and even beauty to become virtuous, each person has within himself the power to attain virtuous character. Philip Quinn correctly anticipates an incongruity between this sort of conception of virtue and Christianity. Such a view of virtue implies that “Practical reason operating apart from religious influences offers humans their best shot at working out for themselves good lives.”⁷² Is Christian virtue ethics possible? Kirmmse hints that, at least for a Lutheran

⁷⁰Ibid., 188.

⁷¹Ibid., 185. In chapter four I will contrast de silentio’s concept of infinite resignation with an apparently similar existentialist view.

⁷²Philip Quinn, “The Primacy of God’s Will in Christian Ethics,” in *Christian Theism and Moral Philosophy*, ed. Michael Beaty, Carlton Fisher, and Mark Nelson (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 280. He cites Martha Nussbaum as an example of a contemporary philosopher who holds this Aristotelian view of virtue.

like Kierkegaard, it is not: "...one wonders indeed whether it is useful to speak of Christian "virtues" at all."⁷³

Kirmmse wants to draw a categorical divide between the unique concepts of Christianity, e.g. grace and sin, and the concepts of classical morality, represented, for instance, by Aristotle. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Anti-Climacus suggests such a sharp divide, exemplified by the Socratic definition of sin as ignorance. This view *is* profoundly different from the Christian view, sin as willful defiance, which was absent in the classical world. While Kirmmse ultimately affirms a few points of possible dialogue⁷⁴ between a virtue ethicist like MacIntyre and Kierkegaard, he insists that Kierkegaard's radical Christian views are largely incompatible with a care for the virtues. Kirmmse writes, "Kierkegaard's way of thinking does indeed come "after virtue," but only because he insists that everything after the arrival of Christianity is after virtue, and that faith is what Christianity puts forth instead of virtue."⁷⁵

If Kirmmse and Quinn are correct that Christianity is incompatible with a classical conception of the virtues, what place *do* the virtues have in Christianity? What of faith, hope and love, and what of the Galatian fruits of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control)? Surely those who disallow the possibility of a Christian virtue ethic must give some account of the many

⁷³Kirmmse, "Kierkegaard and MacIntyre: Possibilities for Dialogue," 198.

⁷⁴Ibid., 209-10 n15.

⁷⁵Ibid., 197.

virtue concepts present throughout Scripture. If there is a place for these virtues in Christianity, can that place be significant in a way that still allows for God's grace?⁷⁶

Similarly, we can ask, is Kierkegaard opposed to a virtue ethic as Kirmmse suggests? If so, how do we make sense of the many virtues expounded throughout his authorship? Since Kierkegaard does value the distinct doctrines of sin and grace, can he give due importance to the virtues and still remain orthodox? Does it enfeeble the notion of virtue to claim that we can cultivate it only through an act of God's grace?

When Kirmmse says "faith is what Christianity puts forth instead of virtue," he refers to Anti-Climacus' (biblically-derived⁷⁷) claim in *The Sickness Unto Death*: "the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith."⁷⁸ However, he ignores the fact that faith has long been viewed by Jews and Christians *as* a kind of virtue, a character trait that we should strive to cultivate and work out, albeit in fear and trembling.⁷⁹ How are we to reconcile this incongruity? Roberts views Anti-Climacus's claim as "a grammatical remark about sin," that understands by 'virtue' what Aristotle's magnanimous man might embody.⁸⁰ This view of virtue can be characterized by a high degree of pride and glory in one's moral character and accomplishments—a view where divine assistance is absent. However, as MacIntyre tells us, there are a wide array of "virtue collections" (each also

⁷⁶Quinn suggests that Christian moral philosophers should "join Aquinas in holding that virtue consists chiefly in conformity with God's will and obedience to his commands," in "The Primacy of God's Will in Christian Ethics," 284.

⁷⁷Rom. 14:23.

⁷⁸Søren Kierkegaard, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 82.

⁷⁹Phil. 2:12.

⁸⁰Roberts, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of 'Virtue Ethics'," 151.

containing its own definition of what a virtue is, generally speaking) including those of Aristotle, the New Testament, the Icelandic Sagas, Benjamin Franklin, and Nietzsche. As Roberts writes, “Once we acknowledge that different virtues, belonging to different traditions, have different grammars, it is quite natural to grant, with the broad Christian tradition, that the *virtue* of faith—the disposition to acknowledge, trust, and love God—is the opposite of sin.”⁸¹ If we can understand faith as a virtue in this sense, and yet salvation according to Paul comes through grace alone *by faith*, then it would seem that the possession of virtues is compatible with distinctive Christian concepts like grace and sin.

Whether a Christian virtue ethic is possible depends on how loosely or how tightly we draw the bounds of virtue ethics, and this is largely a function of how we define virtue. If we want to argue for reading Kierkegaard in this broad tradition we must first be clear about how he departs from classical virtue thinking. One of the more constant ways Kierkegaard departs from that tradition (though his criticism is against his contemporaries, not the ancients) comes in his opposition to life-views anchored by the Delphic motto ‘all things in moderation.’⁸² Kierkegaard regularly criticizes the ‘virtue’ of *Klogskab*, translated ‘sagacity’ by the Hongs, but also suggesting shrewdness, prudence, or calculation. He goes so far as to call the “deification of sagacity” the “idolatry of our age,” and claims that “Christianly understood, sensibleness,

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²“The purely human view is of the opposite opinion, that to be sober is specifically marked by exercising moderation in everything, by observing in everything this sober “to a certain degree” (Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination; Judge for Yourself!*, 106). This also gets expressed in the phrase “nothing too much.”

levelheadedness, and sagacity are ... intoxication!”⁸³ In *Practice in Christianity* Anti-Climacus considers several responses of offense at Christ characterized by *Klogskab*. The “sagacious and sensible person” reflects on the life of Christ in the following manner: “The whole thing is inexplicable to me—what he wants, what his purpose is, what he is trying to do, what he wants to achieve, what it all means. He who by many a statement betrays such a deep insight into the human heart, which I cannot deny him, he certainly must very well know what I with less than half of my sagacity can tell him in advance, that this is no way to get ahead in the world....”⁸⁴ In *Judge for Yourself!* Kierkegaard considers the New Testament exhortation to be sober and contrasts the worldly conception of sobriety with the Christian conception. “When a distinction is made in just a human way between being sober, spiritually understood, and being intoxicated, one thinks of being sober as sensibleness, levelheadedness, sagacity, and everything connected with that; one thinks of intoxication as enthusiasm, venturing, and venturing in such a way that one relinquishes probability.”⁸⁵ While I am not suggesting that, for Kierkegaard, *Klogskab* is identical to, for instance, Aristotelian prudence, there is a kind of worldly wisdom (at times Kierkegaard calls it common sense) present in the Greeks that Kierkegaard strongly rejects.⁸⁶

⁸³Ibid., 102-3.

⁸⁴Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 42.

⁸⁵Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination; Judge for Yourself!*, 98.

⁸⁶It would be interesting to consider how Socrates does or does not live by the motto ‘all things in moderation.’ Kierkegaard tends to view Socrates as someone who does in fact ‘venture greatly.’

In “The Perils of Polarity,” Edward Mooney makes some further distinctions about the kind of virtue thinker Kierkegaard is and is not. A Traditionalist⁸⁷ approach to virtue “would typically set a goal we can achieve with effort and training. Yet some aims Kierkegaard will stress in his religious voice are aims we *cannot* achieve with effort and training. Attainment of these can only be welcomed as a gift from sources we cannot control.”⁸⁸ As we will see below, grace plays an important role in Kierkegaard’s conception of virtue, and of faith in particular. Another divergence from a classical conception of virtue involves Kierkegaard’s qualified understanding of the role of striving in the moral life. According to Mooney, Kierkegaard’s emphasis on “the strategy of releasing will from striving (though not from passion), prevents us from placing him unequivocally within those versions of virtue ethics that place exclusive stress on the dynamic *pursuit* of virtue.”⁸⁹ This idea of “releasing the will from striving” is exemplified in Anti-Climacus’ formula for faith in *The Sickness Unto Death*, where faith is described as a resting in God.⁹⁰ However, Kierkegaard’s conception of virtue (and faith in particular) does not disallow striving altogether.⁹¹ In the *Postscript*, faith itself involves *becoming* a particular sort of person, risking a bold venture, working strenuously. Of course Climacus’s nuanced view, like de silentio’s view of Abraham’s

⁸⁷Mooney employs MacIntyre’s term from *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, where the latter has in mind Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas as representing such an approach to the virtues.

⁸⁸Edward Mooney, “The Perils of Polarity: Kierkegaard and MacIntyre in Search of Moral Truth,” in *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre*, 250-1.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 253.

⁹⁰We will explore this theme in chapter four.

⁹¹This claim assumes basic continuity between Kierkegaard’s and Climacus’ views, a claim that will also be defended in chapter four.

faith, is scriptural insofar as we are told to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”⁹²

That Climacus’s and de silentio’s views overlap with Kierkegaard’s is evident when we turn to the signed work, *For Self-Examination*. There we see a conception of faith that allows for striving. But in this view, unlike the classical, one strives to become virtuous in response to God’s grace and one strives to become virtuous *through* God’s grace. Kierkegaard’s comments are set in the context of the classic grace-versus-works debate that was a divisive issue in the days of St. Paul, as it was for Luther, and as it remains today. Like many of the other issues Kierkegaard sought to clarify, this one was botched by his contemporaries.

There is always a secular mentality that no doubt wants to have the name of being Christian but wants to become Christian as cheaply as possible. This secular mentality became aware of Luther. . . . “If it is to be *works*—fine, but then I must also ask for the legitimate yield I have coming from my works, so that they are meritorious. If it is to be *grace*—fine, but then I must also ask to be free from works—otherwise it surely is not grace. If it is to be works and nevertheless grace, that is indeed foolishness.” Yes, that is indeed foolishness; that would also be true Lutheranism; that would indeed be Christianity. Christianity’s requirement is this: your life should express works as strenuously as possible; then one thing more is required—that you humble yourself and confess: But my being saved is nevertheless grace.⁹³

By rejecting the false dichotomy set up by those who want “to become Christian as cheaply as possible,” Kierkegaard carves a space for the role of *virtues as qualities to be achieved by works that we must strive to do in response to God’s grace, with the help of*

⁹²Phil. 2:12.

⁹³Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, 16-7.

God's grace.⁹⁴ These works are not meritorious, but rather are compatible with salvation by grace alone. Kierkegaard is explicit that salvation comes through grace, yet at this point we can see clearly *why* there is throughout his writings an emphasis on works, on virtues, on the cultivation of right character.

When we qualify Kierkegaard's understanding of virtue, we can follow Quinn's advice to see how Aquinas, the great synthesizer of Athens and Jerusalem, conceives of virtue. Kierkegaard would likely agree to his definition of the theological virtues, in particular.⁹⁵ The reason faith, hope, and love are theological virtues is, "[F]irst, because they have God as their object, inasmuch as by them we are rightly ordered to God; secondly, because they are infused in us by God alone; and finally, because these virtues are made known to us only by divine revelation in Sacred Scripture."⁹⁶ While Kirmmse is right to point out how Kierkegaard's Christian conception of faith is unlike any concept of classical (pagan) thought, he prematurely closes the door on the benefits we might gain by reading Kierkegaard as *a kind* of virtue thinker.

Looking Ahead

The thesis that Kierkegaard aims to edify, as I shall show, stands in direct opposition to a growing body of secondary literature on Kierkegaard. Literary theories

⁹⁴In Kierkegaard's preface to *Anti-Climacus's Practice in Christianity*, he states that Christianity's "requirement should be heard—and I understand what is said as spoken to me alone—so that I might learn not only to resort to *grace* but to resort to it in relation to the use of *grace*" (7).

⁹⁵For a discussion of faith, hope, and love, see Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, 81-5.

⁹⁶Thomas Aquinas, *Treatise on the Virtues*, trans. John A. Oesterle (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 119 (question LXII). MacIntyre is correct to point out that Kierkegaard and Aquinas have different conceptions of human depravity, but he seems to overstate their differences by claiming they are "irreconcilable perspectives, systematically at odds both philosophically and theologically" ("Once More on Kierkegaard," in *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre*, 353).

that posit the ‘death of the author’ have found fertile ground in Kierkegaard’s masterful use of pseudonymity and irony.⁹⁷ To speak of *Kierkegaard’s* intentions, according to such views, is inappropriate from the start. In response to such views I will develop my argument by considering the particular deconstructive readings of Roger Poole and Joakim Garff in chapters two and three respectively. Poole argues against approaches to Kierkegaard’s indirect methods of communication that fail to privilege the literary qualities of the text and that seek to glean serious philosophical or religious meaning instead. To look for, for example, edifying elements in *Fear and Trembling* is to miss the literary detail, the subtext, that Poole believes contains the true, although irretrievable, meaning. Kierkegaard’s own explanation of his indirect methods indicates that in fact serious philosophical and religious points *are* being made *via* the indirect methods, just as Socrates, *via* his irony, has something serious to say to his interlocutors (or Plato has something serious to say through Socratic irony).

Kierkegaard best articulates this perspective in *The Point of View*. However, Garff argues that *The Point of View*, signed by Kierkegaard, is instead another example of a pseudonymous work, this time by the pseudonym “Kierkegaard,” who writes fictionally about his authorship.⁹⁸ Kierkegaard composes this ‘retrospective’ to trick or to deceive, not to inform. Against this thesis I will argue for a reading of *The Point of View* that takes it at face value as an accounting of Kierkegaard’s honest, retrospective conception

⁹⁷Louis Mackey, one of the first to interpret Kierkegaard this way, expresses this hermeneutic in the following way (though without argument): “There is perhaps never good reason (even in the “normal” case) to identify the “writer” with the “actual” person whose name he signs, though it is natural to do so” (*Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard* (Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, 1986), 188).

⁹⁸Mackey shares this view and credits it to Kierkegaard’s brother Peter, who offered the following opinion: “One might almost be tempted to think that even what was signed ‘S.K.’ might not for certain be his final words, but only a point of view” (qtd. in Mackey, *Points of View*, 160).

of his authorship. Where Garff presupposes a hermeneutic of suspicion, I will offer a reading that trusts the text and its author. I propose such a reading not merely as an alternative to deconstruction; this approach is preferable because it is corroborated by other facts within the authorship—the testimony of Kierkegaard’s journals and the way the texts themselves work. If we read *The Point of View* as Kierkegaard apparently intended it, as a direct report to history, it is undeniable that the aim of edification is central to the authorship and that any explanation of the indirect devices must take into account Kierkegaard’s understanding of the context of Danish Christendom and especially the Danish Christians he sought to edify.

After providing a positive conception of indirect communication that takes seriously the literary aspects of Kierkegaard’s writings (without privileging them to the neglect of the philosophical or religious), in chapter four I will illustrate the thesis that edification is central to the pseudonymous writings by exploring the concept of faith as presented in five pseudonymous texts. The great lengths to which Kierkegaard goes in employing his pseudonyms to elucidate faith, especially given the context of Christendom, demonstrate how his indirect methods not only convey serious religious insights, but do so in a unique way aimed at effecting in the reader a particular sort of pathos.

In the fifth and final chapter I will explore Kierkegaard’s relevance to contemporary ethics. For those sympathetic to the shortcomings of modern moral philosophy and a return to an ethics of virtue, I will commend Kierkegaard as a helpful interlocutor. After placing him in conversation with Bernard Williams and Alasdair MacIntyre, I will argue that Kierkegaard’s practice of edification through the clarification of virtue (and other)

concepts, in conjunction with his engaging, poetic style of writing, offers a rich, alternative approach to ethics.

CHAPTER TWO

‘Différance’ or Dialectic: ‘Blunt Reading,’ the Pseudonyms, and the Importance of the Existence Spheres

As stated above, there is likely to be minimal disagreement over the claim that the ultimate aim of Kierkegaard’s upbuilding writings (his signed, religious works that include not just the *Upbuilding Discourses* but *Works of Love, For Self-Examination, Christian Discourses*, etc.) is, in fact, the upbuilding of his reader, whom he addresses personally in many places as “the single individual.” If there *is* opposition to this claim, the burden rests on those who see other intentions on behalf of the author, and it is not my objective to anticipate such arguments here. More difficult to defend, but much more interesting, is the thesis that the pseudonymous writings share the intention of upbuilding as well. This is not to say that all the pseudonymous authors themselves aim to edify, but rather that Kierkegaard, through the pseudonyms, works toward this end.

In chapter one I claimed that an important way Kierkegaard seeks to edify his reader is through conceptual clarification. We saw how both Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms express frustration over the pervasive misunderstanding and misuse of moral and religious terminology—especially concepts central to Christianity. Given Climacus’s diagnosis of his age—that “it is very easy to confuse everything in a confusion of language, where estheticians use the most decisive Christian-religious categories in brilliant remarks, and pastors use them thoughtlessly as officialesse that is indifferent to content”—he seeks to make clear what such concepts mean—to draw important

distinctions between, for instance, the Christianity of the New Testament and that reflected by Christendom.¹

Despite such strong textual support for Kierkegaard's interest in the clarification of concepts, Roger Poole argues that Kierkegaard is doing no such thing. In this chapter I will examine Poole's claim that when we read Kierkegaard as engaged in such serious activities, we misread him. Poole argues that when we take seriously the literary nature of Kierkegaard's writing—something that has been largely overlooked in the secondary literature—we are better equipped to understand his rather unserious production. I will argue against Poole's privileging of the literary on the basis that it fails to account for two important components of Kierkegaard's authorship—the everpresent use of dialectical analysis and the spheres of existence.

Roger Poole on Kierkegaard's Indirect Communication

Introduction

Poole insists that we are *not* permitted to ask of Kierkegaard's texts "What does it mean?,"² nor can we expect to find a "clear position," a "definite result," "his' position," or "final 'closure' on the matter of 'his' meaning."³ According to Poole, "Kierkegaard

¹Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 269.

²Roger Poole, "The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth Century Receptions," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 62. Interestingly, in a later article Poole says of Kierkegaard's writing that there is a "meaning" to be found, although it is not at all clear what *he* means ("Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading: How to Read and Why" in *Kierkegaard Studies, Yearbook* (2002), ed. John Stewart, Christian Fink Tolstrup, Hermann Deuser, and Niels Jørgen Cappelørn (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2002)). This statement comes at the end of the lengthy piece and lacks a referent. While there are possible hints of modification in this more recent article, he does not acknowledge any change in his views, and so I feel it fair to treat his work from 1993 on statically.

³Poole, "The Unknown Kierkegaard," 48.

writes text after text whose aim is not to state a truth, not to clarify an issue, not to propose a definite doctrine, not to offer some “meaning” that could be directly appropriated.”⁴ Speaking of the aesthetic (i.e. pseudonymous) works from *Either/Or* to *Stages on Life's Way* Poole continues this line of thought, “the aesthetic stream has as its purpose not to deliver a univocal communicatum. The aim of the aesthetic texts is not to instruct, or to inform, or to clarify, but on the contrary to divert, to subvert, and to destroy clear biographical intelligibility.”⁵ Elsewhere Poole speaks of Kierkegaard’s “deceptions”⁶ and how he “deliberately misleads”⁷ his reader.

We might ask ourselves, why would Kierkegaard go to such lengths if he did not have a serious interest in the concepts he addressed? What would be the point of a 600-page *Postscript*? Surely the comic effect⁸ would have come through with 300 pages? Why, for example, go on and on about the different sorts of religious pathos in such depth as he does through his pseudonym Johannes Climacus?

⁴Roger Poole, *Kierkegaard: the Indirect Communication* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 7.

⁵Ibid., 9.

⁶Roger Poole, “A Theory of Reading—Undecidability and ‘Filters’” (paper delivered at the Søren Kierkegaard Society of the United Kingdom, University of Leeds, 6 May 2000), 6. (Most of the text of this paper which was presented to the Kierkegaard Society of the United Kingdom in 2000 was reprinted in the much larger piece, “Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading,” (2002).) Whereas in *The Point of View* Kierkegaard refers to his early aesthetic writings as deception “into the truth,” Poole’s understanding and explanation of “deception” ignores the phrase “into the truth.” As we shall see, the category of the edifying, according to Poole, is particularly suited to those who read Kierkegaard ‘bluntly.’

⁷Roger Poole, “‘My wish, my prayer’: Keeping the Pseudonyms Apart; Preliminary Considerations,” in *Kierkegaard Studies, Yearbook* (1997), ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Hermann Deuser (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 163.

⁸The *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* to Philosophical Fragments was several times larger than the original piece itself.

Poole offers at least two reasons. The first pertains to a desire on the part of Kierkegaard to lure his reader alongside himself into an inescapable labyrinth. Poole writes, “The reader has to be gathered in as a potential ally, seduced and intrigued by the typographical and rhetorical waylayings of the text, and then involved in a kind of detective work, up to that point where (under ideal conditions) there is no unadorned instruction or doctrine or objective fact to be had, but only **the mutually shared experience of perplexity.**”⁹ In his pseudonymous writings up to *Postscript*, Kierkegaard invites, or perhaps manipulates his reader into trying to assemble (along with himself) a very complex puzzle; only, as it turns out, not all the pieces are available to the reader, if they exist at all. It seems that Poole might have offered the more charitable, though related suggestion that at the end of this perplexity is some philosophical or ethical insight awaiting the reader. Such an interpretation would be compatible with Anti-Climacus’s description of indirect communication as a dialectical knot the reader must untie.¹⁰ However, Poole believes “the mutually shared experience of perplexity” is an end in itself, and thus sufficient to explain Kierkegaard’s intention. But what would possess Kierkegaard to undertake such a project, especially given his knack for philosophical rigor, not just literary brilliance?

This leads us to a second reason Poole offers us: Kierkegaard’s own whim. Poole believes that a proper understanding of the relation between the early aesthetic works and

⁹Poole, *Kierkegaard: the Indirect Communication*, 9-10. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 133.

the corresponding upbuilding discourses is one primarily of opposition.¹¹ Upon completing ‘the first authorship’ (i.e. both pseudonymous and upbuilding writings up to 1846) Kierkegaard, according to Poole, sits back and smirks to himself. “He has concluded this whole literary campaign **for his own amusement**, to keep bitterness or bile at bay, and he has indeed achieved just that. The indirect communication had been a pleasure to set up, a pleasure to work with, and was now a pleasure to conclude.”¹² Poole’s characterization of Kierkegaard likens him to the reflective aesthete of *Either/Or*. He is a seducer whose object of amusement isn’t a particular young woman, but all of Copenhagen.¹³ To put Poole’s position in Kierkegaardian terms, Kierkegaard is engaged in much jest at the expense of earnestness.¹⁴

Poole’s Charge of ‘Blunt Reading’

¹¹When reading *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* alongside the *Upbuilding Discourses*, C. Stephen Evans suggests a different approach: “It would not be extravagant to recommend the *Edifying Discourses* as perhaps the best guide or commentary to the *Postscript*...” (*Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript: the Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1983), 50).

¹²Poole, *Kierkegaard: the Indirect Communication*, 14 (emphasis mine).

¹³Consider Evans’s explanation of the reflective aesthete: “The real world becomes a set of “occasions” for the exercise of her creative fancy” (*Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript*, 35). In chapter three I will consider similar views of Kierkegaard as seducer (or deceiver) represented by Henning Fenger and Joakim Garff.

¹⁴Poole condemns, as he puts it, “an insistence upon reading grimly ‘seriously,’ in a way which insists upon locating or identifying a unitary ‘meaning’ at the heart of every work, or at the heart of all the works taken as a sequence, as for example Sylvia Walsh does in taking *The Point of View* at absolutely face value” (“Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading,” 413). Incidentally, I will take up consideration of *The Point of View* in the next chapter. For a view similar to Poole’s, see Josiah Thompson, *Kierkegaard* (New York: Knopf, 1973), 146.

Just how satisfactory is this view of Kierkegaard? Up until Poole, such interpretations of Kierkegaard have been in the minority,¹⁵ whereas commentators who believe that Kierkegaard *does* present us with clear ideas and concepts (whether “existentialist,” Christian, or otherwise) have been the dominant strain in the secondary literature. These sorts of readings are the object of Poole’s polemic, best represented in a 1998 article that assesses the reception of Kierkegaard in the twentieth century. There he accuses those who inherited Kierkegaard from his early American translators¹⁶ as furthering a legacy of ‘blunt reading.’ According to Poole, “Blunt reading is that kind of reading that refuses, as a matter of principle, to accord a literary status to the text; that refuses the implications of the pseudonymous technique; that misses the irony; that is ignorant of the reigning Romantic ironic conditions obtaining when Kierkegaard wrote; and that **will not acknowledge, on religious grounds, that an “indirect communication” is at least partly bound in with the *pathos* of the lived life.**”¹⁷ He continues, “the tradition of ‘blunt reading’ insists on interpreting him as a ‘serious’ writer who is didactic, soluble and at bottom, ‘**edifying**’.”¹⁸ In a previous article that contained the seeds of this full-blown criticism, Poole chastises a blunt reading of Kierkegaard’s employment of pseudonymity. “The tradition of “blunt reading” mixes quotations and concepts from all or any pseudonyms in a single sentence, attributes to them all an equal valency and weight, and deliberately refuses the hard conceptual job of thinking one’s

¹⁵Probably the most well-known is that of Louis Mackey, who offers a similar deconstructive reading in *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard*. See also Josiah Thompson’s *Kierkegaard*.

¹⁶David Swenson and Walter Lowrie.

¹⁷Poole, “The Unknown Kierkegaard,” 60 (emphasis mine).

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 61 (emphasis mine).

way, through “différance,” through the very specific conceptual worlds the pseudonyms inhabit.”¹⁹ He continues, “The tradition of “blunt reading” ... is forever prepared to ignore or to downgrade this literary background, and to slip into that happy no-man’s-land where the names of the pseudonyms, and the name of “Kierkegaard,” can be gradually and painlessly elided.”²⁰ And in a more recent paper, “For forty years, the view persisted, very largely due to the early American translators, that the reader need not take any notice of the pseudonyms, that “Kierkegaard” lay not far behind each text, and that each and every text reflected “Kierkegaard’s” views.”²¹ Contained within these passages are a number of criticisms that need to be unpacked. While Poole is correct that past interpretations have largely ignored the literary quality of Kierkegaard’s authorship, his criticisms and prescriptions for how to read the authorship are problematic. It should become clear that if Poole’s criticisms are sound and if his position is correct, then my reading of Kierkegaard—my claims about conceptual clarification, edification, and the overarching interest in what it means to become a Christian—will be severely undermined.

Thus, I will begin by summarizing what I take Poole to mean by a ‘blunt reading.’ I will make note of what I consider the valid aspects of his criticism. However, the notion

¹⁹Poole, “‘My wish, my prayer,’” 157. Strangely, in a posthumously published article Poole sets aside the distinctions between *Either/Or* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and their respective pseudonyms (not to mention the distinct functions that the different pseudonyms have *for Kierkegaard*) and speaks of Kierkegaard’s “doctrine of subjectivity” that must be used to combat the “gradual annihilation at the hands of a postmodern ‘objectivity’ or a Nietzschean nihilism...” (“Reading *Either/Or* for the Very First Time,” in *The New Kierkegaard*, ed. Elsebet Jegstrup (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 54). Beyond overlooking the possible distinctions between e.g. William’s and Climacus’s views of subjectivity, Poole seems to be after a serious, even edifying, ethical implication in Kierkegaard’s work.

²⁰Ibid., 159.

²¹Poole, “Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading,” 397.

of a blunt reading rests on a false dilemma: *either* take seriously Kierkegaard's use of indirect communication (pseudonymity, irony, etc.) *or* read him "on religious grounds" (as edifying or as having a serious message to convey through the pseudonyms). Poole assumes that the only way to take seriously Kierkegaard's indirection is to read him as he does—from a deconstructive literary perspective that views the pseudonyms and their views as ultimately irresolvable so that any substantive relationship between Kierkegaard and a pseudonym or between the pseudonyms themselves is characterized by, and only by, *différance*.²² As George Pattison puts it, "Roger Poole has asserted that Kierkegaard's multiple pseudonyms are fundamentally distinct voices whose various points of view cannot be harmonised but, following Kierkegaard's own stated 'wish' and 'prayer,' must be kept forever apart."²³ Poole does not seem to consider the possibility that one might address seriously the indirect nature of the writings in ways that credit the apparent ethical, religious, edifying, and clarifying aims that many commentators see in the authorship. In the end, I will argue that Poole's reading is more blunt in its very narrow scope of what constitutes indirect communication. This narrowness is also reflected by the fact that, so far as I can tell, Poole concerns himself only with the pseudonymous writings.

The following is a list of the salient aspects of a blunt reading.²⁴ I have drawn these features from a wide variety of his texts:

²²I will explain this term shortly.

²³George Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses: Philosophy, Literature and Theology* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 4.

²⁴It is not clear whether someone guilty of just one or two of these four is, for Poole, a blunt reader, or whether blunt readers must err in all of these four ways. I will assume that the possession of any of these faults makes one a blunt reader.

- 1) downplaying (or in the worst, ignoring) the literary facets of Kierkegaard's writings²⁵
- 2) looking for 'serious' or straightforward meaning in each work, particularly of a religious or edifying nature
- 3) attributing to Kierkegaard a pseudonym's view, or making mention of "a Kierkegaardian view," the derivation of which comes from "a dozen conflicting and warring sources."²⁶
- 4) ignoring the indirection, which includes irony, but especially pseudonymity or the implications of pseudonymity, or, conflating the views of the pseudonyms²⁷

There are doubtless valid concerns present in these critiques. Kierkegaard *is* a literary genius, a poet, who has mastered many different rhetorical techniques and genres. Poole thanks Louis Mackey for bringing to light such insights about, for example, *Either/Or*. Mackey writes, "Like *Wilhelm Meister*, *Either/Or* was to be a *Bildungsroman*, a novel of the formation of the human personality, unfolding and shaping the manifold potentialities of its protagonist, and exploiting all the Romantic conventions: the narrative, the letter, the aphorism, the essay and the monologue."²⁸ Poole is also correct to draw our attention

²⁵He puts it stronger than this in his two most recent articles, where a blunt reading involves "the refusal to read the work initially and in the first instance as a *literary* work, within the literary conventions of the time" (Poole, "Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading," 413.) See also "Reading *Either/Or* for the Very First Time," 46.

²⁶"Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading," 413. In his 2004 "Reading *Either/Or* for the Very First Time," Poole seems to contradict himself by falling victim to his own earlier criticisms of a blunt reading. "I think there is one major conceptual task that we Kierkegaardians have to start in on, and that is to discover, retrieve, and describe exactly what Kierkegaard's philosophy of subjectivity ... actually *is*," 57. As stated above, in clarifying "Kierkegaard's philosophy of subjectivity" Poole has in mind *Either/Or* and *Postscript*, and since he consistently ignores Kierkegaard's signed writings, he presumably wants to invite other pseudonymous writings into the conversation. But in light of the third criterion of a blunt reading, how is such a doctrine or philosophy even possible, especially if one ignores the signed writings?

²⁷We can distinguish this from the first point by emphasizing that the former involves a criticism of readings that do not, in the first place, read Kierkegaard's writings as literature (which involves consideration of many more devices than just, for instance, indirect communication). The problem in point four is not that these readers are unaware of the specifically Kierkegaardian literary devices, but that they think these devices do not deserve much attention, or are not terribly important to consider when reading a text.

²⁸Louis Mackey, *Kierkegaard: A Kind of Poet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 273; qtd. in Poole, "Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading," 421.

to Kierkegaard's first and last declaration following the text of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. There Kierkegaard requests that we not attribute to him views presented by the pseudonyms. Taking this point a step further in the last criticism, Poole says that we must take seriously the devices of indirection by not conflating the views of the pseudonyms themselves.²⁹

In what follows I will address Poole's criticisms of blunt reading and his prescriptive hermeneutic, or his 'advice' to readers of Kierkegaard. As stated above, I will argue that his criticisms of blunt reading rest on a false dilemma and that his positive instruction for how to read Kierkegaard (specifically the pseudonymous literature) is undialectical (i.e. unKierkegaardian). Most of my comments hinge on Poole's understanding of pseudonymity—its nature as well as its function and purpose in the authorship. Lacking in his thought about Kierkegaard's use of pseudonymity are essential aspects of the corpus, including the role of the existence-spheres, the function of dialectic, and generally speaking, the apparent ethical and religious purposes that run

²⁹While Poole helpfully draws attention to some serious mistakes in the secondary literature, he seems to present these criticisms as novelties, as though they had not been considered in the last two decades. However, this is not the case. For example, having recently attended a large conference on Kierkegaard I do not recall a single instance where a commentator attributed a pseudonymous writing to Kierkegaard himself. Given Poole's article that explores "twentieth century receptions" of Kierkegaard, one would assume that he is well-versed in the recent literature that has, for the most part, followed the spirit of his criticisms. However, there is reason to doubt his analysis of the secondary literature when, for example, he strongly accuses C. Stephen Evans of blunt reading while praising Robert Roberts for his "breakthrough study" (Poole, "The Unknown Kierkegaard," 65). As Evans writes later, "If he [Poole] had read both my book and Roberts' book carefully, he would have learned that Roberts and myself are close friends and shared many ideas in the writing of both books. While Roberts and I certainly disagree on some points, the two books are in basic and broad agreement" ("The Role of Irony in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*," in *Kierkegaard Studies, Yearbook* (2004), ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Hermann Deuser, and Jon Stewart (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 64-5n). Both Evans' *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript: The Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* and Roberts' *Faith, Reason, and History: Rethinking Kierkegaard's Philosophical Fragments* follow Kierkegaard's wish and declaration that the pseudonyms be kept apart and that they be treated as distinct characters from Kierkegaard. To size up Poole's criticism of Evans' blunt reading for yourself, see Evans's first two chapters "Reading Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Literature" and "Reading Johannes Climacus" in *Kierkegaard's Postscript and Fragments: the Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1983).

throughout the authorship and that Kierkegaard explicitly defends in *The Point of View* and journals. My aim in confronting Poole's reading is to clear the way toward a positive account of Kierkegaard's use of indirect communication that I will develop in chapter three. This account, as forecasted, will argue that indirect communication serves the end of conceptual clarification, which, as I argued in chapter one, (for the moral grammarian) aims at assisting individuals in cultivating virtue and becoming wise. I will illustrate Kierkegaard's conceptual clarification in the fourth chapter through an analysis of faith as it is developed across three pseudonyms' works. Insofar as indirect communication does serve the end of conceptual clarification, I will argue that it contributes to Kierkegaard's edifying purposes which ultimately culminate in aiming to help the reader become a Christian.

Clearing Away the Blunt Reading, Part I: Privileging the Literary

As stated in a footnote above, Poole is explicit about his preference of a literary approach to Kierkegaard's writings. Even more, he argues that a 'responsible reading' views Kierkegaard, first and foremost, from this perspective. This is Poole's outright advice to *his* readers. There are two points to make here. First, a dominant literary hermeneutic (as Poole recommends it) is prone to overemphasizing Kierkegaardian jest to the neglect of Kierkegaardian earnestness. Put differently, such a vantage point makes much of Kierkegaard's play, his form, and much less of Kierkegaard's message, the content of his philosophical or existential argument, *what he is serious about*. In *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus compares one form of indirect communication to a knot of

jest and earnestness.³⁰ Such indirect communication requires the reader to untie this knot by herself if she hopes to receive the communication's message. The intention of the indirect communication—which is composed of *both* jest *and* earnestness—is not endless play with the knot.³¹ Rather, the intention is to work on the problem of the knot, to struggle with it, and eventually to untie it and in accomplishing this, receive the *message* of the indirect communication, albeit in a particular (playful) way.³² Poole fails to account for the earnest intention of the indirect communication.³³ His 'dominant literary

³⁰Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 133. Though not speaking of indirect communication per se, Quidam maintains a similar view in *Stages on Life's Way*: "true earnestness is the unity of jest and earnestness" (Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 365) as does Johannes Climacus in his discussion of Lessing's second thesis (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 80-93). It might appear that by supporting my claim *about Kierkegaard* with a pseudonymous text I am begging the question. There are two reasons this is not the case. First, as we will see in our discussion of indirect communication in chapter three, the views of indirect communication in *Practice in Christianity* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* are compatible with Kierkegaard's own view in his unpublished journals and papers and in signed writings like *The Point of View*. Second, even if Anti-Climacus's view of the knot of jest and earnestness were not Kierkegaard's own view, it would not then follow that we would be barred from taking seriously what a pseudonym says on the issue of indirect communication. That is, whether or not Kierkegaard agrees with Anti-Climacus about the knot metaphor, the notion is still a useful one on its own, and I see no good reason not to take it into account when reading Kierkegaard or any other pseudonym for that matter.

³¹Though at times I am suspicious, the intention of the Rubik's cube is not endless play, or in my experience, endless frustration.

³²I will hold at bay questions about whether certain messages can *only* be communicated this way. For an interesting exploration of this issue, see James Conant, "Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense," in *Pursuits of Reason: Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 1993) as well as a response to Conant by John Lippitt and Daniel Hutto, "Making Sense of Nonsense: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 98 (1998). In chapter three we will briefly touch on this issue in a discussion of the lectures on communication, which view indirect communication as a communication of capability (i.e. the receiver does something with the communication; e.g. one unties the knot).

³³He occasionally pays lip service to the subjective aspect of receiving indirect communication, but this aspect never contains content (e.g. coming to see the paradox of the God-man for oneself).

approach' concerns itself so much with jest, that it forgets, downplays, or oversimplifies³⁴ an earnest message on behalf of the communicator.

The second problem of Poole's literary approach pertains to a sort of contradiction inherent in his advice about how to read Kierkegaard. On the one hand, Poole writes as though he wants to appeal to the common man who picks up *Fear and Trembling* at the local Barnes & Noble. He offers the relieving thought that "learning and erudition" are not required. He writes, "meaning will not be found by an act of intellectual virtuosity, but by an act of courage, undertaken by 'that individual'..."³⁵ But what Poole says differs from what he does throughout his writings, where he explores in laudable detail the literary intricacies and subtleties that, he reminds us, even Kierkegaard's educated contemporaries did not understand.³⁶ His postmodern, Derridean interpretive lens is hardly something one gains without "learning and erudition." In *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, he writes:

A naïve reading of a pseudonymous text believes that it has found the truth when the various original characters and events can be detached from their fictional

³⁴As stated in a footnote above, in his 2002 article Poole seems to have had a change of heart regarding the possibility of philosophical meaning in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous writings, going so far as to say, "There is a coherent Kierkegaardian philosophy to be grasped and understood" ("Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading," 396). However, after this claim, the closest Poole comes to making a philosophical claim on behalf of Kierkegaard (in an article nearly fifty pages long) is the following: "*But Kierkegaard's new philosophical importance in contemporary [twentieth century] debate is his affirmation of the reality of 'the self', a reality which is central to Kierkegaard's understanding of what it is that philosophy itself is about, which is: the subjective truth of the existing individual...*" (Ibid., 426). That Kierkegaard affirms "the reality of the 'self'" does not begin to get at the complexity of Kierkegaard's conception(s) of the self and oversimplifies a very dialectical category. In "Reading *Either/Or* for the Very First Time," Poole reiterates his earlier assertions about the reality of the self by claiming that the various pieces that constitute *Either/Or* demonstrate that, according to Kierkegaard, "we have a right to our own subjective reality" (53). The simplicity of Poole's philosophical claims seems to be a result not just of his literary bent, but of his disinterest in the normative Christian ethical position Kierkegaard puts forth. (Again, Poole's essential dismissal of Kierkegaard's signed, religious works supports this possibility).

³⁵Poole, "Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading," 442.

³⁶Ibid., 413.

guise and restored to the world of public intelligibility. And that was the reading that Kierkegaard got in his lifetime.

We today, having read Derrida and de Man, can see that Kierkegaard has crammed his text with such devices as *supplément* and *différance* to such an extent indeed that they can clearly have no other aim than that of creating a series of aporias.³⁷

There is neither hint nor suggestion that Poole's intended audience is someone without "learning and erudition."³⁸ To say it another way, it is undoubtedly admirable to have interest in assisting the everyday reader when she picks up one of Kierkegaard's texts. C. Stephen Evans explicitly attempts to make Climacus's two works accessible in *Kierkegaard's Postscript and Fragments*. However, unlike Evans' "companion" piece, Poole's commentaries are inaccessible to this everyday reader.

My desire is not to place a minor incongruity of Poole's thought under a microscope. This disagreement is fundamental to the distinct ways in which Poole and I see the point of Kierkegaard's authorship. Clearly Kierkegaard did not downgrade his level of writing to the lowest common denominator. However, he certainly *did* intend for his writings to be understood.³⁹ What I have been calling Poole's 'dominant literary approach' fails to acknowledge that literary acumen is not what Kierkegaard requires from his reader, but instead someone with enough earnestness⁴⁰—note that this is an

³⁷Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, 110.

³⁸Perhaps we can blame Poole's deconstructive hermeneutic for this contradiction. Undoubtedly, for the reader without "learning and erudition," postmodern deconstruction seems a little less natural than conceptual clarification.

³⁹We can infer this modest hope on Kierkegaard's part from the following quotation: "What I have wanted has been to contribute, with the aid of confessions, to bringing, if possible, into these incomplete lives as we lead them a little more truth..." (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 17).

⁴⁰We will consider the sort of reader Kierkegaard desires in our discussion of *The Point of View* in chapter three, section three, part one.

ethical and religious category—to wrestle with the knot Kierkegaard has tied, and in doing so, to come to a realization of some truth or message that, for whatever reason, Kierkegaard sought to communicate indirectly.

“Clearing,” Part II: ‘Undecidability’ and ‘Différance’

What about Kierkegaard’s use of pseudonyms? It is here that Poole thinks most blunt readings of the indirect communication err. Poole’s theory of Kierkegaardian pseudonymity relies heavily on Jacques Derrida’s concept of *différance*. In fact, Poole sees Kierkegaard as “a philosopher who uses all the major tools of deconstructive theory long before they were given a local habitation and a name by Derrida.”⁴¹ Before considering how Poole employs *différance* in his analysis of Kierkegaard, let us briefly examine the concept as presented by Derrida.

Derrida begins *Of Grammatology* by discussing the problem of language, or more precisely, the devaluation of the term “language” based on its inflated and careless employment across the disciplines.⁴² By way of a necessary movement language has finally come to be recognized as derivative of the more fundamental category of writing, thereby leveling language and depriving it of the metaphysical baggage accumulated since Plato. The significance of this turnabout is that language is not some primordial truth about the world, but—like writing—is a human construct. Derrida draws on the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, to “ask how language is a possibility founded on

⁴¹Poole, *The Indirect Communication*, 7.

⁴²Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 6-7.

the general possibility of writing.”⁴³ According to de Saussure, the signs used in writing (e.g. the letter “A” or the word “aardvark”) are arbitrary and the “value” of signs like these is “purely negative and differential.”⁴⁴ That is, there is no inherent connection between the signifier and signified, between a word composed of letters and the thing the word concerns.

From the distinction between the signifier and the signified Derrida develops the concept of ‘différance,’ a term whose etymology includes both ‘differ’ and ‘defer.’ According to Martin Dillon, the “key function” of différance “is to name the prime condition for the functioning of all language and thought: differing, the differentiation of signs from each other that allows us to differentiate things from each other. Deferring is the process by which signs refer to each other, thus constituting the self-reference essential to language, without ever capturing the being or presence that is the transcendent entity toward which it is aimed.”⁴⁵ Just as Wittgenstein’s language games describe rules of discourse that give meaning to a community’s interactions, and just as these rules are descriptive of that community itself (and not some otherworldly Platonic “reality”), so Derrida’s concept of différance opposes a metaphysics of presence that would suggest that our words, our signifiers, somehow match up with “reality.” What follows from this notion of différance? According to Derrida, “If words and concepts receive meaning only in sequences of differences, one can justify one’s language, and one’s choice of terms, only within a topic [an orientation in space] and an historical

⁴³Ibid., 52.

⁴⁴Saussure quoted in Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 326.

⁴⁵Martin C. Dillon, “Différance,” in *The Cambridge Companion of Philosophy*, 2d ed., ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 234.

strategy. The justification can therefore never be absolute and definitive.”⁴⁶ As we will see, Poole makes explicit application of *différance* to Kierkegaard’s texts when he argues for a reading primarily devoted to those texts’ differences, and when he resists any attempt at an “absolute” or “definitive” statement on Kierkegaard’s thought.

In his broadest application of *différance*, Poole argues that Kierkegaard uses this tool 1) “to establish the *undecidability* of a text,” 2) to distance himself from a genre or model on which he improvises, and 3) to present “a *differentiation between concepts* within his own corpus of writing.”⁴⁷ Insofar as the second application of *différance* is the least related to my present task, and, given its insightful (and in my opinion less controversial) implications for reading Kierkegaard, I will focus attention on the first and third applications.

Unfortunately, Poole does not provide a straightforward definition of undecidability. However, this doctrine might lie behind his warning that we not ask of Kierkegaard’s texts, “What does it mean?”⁴⁸ He writes, “the extreme literary complexity of the pseudonymous texts has as its aim to make impossible a reading which should belong to the Hegelian ‘paragraph communication,’ i.e. a reading which is obvious, fixed, and capable of being agreed upon by all.”⁴⁹ This entails that “however hard we try to reduce its complexity to a single form of comprehensibility, we are bound to fail.”⁵⁰ It is

⁴⁶Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 70.

⁴⁷Poole, “Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading,” 397.

⁴⁸Poole, “The Unknown Kierkegaard,” 62.

⁴⁹Poole, “Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading,” 397.

⁵⁰Poole, “A Theory of Reading: Undecidability and ‘Filters,’” 2.

still unclear, though, *what* is undecidable and *why*? Is there no meaning at all to these texts? Presumably “the doctrine of subjectivity” that Poole finds especially in *Either/Or* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* has some meaning—it is not *completely* undecidable. Is the meaning ineffable? If so, does this explain why it cannot be “agreed upon?” If some meaning of a pseudonymous text is “obvious” to me—strikes me immediately—have I misread the text? Is undecidability a doctrine intended to ward off hermeneutical imperialism (say, of blunt readers) or, is the point to make meaning purely personal? Does Poole view undecidability as Kierkegaardian jest, meant to keep his readers in a state of aporia as to his own intentions? Further, is undecidability incompatible with earnestness?

Poole turns to *Fear and Trembling* as an instance of undecidability. We should keep in mind that he does not present undecidability as *a way* to read Kierkegaard, but as *the way* to read, claiming “the author has built undecidability into the very structure of his work.”⁵¹ Important to Poole’s interpretation of *Fear and Trembling* is a comparison he makes to Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw*, which he also considers undecidable. “Was the governess ‘seeing ghosts,’ or did the two children ‘really’ come back and haunt the house? There have been innumerable interpretations, urging the one case or the other: either, YES, the governess was indeed unbalanced or mad; or NO, the children ‘really’ did come back. But both sorts of interpretation fail for the same reason as

⁵¹Poole, “Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading,” 399. Presumably Poole is speaking of Kierkegaard as the author, not Johannes de silentio, although it is unclear. Interestingly, Poole’s continued attention to Kierkegaard’s intentions (all the while begging readers to pay attention to the pseudonyms and their ‘différance’) severely downplays the significance and role of the character/author Johannes de silentio, and his personal relationship to Abraham and the problem of faith. This will become clearer below.

interpretations of *Fear and Trembling* will fail”⁵² Poole’s certainty about the undecidability of *Fear and Trembling* is even more informed by a comparison he makes to a second James story, *The Figure in the Carpet*. A fictional novelist (whom Poole takes to be James himself) concedes to a young critic that a sort of mysterious thread runs throughout all of his books. “It stretches, this little trick of mine, from book to book, and everything else, comparatively, plays over the surface of it. The order, the form, the texture of my books will perhaps some day constitute for the initiated a complete representation of it. So it’s naturally the thing for the critic to look for ... It strikes me as the thing for the critic to find.”⁵³ As the story continues, the critic searches to discover the secret meaning, but in the end he fails to discover the ‘trick.’

Poole draws two conclusions or “morals” meant to instruct us on how to read *Fear and Trembling*. First, the fictional novelist “could never have said what his secret was;” second, “from a multiplicity of literary phenomena, no *one* message or plan or intention can ever legitimately be derived.”⁵⁴ Concerning the first moral, Poole does not argue for the thesis that *Fear and Trembling* contains some secret; rather, he presupposes this to be the case. The problem is, unlike James, neither Kierkegaard nor de silentio make explicit the idea that their book(s) contain some secret to be figured out or even investigated. It might be helpful to distinguish between a secret or ‘trick’ and a message that not everyone understands. The quote by Hamann that appears at the beginning of *Fear and*

⁵²Ibid., 398-99.

⁵³Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw, The Aspern Papers and Seven Other Stories* (London, 1956), 287-88, qtd. in Poole, “Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading,” 399.

⁵⁴Poole, “Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading,” 401.

*Trembling*⁵⁵ is not a trick nor primarily a secret, but first and foremost a message that not everyone will understand—especially the messenger. It would seem that if a secret does lie within the text, and if the text is not explicit like James’s, Poole must provide evidence to that effect. Instead, he prescribes this ‘filter’ to the reader as the only correct way to approach the text. It seems that we would only have reason to follow Poole’s advice if we already presuppose that something like Poole’s interpretation is correct, yet in that case the reader would need no advice.

A charitable interpreter of Poole might be reminded of the Climacean phrase, “subjectivity is truth,” and the idea that Kierkegaard or Climacus cannot so much relay directly (i.e. say) the truth of Christianity, but can only do so indirectly through something like a knot of jest and earnestness. Perhaps it is better to speak of an indirect message about faith and how one acquires it than it is to speak of a secret or trick. But Poole does not even hint that the point to be derived from the first moral has anything to do with some indirect communication of ethical or religious truth. (As we have seen, he seems directly opposed to such possibilities).

Moral two better captures Poole’s specific point about undecidability. There is no coherent message to be gleaned from texts into whose structure has been forged undecidability. So, Poole concludes, *Fear and Trembling*, shrouded in undecidability, communicates no coherent message to its reader.⁵⁶ What makes *Fear and Trembling*

⁵⁵In translation, “What Tarquinius Superbus said in the garden by means of the poppies, the son understood but the messenger did not” (Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 3.

⁵⁶In drawing comparisons with Jonathan Swift’s satire, John Lippitt argues against interpretations of Kierkegaardian irony as entailing “radical undecidability.” If irony entails undecidability, then ‘A Modest Proposal’ would “fail as satire.” See chapter eight of *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000).

‘deliberately’ undecidable? Poole asserts that in a collection of essays about *Fear and Trembling*,⁵⁷ there is not a single point on which the various commentators agree, and therefore, this demonstrates that the text is deliberately undecidable. This claim is dubious for a few reasons. First, it seems likely that each contributor to that volume would, in the least, agree that the pseudonymous character of *Fear and Trembling* has significant implications for any proper interpretation of the text. But second, even if it were the case that the commentators agreed about nothing, it does not follow that the text is therefore deliberately undecidable. It is probable that similar collections of essays about the Bible or *The Odyssey* exist and contain multiple viewpoints on a variety of issues raised by those texts; but surely it would be incorrect to conclude that those texts were, therefore, constructed to be undecidable to their readers (or listeners).

Besides what he calls the ‘practical’ explanation why *Fear and Trembling* is undecidable—that no one agrees on it—Poole offers two interpretations of what he calls ‘details’ in the text that he feels support his case. In considering these details it is clear how much his assumptions of not just secrecy and undecidability, but deception and trickery, color his interpretation.⁵⁸ Let us consider these ‘details’ that function as instruments of undecidability. First, the four variations on Abraham’s trip to Mount Moriah exemplify, for Poole, deception and undecidability. He asks, “But what do the apparently informational supplements scattered across the four moods tell us, if not that no amount of subtle combinatorial activity can release their ‘secret’?”⁵⁹ An obvious

⁵⁷*International Kierkegaard Commentary: Fear and Trembling, and Repetition*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993).

⁵⁸On his assumptions of deception see p. 402 of “Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading.”

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 402.

response to this rhetorical question is that the various retellings of the story have a similar function as de silentio's discussion of the tragic heroes Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Brutus in Problema I: to distinguish Abraham from all other possible 'exceptions.' Inasmuch as each of these historical and mythic figures remains within the ethical—their actions can be universalized and widely understood—their apparently exceptional circumstances and responses to those circumstances are categorically distinct from Abraham's. As de silentio puts it, "Abraham's situation is different. By his act he transgressed the ethical altogether and had a higher τέλος outside it..."⁶⁰ Similarly, the four variations on the ascent of Mount Moriah inform us negatively about Abraham's unique character, about the Abraham he is *not*. He did *not* try to protect Isaac's faith, he did *not* despair, he did *not* doubt, and Isaac did *not* lose his faith. Interestingly, present in this method of clarifying who Abraham really is by showing who he is not, we can observe what we might call de silentio's or Kierkegaard's own employment of *différance*. That is, de silentio differentiates Abraham from these other four possibilities, or what John Lippitt calls "sub-Abrahams."⁶¹ But Poole does not see these instances as such.

Instead of viewing these as four variations on the story of Abraham's ascent of Mount Moriah, Poole surprisingly draws not only a conclusion from the text, not only a *serious* conclusion, but, apparently, a conclusion about the entire book, or, one that at least concerns "the whole story about faith."⁶² Based upon the fourth retelling of the

⁶⁰Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 59.

⁶¹See chapter two of John Lippitt, *Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁶²Poole, "Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading," 403. It is unclear whether or not he means to suggest that this conclusion is de silentio's or Kierkegaard's.

ascent, Poole concludes that *Fear and Trembling* is really about Isaac and *his* faith. *Fear and Trembling* shows “that the entire testing of Abraham’s faith is not worth the effort” since Isaac has lost his own faith.⁶³ Poole elevates what he calls a ‘detail’—“But Isaac had lost his faith”—to a place of highest priority that is meant to color or ‘filter’ our reading of *Fear and Trembling* from the start.⁶⁴ This conclusion is surprising because its claim seems to contradict performatively what Poole has told us about secrecy and undecidability. That *Fear and Trembling* is really about Isaac’s faith and thus, that God’s test of Abraham is unjustified, sounds just like the sort of secret Poole claims exists; however, in disclosing it and suggesting that we read *Fear and Trembling* accordingly, Poole renders the text decidable. At the close of this section Poole offers a disclaimer to the effect that what he has claimed about Isaac as the center of the story does not result in a claim about the ‘meaning’ of the text, but just one possible intelligibility among other ‘intelligibilities’ the text presents. But if this reading represents just one possible intelligibility, what warrant have we to accept it over the rather plausible interpretation mentioned above—that each retelling distinguishes the real Abraham from possible ‘sub-Abrahams’ that fail to match up?

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴The elevation of details seems part and parcel of deconstruction. Joakim Garff writes, “May a sense for the indispensability of the useless therefore be an edifying pulse in every deconstructive reading of Kierkegaard” (“The esthetic is above all my element’,” in *The New Kierkegaard*, 70).

Next, Poole explores the ‘detail’ of *Fear and Trembling’s* ‘acoustic properties.’⁶⁵ He assembles a collection of various sentences from a range of a dozen pages and claims that ‘the music of the text’—the text that Poole himself has ordered—runs against the surface-level argument being made. In the first place, I am dubious whether or not it is appropriate to collect a smattering of quotations from a text, assemble them, and draw inferences from them, not to mention inferences about their ‘sound’ next to one another. Presumably, one could come up with countless ‘intelligible’ meanings or conclusions that are not at all warranted by the text itself, or the text as it was written. But second, the surface level argument Poole mentions is actually *not* an argument de silentio makes. Concerning this surface level argument Poole writes, “The question of whether or not Abraham ‘misheard’ God’s instruction is central to the intelligibility of the text at the level of argument.”⁶⁶ The setting of Abraham’s alleged ‘mishearing’ is Problema I, where de silentio contrasts Abraham with the tragic heroes. However, de silentio is not interested in whether or not Abraham heard God properly, or even at all, but how Abraham, whose relation to God is private, exists among those who are not privy to that relationship.⁶⁷ The question of the Problema, “*Is there a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?*” investigates whether one’s God-relation is higher than one’s society-relation.

⁶⁵In *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, Poole explores the acoustical properties of *The Concept of Anxiety* and concludes, “The text is about the hiss” made by the many s’s present in the original Danish (Poole, *Kierkegaard: The Indirect Communication*, 107). According to Poole, the continuous ‘s’ sounds function to blur not just the sound of the text but the meaning of the text as well. Thus, *The Concept of Anxiety* is rendered undecidable; more than that, “It is about uncertainty” (Ibid.). For the sake of brevity I will withhold judgment about Poole’s analysis here. It is difficult to say, however, how the text could avoid lots of ‘s’ sounds given the fact that many of the concepts Kierkegaard (or Vigilius) considers (e.g. sin, guilt, snake) begin with an ‘s.’

⁶⁶Poole, “Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading,” 404.

⁶⁷See Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 61.

It does *not* investigate whether one can have a God-relation or the circumstances under which one best hears from God. While the question of how one hears from God is certainly an interesting and important one to ask, it is simply not the focal point of this or any section of *Fear and Trembling*.⁶⁸

Besides these details that Poole considers, it may *appear* that the way de silentio sets up the three Problemas renders *Fear and Trembling* undecidable to some degree. Each Problema asks a profound question surrounding the problem of Abraham and his relationships to God and society, and each answer takes the form of a disjunction. So for example, Problema II asks “*Is There an Absolute Duty to God?*”, and the answer takes the form of the disjunction, “either there is an absolute duty to God ... or else faith has never existed because it has always existed.”⁶⁹ But are these questions really undecidable? Despite the either/or form of the answer to each Problema, it is not as though de silentio himself is unsure of which disjunct is correct, nor is it the case that Kierkegaard’s implied audience would pause before answering. To combine the disjuncts of each Problema, either Abraham was a murderer (I), faith has never existed (II), and Abraham is lost (III), *or* there is a teleological suspension of the ethical (I), there is an absolute duty to God (II), and there exists a paradox where the single individual stands in an absolute relation to God (III). To ignore Kierkegaard’s (or de silentio’s) audience here is to read *Fear and Trembling* out of context. The very point of positing the issue of faith in this way is to awaken religious people to what makes their faith distinct. In the rejection of the left-hand side of the disjunct, they must confront what

⁶⁸Kierkegaard addresses these sorts of questions in the posthumously published *Book on Adler*.

⁶⁹Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 81.

they already accept in the right hand side of the disjunct. The positing of a disjunction is to force a choice, and in the case of an obvious choice, to force deeper consideration of *why* one made that choice.

To anticipate a possible Poolian objection, let us consider the fact that de silentio himself is quite *decided* in his opinion about Abrahamic faith: he praises it. Might the fact that a pseudonym holds Abraham's faith in such high esteem lend itself to a blunt reading? I see no reason why a didactic or soluble reading follows, nor why it would follow if, along with de silentio, we praise Abraham for his faith and seek to attain it ourselves. Ironically, whereas Poole hopes to give greater due to the importance of pseudonyms in Kierkegaard's writings, his interpretation actually moves away from the person and character of de silentio. That is, in claiming that the text really concerns Isaac's faith, Poole not only counters traditional readings that understandably pay close attention to Abraham, he all but ignores the 'character' of de silentio, who throughout *Fear and Trembling* offers very personal, interested remarks. We might reason further that de silentio's personal interaction with the subject matter—his expressed admiration, his confessions—is itself an indirect tool that invites the reader to consider her own faith relation to God. In de silentio's call for the reader to join him in considering and praising Abraham's faith, does not de silentio's own inability to make the double movement beg of the reader a response of inwardness and challenge?⁷⁰

In the end, Poole's reading is itself overly mediated through Henry James, and the effect of this mediation is, once again, an overemphasis on play (remember that James uses the word "trick") to the neglect of earnestness. In his abstract to "Towards a Theory

⁷⁰And, as de silentio himself hints, it is conceivable that he offers us a message that he himself does not realize.

of Responsible Reading,” Poole reminds us that Kierkegaard “has been swallowed up in a sea of quasi-‘philosophical’ impressionism in which Kierkegaard can be made to ‘say’ anything whatsoever according to the whim of the hermeneut.”⁷¹ If my analysis of Poole’s hermeneutic of ‘undecidability’ is correct, then the effect of this quotation is the pot calling the kettle black. That Poole himself is dangerously close to doing violence to Kierkegaard’s text seems a real possibility given his words of praise for Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*: “*Of Grammatology* is the tool-kit for anyone who wants to empty the ‘presence’ out of any text he has taken a dislike to. A handy arsenal of deconstructive tools are to be found in its pages, and the technique, once learnt, is as simple, and as destructive, as leaving a bomb in a brown paper bag outside (or inside) a pub.”⁷²

“Clearing,” Part III: ‘Différance’ and the Pseudonyms

Poole offers the following principles for treating the pseudonymity, and they bear out the notion of *différance* in their formulation:

*First principle: Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works are heterogeneous thought worlds in which although the key concepts may share some “family resemblances” those key concepts achieve their efficacy and yield their meanings by being read in terms of their differences, not in terms of their similarities.*⁷³

*Second principle: The pseudonymous authors inhabit thought-worlds which are radically different, and thus concepts in the pseudonyms ought to be distinguished from each other, even when they are verbally identical.*⁷⁴

⁷¹p. 395.

⁷²Quoted on the back cover of Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

⁷³Poole, “‘My wish, my prayer’,” 159.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 162.

We can add to these principles a related rhetorical device that, according to Poole, Kierkegaard invented. The device involves “The emptying out of the meaning of terms while retaining their verbal form.”⁷⁵ According to Poole, Simon Critchley has recently named this device “palaeonymic displacement” in his assessment of Levinas’ use of it. Critchley says it occurs when “the ancient words of the tradition are repeated and in the iterability of that repetition, semantically transformed.”⁷⁶

Let us begin with Kierkegaard’s so-called palaeonymic displacement. In the first chapter I argued along with Robert Roberts that Kierkegaard can be understood as a moral grammarian who aims to recharge the stale concepts of the Christendom in which he lives. As such, he takes moral and religious terms that belong to the tradition of Christianity—concepts like suffering, sin, and faith—and reinfuses them with primitivity or what he understands to be their meaning in the original New Testament sense. As Sylvia Walsh puts it, “Kierkegaard’s aim was not to construct or systematize the qualifications of Christian existence, but simply to describe (*at fremstille*)⁷⁷ them.”⁷⁸ We might call this idea Kierkegaard’s “nothing new policy.”⁷⁹ Kierkegaard tells us time and

⁷⁵Poole, “Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading,” 415.

⁷⁶Simon Critchley, *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity : Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (New York: Verso, 1999), 75; qtd. in Poole, “Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading,” 415.

⁷⁷This verb can also be rendered “to expound” or “to give an account of.”

⁷⁸Sylvia Walsh, *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard’s Dialectic of Christian Existence* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2005), 4.

⁷⁹“Every human existence ought to have primitivity. But the primitive existence always contains a reexamination of the fundamental. This one sees most clearly in a primitive genius. What is the significance of a primitive genius? It is not so much to produce something absolutely new, for there really is nothing new under the sun, as it is to reexamine the universally human, the fundamental questions. This is honesty in the deepest sense” (Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 7 vols. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967-78),

time again that, in a qualified though important sense, he is saying *nothing new* about Christianity. Rather, he is re-describing it, approaching it from a different angle, conveying it in such a way that its truth might be better appropriated. In “A First and Last Explanation,” a Kierkegaardian (as opposed to Climacean) postscript to the *Postscript* (and interestingly, a section that Poole loves to quote), Kierkegaard invokes this “nothing new policy” when talking about his pseudonyms:

What I in one way or another know about the pseudonymous authors of course does not entitle me to any opinion, but not to any doubt, either, of their assent, since their importance (whatever that may become *actually*) unconditionally does not consist in making any new proposal, some unheard-of discovery, or in founding a new party and wanting to go further, but precisely in the opposite, in wanting to have no importance, in wanting, at a remove that is the distance of double-reflection, once again to read through solo, if possible in a more inward way, the original text of individual human existence-relationships, the old familiar text handed down from the fathers.⁸⁰

If the “nothing new policy” is correct, then Poole’s application to Kierkegaard of palaeonymic displacement is not sound. In fact, I would argue that Kierkegaard himself is *responding* to the palaeonymic displacement of terms carried out by the speculative philosophers and clergy of his day. Consider the following quotation, where Kierkegaard rails against the absence of primitivity—a personal grappling with ethical and religious truth. “This produces dishonesty; concepts cease, the language is confused, men fight each other in all directions. There could never be more suitable conditions for all prattle-peddlers, for the universal confusion conceals their own confusion. It is a golden age for

1:306 (#657). “I have nothing new to proclaim, I am without authority” (Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 87). See also *The Point of View*, 134.

⁸⁰Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, [629-30]. Of course Kierkegaard executes this nothing new policy through the mouths of the pseudonyms, though—as is evident in the previous note—there is plenty of reason to suppose the same applies to him.

prattle-peddlers.”⁸¹ These “prattle-peddlers” continue to speak of God or of faith—“retaining their verbal form”—all the while discarding traditional conceptions, or in extreme cases, “emptying out...the meaning of the terms.” Whether that assessment of his contemporaries is accurate or not, Kierkegaard himself is doing quite the opposite of emptying out the meaning of terms.

Returning to the notion of *différance*,⁸² Poole’s two principles claim that the different pseudonymous works and the different pseudonyms themselves inhabit utterly distinct “thought-worlds” that contain concepts that might appear similar (i.e. they are the same word) but should be read in terms of their differences. Poole is absolutely right to bring to light the distinct notions that underlie particular terms like sin, the self, or religiousness. Consider his juxtaposition of ‘the ethical’ of Judge William in *Either/Or* with de silentio’s concept of ‘the ethical’ in *Fear and Trembling*. In William’s admonition to A, his criticism of the aesthetic lifestyle, according to Poole, is “purely immanent.”⁸³ That is, there is no mention of sin, and any mention of God or the religious is “only for the sake of proprieties.”⁸⁴ On the other hand, de silentio’s thought-world is

⁸¹Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 1:293 (#654). See also 1:294 (#655).

⁸²For the sake of brevity I will withhold extensive critique of Poole’s exaggeration of *différance* in Kierkegaard’s writings. For a particularly troubling example, see Poole, “Towards a Theory of Responsible Reading,” 437-441, where he claims that the term ‘self’ in *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Works of Love* has utterly different, incongruous meanings. Given Kierkegaard’s admission that Anti-Climacus represents the ideal Christian and given the fact that *Works of Love* concerns itself with an explicitly Christian conception of love, Poole’s analysis of the ‘self’ in both works is suspect. As a hint toward his argument, he views the self of *The Sickness Unto Death* as solipsistic.

⁸³Poole, “‘My wish, my prayer,’” 160.

⁸⁴*Ibid.* Poole does not consider the possible pedagogical reasons why William’s ethical and religious sensibilities might not rise to the surface. That is to say, William must present the ethical life as appealing if he is to convince A to leave his aesthetic lifestyle behind. As a heading in Kierkegaard’s *The Point of View* states, “*If One Is Truly to Succeed in Leading a Person to a Specific Place, One Must First and Foremost Take Care to Find Him Where He Is and Begin There*” (45). In “Reading *Either/Or* for the Very First Time” Poole continues along this line, claiming that *Either/Or* in its entirety is aesthetic, and contrary

“anything but immanent.”⁸⁵ De silentio’s ‘ethical’ is weighty and concerns itself with such heavy religious concerns as one’s absolute duty to God. Poole writes, “Their two thought-worlds are incommensurable with each other, and thus incommensurability of concepts, even though they may be mediated by the same *word*, emerges as one of the most striking markers of “difference” [*sic*] across these pseudonymous works.”⁸⁶ Poole adds *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* to the mix to show a third incommensurable conception of the ethical as represented by Johannes Climacus. He correctly points out that many of Kierkegaard’s terms like ‘the ethical’ are context dependent and must be indexed to a particular pseudonym. But, instead of wondering *why* Kierkegaard might explore different conceptions of the ethical,⁸⁷ he promptly ends the discussion there.

While Poole’s advice should be considered seriously, is it possible that he goes too far? Per Kierkegaard’s request, we *should* keep the pseudonyms (and their concepts) apart as well as keep them apart from him.⁸⁸ Does this entail that such concepts should be analyzed *only* in terms of their differences?⁸⁹ Can we not follow Kierkegaard’s advice

to traditional readings, does not present the reader with an ethical choice or an ethical ‘either-or’ (47, 53). In setting up another false dilemma (**either** *Either/Or* in its entirety is aesthetic **or** it has an ethical purpose) Poole again ignores the fact that William’s appeal to A might clothe itself in the aesthetic to garner attention and respect for the ethical existence-sphere.

⁸⁵Poole, “‘My wish, my prayer,’” 160.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 161.

⁸⁷That is, why Kierkegaard might use this device beyond Poole’s two reasons that I mentioned earlier: to draw the reader into a “mutually shared experience of perplexity” and for Kierkegaard’s own amusement.

⁸⁸Evans provides a thorough explanation of why we should specifically keep Johannes Climacus and Kierkegaard (and their views) apart. See *Kierkegaard’s Fragments and Postscript*, 51-2. (Interestingly, as pointed out above, Poole considers Evans’ work a good representative of blunt reading).

⁸⁹I will leave it up to Derrida scholars as to whether or not Poole rightly applies *différance* to Kierkegaard and his texts—that is, whether or not Poole’s *différance* is faithful to *Derrida’s* philosophical

and yet look for both differences *and* similarities or consistency in the concepts? We might ask Poole, *why* must différance be emphasized to the absolute neglect of similarity or likeness?

The possibility of giving credence to the ways in which concepts like the ethical resemble one another across the different pseudonyms depends upon an interpretation of the pseudonyms that conceives of their purpose as more than just diverting readers from claiming any one, true meaning. Poole's account of the pseudonyms lacks a robust understanding of both Kierkegaard's stages or spheres of existence and his related use of dialectic.⁹⁰ (It is striking that these two concepts—the stages of existence and dialectic—are absent from the index of Poole's *The Indirect Communication* and mentioned at most in passing in the many articles under consideration.⁹¹)

Overcoming Poole's Undialectical Reading

interests and hermeneutical intentions. I have doubts for two reasons. First, whereas the object of Derridean différance is the distinction between language's meaning (the signified) and language's tools (signifiers), Poole's distinction concerns not the problem of reference but the interrelation of two or more literary texts. Derrida's claim that concepts get their meaning only through differentiation, and therefore there is no final, definitive meaning, does not entail that when one compares two concepts (say, of two pseudonymous authors) one cannot analyze them in terms broader than their differences. This leads to my second reason to doubt Poole's use of Derridean différance: namely, that Poole's own employment of the notion lends itself to predictable and uninteresting results (and as we will see shortly, undialectical ones).

⁹⁰As Evans says, "What is the purpose of the pseudonyms? How are they to be approached? It is impossible to answer these questions without an understanding of "indirect communication." Indirect communication is in turn closely connected to the concepts of "existence" and "subjectivity" or "inwardness," which in turn can only be understood in connection with the concept of the "spheres" or "stages" of existence. A single one of these concepts is unintelligible apart from the others" (*Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript*, 6).

⁹¹As well, there are no headings for 'the aesthetic,' 'the ethical,' or 'Religiousness A or B' in *Kierkegaard: the Indirect Communication*.

*An Alternative to 'Différance,' Part I: Kierkegaard's Existence-Spheres*⁹²

How might attention to the stages of existence inform our views about *différance* in the pseudonymous authors? Let us take for example the concept of love. Love in Kierkegaard's thought has many diverse instantiations based upon its use in different works by different pseudonyms. The esthete A's view of love is constrained by aesthetic interests (e.g. the erotic in Mozart's operas or Johannes' seduction or Scribe's play about first or true love⁹³), while B's understanding is characterized by commitment and a sense of duty to eternal values (e.g. marriage). The view of love Kierkegaard presents in *Works of Love* is a Christian conception. Each stage of existence in virtue of being a *different* stage of existence will have a different conception of a term like love or God or sin. Should such differences end the intertextual conversation? While the differences are profound, and we see this exemplified in Kierkegaard's emphasis on the superiority of neighbor love to preferential loves, this does not entail that conversation must halt or that points of continuity are absent. We might ask ourselves, is Kierkegaard not begging us to consider *why* he might say so much about one single concept, yet in such different ways? Could it be that Kierkegaard finds one sort of love *better* than another, or more, that *we* might come to this realization (in thought and deed) as well?

⁹²Kierkegaard refers to these as both stages and spheres. "Stages" conveys the sense in which Climacus views them as progressive. "Spheres" conveys the sense in which they are "existential possibilities a person can remain in for a lifetime" (Evans, *Kierkegaard's Postscript and Fragments*, 47). That is to say, transitions between them are not inevitable, but require a "pathos-filled" leap (Ibid., 46).

⁹³In *Either/Or I*, A reviews the play *Les Premières Amours ou Les Souvenirs d'enfance*.

In what follows, I will examine C. Stephen Evans's and John Lippitt's understandings of the existence-spheres, and in particular, the spheres' interrelation.⁹⁴ Both of their views are sympathetic to the positive concerns I noted in Poole's critique of blunt reading. Both accounts take seriously the perspective of the pseudonym, Johannes Climacus. So while there are journal entries that indicate Kierkegaard's agreement with Climacus about the stages,⁹⁵ Evans is very careful to point out Climacus's distinct perspective on them. Lippitt's account of the spheres comes in a book about Kierkegaard's and Climacus's use of the comic, which demonstrates his sympathy toward readings that take seriously the literary aspects of the authorship. If Evans and Lippitt are correct that Kierkegaard *and* Climacus present the spheres progressively where Religiousness B is the highest form of existence, then we can likewise conclude that it is preferable to interpret the many distinct uses of single concepts teleologically. To put it another way, instead of merely acknowledging⁹⁶ the distinct meanings of 'love' based on the different 'thought-worlds' of A, Judge William, and Kierkegaard himself, we can instead view Christianity's conception of love as the goal toward which *our* personal conceptions of love—whether aesthetic, ethical or immanently religious—should be

⁹⁴By interrelation I mean both the notion that they progress from aesthetic toward Religiousness B, and the sense in which the higher spheres can genuinely subsume aspects of the lower spheres.

⁹⁵The following journal entry seems particularly applicable to the existence-spheres: "Through my writings I hope to achieve the following: to leave behind me so accurate a characterization of Christianity and its relationships in the world that an enthusiastic, noble-minded young person will be able to find in it a map of relationships as accurate as any topographical map from the most famous institutes. I have not had the help of such an author. The old Church Fathers lacked one aspect: they did not know the world" (Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 6:77-8 (#6283). See also Evans's *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript*, 11, and *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 4:295-306 (#4454, 4467, 4474, 4476).

⁹⁶Note how Poole's halt at 'différance'—what amounts to no more than an intellectual acknowledgment—compares to the speculative philosopher's objective approach to truth that Climacus attacks throughout the *Postscript*.

oriented. Furthermore, we can observe how Christian love takes up positive aspects of the other views, or more accurately, seeks to transform the other sorts of love. If the existence-spheres have this sort of direction to them—that is, if we are supposed to let, for example, Christian love transform lesser conceptions of love—then a case for the upbuilding as Kierkegaard’s ultimate aim will be strengthened. This upbuilding intention comes through in a chapter heading of Kierkegaard’s *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*: “If One Is Truly to Succeed in Leading a Person to a Specific Place, One Must First and Foremost Take Care to Find Him Where **He** Is and Begin There.”⁹⁷

Kierkegaard aims to edify his reader by meeting her where she is—the aesthetic—and then leading her toward Christian existence.

As we have seen, one of Poole’s worries about blunt readings concerns an approach to Kierkegaard that seeks to draw out of the pseudonymous works what we might call absolutist or ultra-serious theories or philosophical doctrines. Even worse would be a claim that *Kierkegaard himself* viewed one of his own theories or concepts as such. According to Evans, “The scheme of categories is **not** absolutized. He [Kierkegaard] does not deny the possibility of other helpful ways of categorizing existence. ...the scheme is not a “system” but a conceptual tool that is treated differently in different contexts. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard sees his stages as both helpful and in some sense fundamental.”⁹⁸ In general support of this final claim Evans quotes the journals, where Kierkegaard advises, “Using my diagram, a young person should be able to see very accurately beforehand, just as on a price-list if you venture this far out, the conditions are

⁹⁷Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 45.

⁹⁸Evans, *Kierkegaard's Postscript and Fragments*, 12 (emphasis mine). See also p. 30.

thus and so, this to win, and that to lose; and if you venture out this far these are the conditions, etc.”⁹⁹ The pseudonymous authors present a particular sort of embodiment of the spheres, a picture of them *in action*. Likewise, concepts such as love or the ethical are embodied by actual characters who live their lives and philosophize according to the principles and values that characterize their stage. Presenting the existence-spheres through the pseudonyms and their writings, Kierkegaard does not moralize. Instead, the reader is “imaginatively presented with existential possibilities” that she must come to grips with on her own.¹⁰⁰

Evans and Lippitt both approach the spheres through the eyes of Johannes Climacus who, in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, hopes “to clothe the issue [Christianity or Religiousness B] in historical costume.”¹⁰¹ Of the different pseudonymous authors, Climacus is most apt to speak about the stages because the one he presents in greatest detail—Christianity—stands as the highest in relation to the others. In an appendix called “A Glance at a Contemporary Effort in Danish Literature,”¹⁰² he reviews the other pseudonymous productions from *Either/Or* up to his own. Later in the *Postscript* he tallies a list: “immediacy, finite common sense; irony, ethics with irony as its incognito; humor; religiousness with humour as incognito—and then, finally, the essentially Christian....”¹⁰³ Let us examine closely the three primary spheres—the aesthetic, ethical

⁹⁹Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 1:455 (#1046).

¹⁰⁰Evans, *Kierkegaard's Postscript and Fragments*, 14.

¹⁰¹Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 10.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 251-300.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, 531n.

and religious—and then briefly illustrate how these spheres’ understandings of love relate to one another. I will also consider the significance of the additional substages and border zones or *confinia* (irony and humor). By paying close attention to the particular relationship between the spheres and indirect communication, these *confinia* will become exceedingly important in explaining the relationships among the stages themselves.

Before proceeding further, let us discuss the pseudonym Climacus himself. First, Climacus is not a Christian.¹⁰⁴ While he takes great interest in Christianity, “the issue” that *Postscript* presents, Climacus is an “outsider.”¹⁰⁵ While he concedes Christianity to be the highest sphere, he has not made that transition himself, and so *his* views are not Christian views. Instead, as he describes himself, Climacus is a humorist,¹⁰⁶ and in terms of the stages, humor is well-advanced. What is a humorist? “First, humorists—unlike ‘ironists’—are concerned with the existential situation shared by *all* human beings. Second, for the humorist—unlike for the Christian, as portrayed by Climacus—there is no sense of urgency about the human condition.”¹⁰⁷ Why has Climacus so much interest in Christianity if he is not a Christian? As Lippitt describes the humorist, Climacus genuinely cares about the question, what does it mean to exist as a human being? Further, he believes that Christianity presents itself as a solution to this question; therefore, he takes up an analysis of this solution. The contradiction before Climacus is that while Christianity seems so familiar to his contemporaries (they all claim to be

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 617.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 16.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 617.

¹⁰⁷Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*, 62-3.

Christians), it is not clear that these people live their lives enriched by the truth of Christianity and its categories, that they exist in this more complete sense. As such, Climacus describes his intention (of course with a dose of humor) in an age where people are making things easier, as: “to make it difficult to become a Christian, yet not more difficult than it is.”¹⁰⁸ In conceiving of Climacus as a humorist, Lippitt clarifies that humor is not synonymous with whatever is funny. The ‘comic,’ according to Climacus, is the umbrella term under which humor and irony are the most explored subdivisions.¹⁰⁹ As we delve deeper into the stages, the significance of Climacus as humorist will become more apparent.

Lippitt also calls Climacus a satirist.¹¹⁰ The object of his satire is Hegelian or speculative thought (or those under its influence), which emphasizes objective reflection over ethical and religious inwardness. Lippitt describes the satirical nature of Climacus’s writing: “The *prima facie* anti-Hegelian satire of the *Postscript* can best be seen as a piece of ‘indirect communication’ through which the reader is intended to recognise, and to take corrective action against, the ethical-religious evasions of misapplied objectivity to which we scholars—Hegelian and non-Hegelian alike—are particularly susceptible.”¹¹¹ To summarize, Climacus shares many concerns with the Christian, including an interest in what it means genuinely to exist. However, he himself falls between the ethical and religious spheres.

¹⁰⁸Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 557.

¹⁰⁹Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*, 63. Lippitt understands jokes, satire, and wit as all coming under the larger concept of ‘the comic’ as well.

¹¹⁰Ibid., chp. 2.

¹¹¹Ibid., 13.

What constitutes the aesthetic¹¹² sphere? Evans notes that the term to describe the first stage can mean at least three different things in Kierkegaard's writings. It can refer specifically to the stage of existence that we see represented by A in *Either/Or I*; it can bear the traditional meaning used to describe the artistic; or it can refer to Kierkegaard's own designation of his writings that employ a poetic, lyrical style.¹¹³ The aesthetic sphere is characterized by great interest in possibility, and in particular, the possibilities of the moment at hand. As such, the aesthete's life and self-conception tend toward fragmentation; lacking is some sort of theme or commitment that might give unity to the disparate moments. Many variations of the aesthetic stage are possible,¹¹⁴ and this comes through in the diverse characters of *Either/Or I*. Mozart's Don Juan represents "pure sensuousness," which is characterized by a high degree of immediacy or unreflective spontaneity. All that counts is what he can have or experience in the here and now.¹¹⁵ At the other end of the aesthetic range is "pure imaginative reflection," represented in *Either/Or I* by the "almost purely intellectual" Johannes the Seducer.¹¹⁶ Interestingly,

¹¹²As we will see shortly this is a general term for a range of existential possibilities. For that reason, "aesthetic" does not appear on Climacus's list that I quoted above.

¹¹³Evans, *Kierkegaard's Postscript and Fragments*, 34.

¹¹⁴Kierkegaard's pseudonym Victor Eremita, the editor of *Either/Or*, claims the following about A's diverse writings in *Either/Or I*: "A's papers contain a multiplicity of approaches to an esthetic view of life" (Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 13).

¹¹⁵Evans, *Kierkegaard's Postscript and Fragments*, 35.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 36.

both aesthetes, both Johns, are seducers. One absolutizes¹¹⁷ the lust of the flesh, while the other absolutizes the lust of the mind.

Another possibility within the range of the aesthetic is finite common sense.¹¹⁸ The aesthete with finite common sense appears to have moved beyond his fellow aesthetes in a small degree. That is, he takes up a critical stance toward aesthetes like, for instance, the seducer of *Either/Or*, whose life is consumed by erotic love, a finite good. He sees himself as superior to such an aesthete in his reliance upon common sense. His thinking is: only fools devote themselves in such an unbalanced way to things like erotic love. The one with finite common sense is instead shrewd and calculating, resolved not to ‘overdo it’ on something so fleeting as erotic love. At bottom, however, this individual merely values another fleeting, finite good besides erotic love—perhaps money, power, or control over his ‘destiny.’ It turns out that this individual has not progressed beyond an aesthete like the seducer of *Either/Or*, but has actually regressed, because unlike that seducer, this individual has less passion for life. While the individual with finite common sense views the immediate aesthete as comical, it turns out that the one with finite common sense is more comical because he thinks he knows ‘the way out’ of the aesthetic, he thinks he has discovered a way to find true meaning in life, and yet he relies

¹¹⁷To absolutize means ‘to give the utmost importance to’ in one’s pursuits and actions. What fails to qualify these particular themes (i.e. the seductions of women) as unifying (and thus the ethical stage) is the temporal quality of the sort of relation Don Juan or the Seducer has to the women. That is, they fail to take responsibility for committing themselves fully to those relationships in an eternal, ideal way.

¹¹⁸Climacus does not discuss this stage at length. There is also no explicit mention of finite common sense in *Either/Or*.

(no less than the immediate aesthete) on temporal goods.¹¹⁹ The security he feels in his own status is unfounded, and he is self-deceived.

One can begin to grasp what might constitute a particularly aesthetic conception of love. Due to the wide range of existential possibilities within the aesthetic stage, there will be many variations. Nevertheless, what common attributes might characterize aesthetic love? If an undying interest in possibility dominates the aesthetic, then this individual loves someone or something only as long as a new, interesting possibility does not avail itself. In the *Either/Or I* essay, “The First Love,” A—an esthete himself—reviews a play of a similar title written by Augustin Eugène Scribe. There A criticizes what he calls a “sophistical thesis” about the notion of one’s first love. While this instance illustrates one aesthetic viewpoint of love, its “sophistical” nature captures the general aesthetic propensity to abide in a sea of unending possibilities.

For the thesis that the first love is the true love is very convenient and can be of service to people in many ways. If one is not so fortunate as to obtain what one wishes, there is still the sweetness of the first love. If one is so unfortunate as to love several times, each time is nevertheless the first time. In other words, the thesis is a sophistical thesis. If one loves for a third time, one says: My present love is, nevertheless, my first true love, but the true love is the first—*ergo* this third love is my first. The sophistry consists in this, that the category *the first* is supposed to be a qualitative and a numerical category simultaneously. . . . This thesis is just as sophistical and just as elastic. One loves several times and each time denies the validity of the previous times, and in this way one still insists on the rightness of the thesis that one loves only once.¹²⁰

This sort of fickle love exemplifies the superficial nature of the aesthetic—the inability (unlike the ethical individual) to commit to another person or some sort of eternal ideal.

Given the fragmented nature of such an existence, the only way to make sense of it—to

¹¹⁹Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought*, 97.

¹²⁰Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 1, 254.

justify this lifestyle to oneself, is self-deceivingly to make one's current love 'the first love' or 'the true love.' It should be noted that aesthetic love need not be erotic love. One can imagine a filial aesthetic love, where an aesthete befriends another because this relationship is, again, a new possibility. Such a possibility is interesting, and perhaps there is something instrumental about the relationship—something the aesthete can gain by association with the other. However, as in the case of the first love, there is no real commitment to the friend—no sense of duty that would inform the nature of the relationship.¹²¹

The next primary stage is the ethical which, as we have seen, must be attended to carefully given its different meanings throughout the authorship. Looking at the list above, one notices that "the ethical" is absent, and instead Climacus counts "ethics with irony as its incognito." What does this mean? What is the relation of irony to ethics? Irony (and humor) are what Climacus calls *confinia* or border zones between the primary spheres. Not only do Kierkegaard and Climacus *use* irony in their writing, not only do they *discuss* irony as a subject related to existence, but irony also represents a special type of existence-sphere. It might appear that irony in this last sense has little if anything in common with its traditional connotations. According to Evans, "...Climacus is obviously not employing the terms as most people do today. But his usage is not totally removed from ordinary usage either. He has taken what appears to be the distinguishing characteristics of irony and humor as found in literature and life and used these to

¹²¹As we briefly explore the various conceptions of love represented generally in the aesthetic, ethical, and religious, we should bear in mind how these different conceptions are best understood by an analysis that considers, unlike Poole, not just their distinctions but the ways in which the higher spheres fulfill the immature interests of the lower spheres, albeit in more ethical and religious ways.

designate and illuminate two whole ways of life.”¹²² One of the fundamental characteristics of any description of irony is incongruity. At the end of *Romeo and Juliet* Shakespeare employs dramatic irony and creates incongruity as the audience—which possesses a semi-omniscient perspective—frustratedly grapples with the characters’ limited knowledge of one another. Shakespeare ignites in his reader a desire to enter the story and inform each party of the other’s situation. Of course this device drives the plot and keeps us reading (or watching). Existential irony, or irony as a border zone, maintains a similar tension, although the incongruity lies not in the discrepancy between a character’s and reader’s knowledge, but instead concerns what an individual knows about himself and the degree to which he allows such knowledge to inform his existence.

Whereas the aesthete with finite common sense perceives the shallowness of the immediate aesthete’s existence, yet is blind to the ways in which he devotes his own existence toward finite ends, the ironist’s position is actually superior to all forms of the aesthetic because it sees through the limited value of all finite goods. Erotic relationships, financial gain, power and prestige, control over one’s direction in life—none of these has eternal value. A similar sense of irony is present in Kierkegaard’s dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*, where he speaks of “irony’s baptism of purification that rescues the soul from having its life in finitude...”¹²³ In this purification, irony individuates; “it disciplines and punishes” the individual, separates the individual out from the crowd by revealing to each one his or her own idiosyncratic cares for finite

¹²²Evans, *Kierkegaard's Postscript and Fragments*, 186.

¹²³Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 326.

goods that fail to bring ultimate fulfillment in life.¹²⁴ Despite this realization, however, the ironist does not affirm the ethical.

Irony, like humor, is marked by what Climacus calls contradiction.¹²⁵ Evans describes the contradiction of irony (and humor) in this way: “*Irony and humor are boundary zones in which the individual has acquired an intellectual understanding of a truth that he has not yet existentially realized.*”¹²⁶ What is the ‘truth’ that the ethicist has realized or actualized, but the ironist has not? That “To exist means to choose; choice requires resolution; resolution requires what Climacus calls passion.”¹²⁷ Evans draws attention to the temporal element in Climacus’s discussion of the stages. Whereas the aesthete lives life moment by moment without any sense of unity, the ethicist brings these moments together through passionate commitment, and in doing so, ‘gains a history.’¹²⁸ While the ironist sees the shallowness of the aesthetic, his life is marked by contradiction, an existential incongruity, because he is unable to affirm the higher stage of the ethical and return to life’s finite goods with the passion of the infinite.¹²⁹

How does the ethicist have irony as his incognito? Is the ethicist bound to be ‘stuck’ in transition? Or, is it the case that the higher stage of ethics somehow ‘takes up’

¹²⁴Ibid.

¹²⁵Evans, *Kierkegaard's Postscript and Fragments*, 39.

¹²⁶Ibid., 191-92.

¹²⁷Ibid., 39.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 41.

¹²⁹There are definite similarities between the ethical existence-sphere and what de silentio calls faith’s first movement—infinite resignation. We will consider the latter in chapter four.

the positive aspects of irony? According to Lippitt, Climacus gives two reasons why the ethicist uses irony as an incognito. First, “irony is a sort of shield by which the ethicist protects the integrity of his self by creating a private space for the continual renewal of his commitment to the demands of the ethical.”¹³⁰ Irony provides a sort of modest check on the ethicist’s intentions. He can work on the project of ‘himself,’ cultivate his passion for a life dedicated to meaningful ideals, yet do so privately by appearing publicly as an ironist. He ‘protects’ himself so that when he fails, he can renew his commitment without being chastised by others. Second, the ethicist uses irony as an incognito in the interest of ethical communication. The ethicist cannot directly communicate to an aesthete what the ethical life is, because understanding of the inwardness involved in the ethical life opposes straightforward communication. So, while I could give examples about my commitment to my wife and express to the aesthete that he too should commit himself to his lover in this way, I cannot communicate to that aesthete an “existential” understanding of my commitment, or what it means *for me* to be committed to her (or, for that matter, what it means *for him* to be committed to another). While he could take my word that ‘it works,’ the ethicist believes such communication is ultimately inadequate—unable to transform the other. Only through one’s own passion, not the passion of another, can the transition from one stage to another take place. Nevertheless, as Lippitt says, “the ethicist may be able to *show*—to some, at least—what he cannot *say*.”¹³¹

How might we understand a conception of love in the ethical sphere? Judge William of *Either/Or* best represents the ethical, though unlike an ethicist whose

¹³⁰Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*, 92-3.

¹³¹*Ibid.*, 93.

incognito is irony, the Judge is hardly shy about his ethical commitments. Just as the ethical generally seeks to unify life through commitment to ideals and a strong sense of duty, so is ethical love based upon a particular sense of duty to one's beloved, best illustrated in the institution of marriage. Speaking of his own marriage, William summarizes an argument he has presented to A: "But I have not been afraid of duty; it has not appeared to me as an enemy that would disturb the fragment of joy and happiness I had hoped to rescue in life, but it has appeared to me as a friend, the first and only confidant in our love."¹³² William's duty has enabled him to 'gain a history,' to return continually to his wife, and he sees this as a virtue lacking in aesthetic love. "[R]omantic love goes astray or comes to a standstill because of its unhistorical character."¹³³

What is especially profound about *Either/Or II* and the Judge's words to A are the implications for how readers of Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms can approach the diverse perspectives on concepts like love or the ethical. Whereas Poole's sole criterion of analysis is *différance*, William relates his own conception of love to A's on A's terms—that is, admitting the two conceptions' likenesses or compatibility. The primary goal of William's first essay, "Esthetic Validity of Marriage," is to persuade the aesthete that ethical love (represented in a committed marriage relationship) is superior to aesthetic love, not just because it is different, but because it subsumes the best aspects of aesthetic love and yet advances far beyond it. Distinguishing himself from old, boring married couples, the Judge tells A "in maintaining the inwardness of duty in love I am not doing it with the wild anxiety with which it sometimes is done by people whose

¹³²Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 153.

¹³³*Ibid.*

prosaic prudence has first annihilated the immediate and who now in their old age have resigned themselves to duty....”¹³⁴ In claiming that he has not “annihilated the immediate,” William argues that romance need not dissipate once marriage vows are spoken. He hopes to convince A that an eternal commitment to one’s spouse in fact spurs on the romantic. Whether or not William successfully makes the case, his essays helpfully illustrate Kierkegaard’s intention that the existence-spheres and their respective concepts be positioned in dialogue with one another not solely in light of their differences.

If Judge William represents the ethical sphere and yet he is religious, why does Kierkegaard not place him in the religious sphere? That is, what marks the difference between the two spheres, ethical and religious?¹³⁵ Moreover, how does the next border zone, humor, relate to the ethical and religious? Humor advances beyond the ethical as it comes to see the ethical sphere’s weaknesses: namely, the conviction that “self-discovery is ultimately a matter of *will*.”¹³⁶ (Lippitt notes Kierkegaard’s intention in naming the ethicist “Judge William,” whose name derives from the Danish noun *Vilje*, which means

¹³⁴Ibid., 152.

¹³⁵Both Evans and Lippitt point out a tension in Climacus’s different portrayals of this end of the spectrum of spheres. There are texts which suggest the order as: ethical, humor, Religiousness (A and then B). Others indicate: ethical, Religiousness A, humor, Religiousness B. For simplicity I will follow the first ordering. What Evans wants us to note about this incongruity is, first, regardless of the ordering, the ethical, humor, and Religiousness A all fall under Climacus’s category of immanence—that is every human has the capacity to know the truth of and to comport oneself to the existential possibilities of these categories. Conversely, Religiousness B (Christianity) alone is transcendent, and only by God’s assistance can one achieve this stage. Second, since humor is an existential possibility within a range, it is okay for it to go on either side of Religiousness A. This tension need not take away from the overall insights to be gained from the scheme itself. For more discussion on this problem, see Evans, *Kierkegaard's Postscript and Fragments*, 195-201.

¹³⁶Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*, 75.

“will.”¹³⁷) While the ethicist commits himself to eternal values, his commitments rest on a sense of self-sufficiency that by himself he can triumphantly uphold them. The humorist recognizes that the ethicist needs divine assistance not only to fulfill his commitments, but to save him from the despair that results from his failure to accomplish this on his own.¹³⁸ So, while Judge William acknowledges God and believes in God, he fails to admit his need for God. As Evans puts it, “The ethicist is infinitely interested in *himself*, however; the religious individual’s infinite interest is focused on ‘the actuality of another’.”¹³⁹ Therefore, whereas a sense of triumph and victory characterize the ethicist’s life,¹⁴⁰ suffering and resignation characterize the religious person’s life.¹⁴¹

How does the humorist relate to the religious? “[H]umor is simply the situation of the individual who understands religious truth but fails to passionately exist in that truth.”¹⁴² To repeat, the humorist sees the need for divine assistance. More than that, the humorist sees a particular truth about the role of suffering in the religious life. While it is possible that the ethicist also suffers, in his self-sufficiency he fails to realize that there is no temporal solution to suffering and that in fact, suffering is an *essential* aspect of the religious life. “[F]rom a genuinely religious point of view, suffering is not something to

¹³⁷Ibid., 185n.3.

¹³⁸Ibid., 75.

¹³⁹Evans, *Kierkegaard's Postscript and Fragments*, 42.

¹⁴⁰This sense is present in the Judge’s enthusiastic apology for the ethical over the aesthetic.

¹⁴¹Ibid.

¹⁴²Ibid., 201.

be ‘wished away’.¹⁴³ While the humorist sees this truth he fails to make a passionate leap into the religious, into the life of suffering. Lippitt puts the distinction between the humorist and the Christian sufferer very nicely: “while the Christian *lives* the suffering and anguish of religious existence, the humorist, while well aware of the suffering that is essential to the human condition, thinks that nothing can be done about it, and so chooses to smile, albeit sadly, about this condition. His reflection is ... ‘*away from* the suffering,’ comforted by his view that ‘the goal [of existence] lies behind:’ that whatever salvation is available, is available to all. For the humorist, in the end ‘everyone advances equally far’.¹⁴⁴ Such is the view of Climacus himself.

Contrastingly, the religious individual “relates to himself through his God relationship instead of relating to God through his relation to himself.”¹⁴⁵ There are three expressions of religious pathos or inwardness. First, resignation (‘the initial expression’) occurs when “the finite elements are once and for all reduced to what must be surrendered in relation to the eternal happiness.”¹⁴⁶ The absolute *telos* of eternal happiness that comes through a relationship to God requires a ‘reduction’ or ‘surrender’ of everything else to that higher good.¹⁴⁷ The second, ‘essential’ expression, suffering, follows naturally for the person who seeks to resign all relative or finite ends to God.

¹⁴³Lippitt, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*, 80.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., 65. The *Postscript* quotes within the text come from pages 449 and 450 respectively.

¹⁴⁵Evans, *Kierkegaard's Postscript and Fragments*, 43.

¹⁴⁶Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 391.

¹⁴⁷Note the obvious similarity of this view to de silentio's first movement of faith, infinite resignation, in *Fear and Trembling*. These are the sorts of complementary aspects of concepts (that Poole ignores or dismisses) that I will highlight in chapter four.

“Since the individual in this situation is always to a certain extent “caught” by relative ends—such as health, career, family, money, etc.—to achieve the state of resignation he must begin by “dying to immediacy,” by *suffering*.”¹⁴⁸ The third, ‘decisive expression’ of religiousness is what Evans considers a “phenomenological” exposition of the person who has tried to resign all finite ends and in doing so has suffered. This expression is guilt. Climacus writes, guilt “expresses that an existing person relates himself to an eternal happiness ... expresses the relation by expressing the misrelation.”¹⁴⁹ This ‘misrelation’ is an admission of one’s utter and absolute need for and dependence upon God—similar to the admission *lacking* in the ethical individual.

Resignation, suffering, and guilt constitute the pathos-filled component of Religiousness A. Climacus believes that these expressions of religious pathos are possible for someone who does not know about Christianity. Evans compares them to William James’s generic account of religious experience. Speaking of Christianity, though, Climacus writes, “The issue is pathos-filled *and* dialectical.”¹⁵⁰ What about the dialectical? The pathos of Religiousness A, which happens to be the subject of Climacean dialectic (or analysis) for more than half the book, is taken up in Christianity (Religiousness B) in light of Christianity’s new, “decisive” dialectic. “The dialectical consists in this, that the eternal happiness to which the individual is assumed to relate himself with proper pathos is itself made dialectical by additional qualifications, which in

¹⁴⁸Evans, *Kierkegaard's Postscript and Fragments*, 168.

¹⁴⁹Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 531.

¹⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 385 (emphasis mine).

turn work as an incitement that brings passion to its extreme.”¹⁵¹ Consequently, the decisive dialectic of Religiousness B results in a new pathos unique to it: “the dialectical is decisive only insofar as it is joined together with the pathos-filled and gives rise to a new pathos.”¹⁵² What is it about the dialectical, the ‘additional [Christian] qualifications’ that transforms resignation, suffering, and guilt into a new pathos? It is the ‘absolute paradox’ that Climacus developed earlier in *Philosophical Fragments*. That God became a human being at a particular time in a particular place and that this God-man—in time—offers humans eternal happiness—this is the absolute paradox that offends human understanding and requires for its acceptance the condition of faith that only God can give. For this reason, Religiousness B, Christianity, is transcendent religion, requiring not only God’s revelation of the God-man, but the miracle of the very ability to believe in the God-man and to see our position before him as untruth. This dialectic gives rise to a new pathos because it makes humans completely dependent upon God, in part, by making their own faculty of recognizing God impotent to do so. When the transition of faith comes about, it can occur only with the utmost passion and *not* through the human faculty of understanding. It is for this reason that Climacus satirizes the Hegelian and speculative conceptions of Christianity and of existence—conceptions according to which ‘the absolute’ or one’s eternal happiness could be gained by human understanding. Climacus suggests that this is precisely the wrong approach to Christianity.

In *Works of Love* Kierkegaard provides us with a conception of love that belongs to Religiousness B, Christianity. In this signed work he exegetes the New Testament

¹⁵¹Ibid.

¹⁵²Ibid., 555.

command of neighbor love that Christ issues alongside the command to love God. Kierkegaard believes that this view of love stands in the starkest contrast to any other view of love in human history, precisely because the very idea of neighbor love comes through divine revelation and not from ‘a human heart.’ While Kierkegaard draws upon the utter ‘différance’ between neighbor love and all other kinds of love (which he calls “preferential”), his analysis goes further than Poole would seem to allow. Kierkegaard presents neighbor love as *transformative* of the sorts of love that A and B espouse.

As stated above, ethical love can be characterized by a strong sense of duty to follow through on one’s commitment to the beloved. The concept of neighbor love also maintains a respect for the notion of duty in relation to loving another. However, whereas the ethicist’s duty or obligation to love the other rests on his own self-assertion and ability to recognize and to fulfill his commitments to the beloved, the Christian’s duty to love her neighbor comes in the form of a command from God, and her ability to fulfill the command to love her neighbor is itself a gift of God’s grace.¹⁵³ The ethicist’s approach to love (and to obligation more generally) reflects the Kantian notion “of regarding morality as self-legislation.”¹⁵⁴ When applied to love, this view overestimates a human’s ability not only to be able to recognize a moral obligation, but to fulfill one. Kierkegaard humorously writes in his journals: “Kant was of the opinion that man is his own law (autonomy)—that is, he binds himself under the law which he himself gives

¹⁵³It goes without saying that viewing love as a species of obligation runs counter to many common conceptions of love. Kierkegaard believes, however, that this is an essential component of Christian love. See deliberation II of the first series of *Works of Love*. See also Evans’s *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love*, chapter eight.

¹⁵⁴C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (New York: Oxford, 2004), 127.

himself. Actually, in a profounder sense, this is how lawlessness or experimentation are established. This is not being rigorously earnest any more than Sancho Panza's self-administered blows to his own bottom were vigorous."¹⁵⁵ Christian love, therefore, maintains a similar concern for the concept of one's duty to love, yet reorients the sense of duty as something that comes from God and is enabled by God.¹⁵⁶

In trying to grasp the significance of the entirety of Climacus's scheme, we can at once observe the stages' progressive nature and Christianity's claim to be the highest form of existence,¹⁵⁷ but also, the ways in which it is quite possible for an individual to remain an aesthete or a humorist. By no means are the transitions inevitable or guaranteed. Furthermore, because of the different viewpoints of each sphere, it is clear how the aesthete, the ethicist in the incognito of irony, and the Christian all maintain diverse conceptions of things like existence, the self, God, and love. Had Climacus not attempted to analyze every single stage and to observe their interrelations, Roger Poole's claims about *différance* would be better justified. However, in drawing them together through Climacus, Kierkegaard seems to suggest a less fragmented view of his pseudonymous writings, and even more, that we should consider how these pseudonyms

¹⁵⁵Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 1:76 (#188).

¹⁵⁶In a more exhaustive comparison of the various conceptions of love represented in the existence-spheres, one might also explore the ways in which neighbor love transforms erotic or romantic love—how, according to Kierkegaard, a married person is to love his beloved first as a neighbor. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 140-42.

¹⁵⁷Niels Jørgen Cappelørn writes, "Kierkegaard's stages of existence are finally understandable only in terms of the goal to which they lead and from which they are described, namely, the specifically Christian, the mark of which is the striving to imitate Christ" ("The Retrospective Understanding of Søren Kierkegaard's Total Production," in *Kierkegaard: Resources and Results*, ed. Alastair McKinnon (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1982), 37).

and their works can interact and dialogue with one another. As one unit, *Either/Or* exemplifies this interesting possibility.

An Alternative to 'Différance,' Part II: Kierkegaardian Dialectic

If, along with Climacus, we wonder what might be gained by considering the pseudonyms, their work, and their concepts *together*, we must pay attention to Kierkegaard's constant employment of dialectic or the dialectical. To head off a possible Poolian objection that discussion of a "Kierkegaardian dialectic" (or any "Kierkegaardian" view) would be inappropriate, I would suggest that dialectic be seen as a counterpoint or alternative to *différance*, but unlike *différance*, dialectic is a term that Kierkegaard used himself and used *about* his own writings. As Sylvia Walsh explains, "The term 'dialectic,' then, is not an alien epithet imposed on Kierkegaard's thought but indicates how he understood his own procedure and the qualifications he sought to describe."¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, "An awareness of his conception and use of dialectic is thus essential to an accurate assessment of his writings and the content of his thought."¹⁵⁹

What is dialectic? Generally speaking, dialectic is a philosophical or analytical way of approaching a concept from multiple angles, the purpose of which is to bear out that concept's rich complexities to the whole. Dialectic views "everything in reflection,"¹⁶⁰ and involves a process of "making the opposite equally possible."¹⁶¹ Consider, for

¹⁵⁸Walsh, *Living Christianly*, 6.

¹⁵⁹Ibid.

¹⁶⁰This is Kierkegaard's description of Socrates as a dialectician in *The Point of View*, 54.

¹⁶¹Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 84.

example, Socrates' common interactions with interlocutors and the way he responds to their assumptions with counterclaims and counterexamples that seemingly make "the opposite equally possible."¹⁶² Socrates' dialectical method irritated his contemporaries and earned him the epithet, gadfly. Kierkegaard's use of dialectic resembles Socrates' dialogic style. It serves as a tool "to sort out a confused tangle of concepts to enable ordinary human beings to understand their beliefs, their actions, and their lives better."¹⁶³ As such, we find Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms presenting dialectical examinations¹⁶⁴ of, for instance, 'infinite resignation,' 'existence,' 'hero,' 'idea and conduct' in *Fear and Trembling* (Johannes de Silentio), 'coming into existence,' 'contemporaneity,' 'existence,' 'the moment,' 'truth' in *Philosophical Fragments* (Johannes Climacus), and 'believing,' 'despair,' and 'sin,' in *The Sickness Unto Death* (Anti-Climacus). Each of these texts also explores the dialectic of faith, as we will see in chapter four. There I will argue that in these different elucidations, Kierkegaard himself presents us with his own dialectical examination of faith.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶²In chapter three, more attention will be given to the Socratic influence on Kierkegaard.

¹⁶³Evans, *Kierkegaard's Postscript and Fragments*, 2.

¹⁶⁴It should be stated that Kierkegaard's dialectical exploration of concepts is, for me, the same activity as the "conceptual clarification" I described in chapter one. I purposely used more generic terms there and put off a discussion of dialectic, to present it here against Poole's un-dialectical reading of Kierkegaard.

¹⁶⁵By 'his own' I mean that through several different pseudonymous works we are presented with a large-scale and very rich conception of faith that we cannot attribute to any one pseudonym, the overall function of which is to edify the reader, prod her on toward appropriation of its truth. It is this underlying purpose of edification that, if anything, I attribute to Kierkegaard himself. I am less concerned that these views are his own in the sense that he holds them himself.

In his journals Kierkegaard distinguishes between two sorts of dialectic that he uses throughout the authorship.¹⁶⁶ The first kind, conceptual or quantitative¹⁶⁷ dialectic, is captured by Climacus's phrase "making the opposite equally possible." Walsh explains the aim of conceptual dialectic in the following way: "to sustain a dual or paradoxical perspective that emphasizes the opposition, duplicity, and tension between concepts rather than a synthesis and mediation of them as in Hegelian dialectic."¹⁶⁸ Based on this description, one might think that Poole's hermeneutic of *différance* sufficiently explains Kierkegaard's intentions. However, Walsh continues, "Opposites ... do not always contradict each other; sometimes they are complements..."¹⁶⁹ Whereas Hegelian dialectic dissolves distinctions and Poolian *différance* exaggerates them, Kierkegaard's conceptual dialectic seems to lack a preset agenda, and instead is open to opposing meanings as well as complementary ones.

Existential or qualitative dialectic (or the dialectic of inwardness) concerns itself less with conceptual distinctions per se, and more with existential distinctions insofar as

¹⁶⁶Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 1:352 (#759).

¹⁶⁷By "quantitative" we might understand this sort of approach to a concept as considerate of a wide number of possibilities. In the comparative study of religion one might undertake a conceptual or quantitative dialectic of "God," where one approaches the concept of "God" from a multiplicity of angles (e.g. different religions' views). The dialectic of existence occurs in qualitative or existential dialectic which, as we will see below, concerns itself less with a multiplicity of perspectives and more with the appropriation of ethical and religious truth in one's life.

¹⁶⁸Walsh, *Living Christianly*, 6.

¹⁶⁹*Ibid.* For example, in *Sickness Unto Death* there seems to exist a contradiction between despair as both a disease of the human condition, yet also as the solution to the human condition. To dissolve the distinction between a disease and a solution would go too far, as would the suggestion that these two senses of despair are irreconcilable. Kierkegaard provides a nuanced view where both senses of despair are necessary and even complementary. That is, while despair is the state of humans who seek meaning and worth away from their creator (the disease), the natural experience of despair (the sense of hopelessness, alienation, etc.) is the thing that effectively drives us or prods us toward God (the solution).

human lives express or fail to express those concepts they affirm. “Existential dialectic comes to expression both in terms of the qualitative contradiction between one’s present condition and one’s ethical or ethical-religious *telos*, and in terms of the potential qualities, capacities, or conditions that may be realized in human existence.”¹⁷⁰ We can grasp the distinction between quantitative and qualitative in de silentio’s admission about faith. “The dialectic of faith is the finest and the most extraordinary of all; it has an elevation of which I can certainly form a conception, but no more than that.”¹⁷¹ On the one hand, de silentio conceives of the quantitative, conceptual dialectic of faith in his insightful depiction of Abraham’s unique and praiseworthy relation to God. His analysis demonstrates a significant measure of conceptual understanding. However, like Johannes Climacus, de silentio is not a Christian; he lacks faith, and therefore lacks the qualitative, existential dialectic of religious inwardness. Whereas conceptual dialectic *can* be carried out directly, qualitative or existential dialectic cannot. (This is why there is no direct transition for de silentio from understanding the concept to possessing it.) As the dialectic of inwardness, the truth of qualitative dialectic—while it can be *approached* through conceptual dialectic—ultimately evades direct communication. Precisely because existential dialectic cannot be directly communicated, Kierkegaard engages in various forms of indirection. Looking ahead to a positive account of Kierkegaard’s indirect communication, we can see how both forms of dialectic might function in an authorship devoted to conceptual clarification, and especially clarification of ethical and religious concepts.

¹⁷⁰Walsh, *Living Christianly*, 6-7.

¹⁷¹Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 36.

To review, Roger Poole claims that Kierkegaard does *not* engage in conceptual clarification, but instead, in the pseudonymous works he presents the reader with terms that mean one thing here and another there. Thus, our only response can be to view these terms in light of their *différance*. Kierkegaard's intention, far from being serious, religious, or edifying, is to invite the reader into a "mutually shared experience of perplexity," this being clear (according to Poole) by the nature of the texts' undecidability. For that reason, Kierkegaard's commentator must not explore other possibilities (e.g. complementary aspects of a concept), or even speak of these multi-meaning terms "in a single sentence." Underlying this view are Poole's concerns about blunt reading, where either one takes seriously the literary components of Kierkegaard's authorship, or one reads it for earnest, religious, or edifying meaning. I have argued, however, that this either/or is a false dilemma borne of Poole's undialectical view of the pseudonyms and their concepts—that is, his neglect of two highly significant Kierkegaardian categories: the existence-spheres and dialectic. Both categories bring terms with more than one meaning into relation with one another, suggesting that *différance* is but one tool to investigate the pseudonymity. To set up an exploration of the multiform concept of faith in chapter four, in the next chapter I will respond to Poole's false dilemma and show that the best reading of Kierkegaard's indirect communication (including the various literary tools that facilitate indirection) is one that takes Kierkegaard's professed religious and edifying intentions seriously.

CHAPTER THREE

Indirect Communication in Kierkegaard's Lectures and *The Point of View*

Introduction

In the previous chapter I explored Roger Poole's claim that *either* one reads Kierkegaard with attentiveness to the indirect communication *or* one reads him earnestly, 'on religious grounds,' as edifying. The pseudonym Johannes Climacus humorously responds to this sort of dilemma with suspicion: "the presence of irony does not necessarily mean that the earnestness is excluded. Only assistant professors assume that."¹ Kierkegaard agrees with Climacus on this point, suggesting that Poole's reading is not the first of its kind. "In pseudonymous books published by me the earnestness is more vigorous, 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."² Later in the entry Kierkegaard gives content to the earnestness found in the pseudonymous writings: "Especially in the communication of ethical truth and partially in the communication of ethical-religious truth, the indirect method is the most rigorous form."³ Based on these and similar passages, there is good reason to be apprehensive about Poole's phrasing of the issue: indirect communication as *opposed to* the serious, the religious, the edifying.

¹Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 277n.

²Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 7 vols. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967-78), 1:301 (#656).

³*Ibid.*, 1:302 (#656).

Poole's false dilemma rests on an undialectical understanding of Kierkegaard's indirection, and in particular, the relationship among the pseudonyms and between Kierkegaard himself and the pseudonyms. I argued in the last chapter that instead of viewing the pseudonyms solely in terms of their differences, we should read them as Kierkegaard presented them—dialectically. In doing so, we open ourselves up to the rich and complex relationships among them, the existence-spheres they represent, and the distinctive concepts that constitute those spheres. The dialectical reading also suggests the idea that Kierkegaard's authorship—in guiding a reader toward virtuous character and a genuine relationship to God—is genuinely concerned with the edification of his reader.

In what follows I will present a positive conception of Kierkegaard's indirect communication. I will argue that not only does indirect communication *not* oppose or impede serious religious or edifying intentions: it greatly advances such aims, especially given Kierkegaard's religious and philosophical contexts.⁴ Modeling himself, in part, after Socrates, Kierkegaard adopts a version of the maieutic method directed at the ethical and religious edification of *his* interlocutor, the single individual reader in Copenhagen.

In the first section I will primarily consider Kierkegaard's lectures on communication to establish a working conception of indirect communication. There Kierkegaard provides us with his most straightforward account of the philosophical backdrop behind his use of indirect communication throughout the authorship. As he puts it, "I am going to use direct communication to make you aware of indirect

⁴*The Point of View* proceeds with "the assumption that Christendom is an enormous illusion" (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 48).

communication.”⁵ We will find that while common understandings of indirect communication—humor, irony, pseudonymity—capture important facets of the concept, Kierkegaard sees something else as the primary determination of an indirect communication.

After focusing on the lectures, in section two I move to the question: how does Kierkegaard understand the place and function of indirect communication in the authorship itself? Kierkegaard addresses this most reflectively in *The Point of View*, where he offers a direct account of his literary production.⁶ I will critique those perspectives that downplay the seriousness of *The Point of View* and its explanation of indirect communication. I will begin by considering Henning Fenger’s well-known literary-historical interpretation of Kierkegaard’s production (particularly his treatment of *The Point of View*), and then turn to the deconstructive reading of Joakim Garff. Applying a hermeneutic of suspicion, Garff approaches *The Point of View* assuming that a ‘direct’ explanation of an authorship is impossible, and consequently one must approach that text suspecting Kierkegaard to be involved in a deception.

Contrary to the positions of Fenger and Garff, I will argue in section three that the best (and most Kierkegaardian) reading of *The Point of View* is one that accepts his straightforward explanation for why he employed indirect communication. Such an interpretation is consistent with the testimony of the lectures on communication (about which Garff is silent), whose serious intent we have little reason to question. Furthermore, as Kierkegaard demonstrates in *The Point of View*, this explanation best fits

⁵Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 1:300 (#656).

⁶The subtitle of *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* is ‘A Direct Communication, Report to History.’

the ‘evidence’—his literary production. I will argue that the best way to approach the authorship is with a particular sort of character that is interested in and open to ethical and religious development. Besides offering an alternative way to read *The Point of View* and consequently, the authorship, I will consider how, in both writing the authorship and ‘living the authorship,’ Kierkegaard—in viewing the authorship as *his own* upbringing⁷—sought to cultivate in himself a variety of virtues.

Indirect Communication in the Lectures

During the writing of *Works of Love* Kierkegaard composed a series of lectures on communication whose imprint can be found throughout the pages of that signed work.⁸ Though he never presented or published them, the lectures provide a unique and helpful lens for reading the authorship itself. The fact that Kierkegaard chose not to present these lectures requires a cautious approach that bears that qualification in mind. Nevertheless, Kierkegaard authorizes us to take them seriously: “*If anyone were to ask me how I regard these lectures in relationship to my whole authorship, I would answer: I regard them as a necessary concession, for which I intend to bear responsibility.*”⁹ While he seems to stand behind the lectures, the tone of this statement implies a sense of apprehension about the task of trying to explain indirect communication in such a direct format. Kierkegaard is aware of the irony in this. “If I say what I have said here in this way to an audience, it may affect one or two, and why? Because this is direct communication, I do not

⁷On this important theme for Kierkegaard, see *The Point of View*, 12, 15, 17, 77-8, 87, 90, 97.

⁸See the Hongs’ historical introduction to *Works of Love* (Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), ix – xvi).

⁹Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 1:302 (#656).

reduplicate, I do not execute what I am lecturing about, I am not what I am saying, I do not give the truth I am presenting the truest form so that I am existentially that which is spoken. I talk *about* it. As soon as I execute it, reduplicate it existentially, I alienate, and somebody or other says—it is pride.”¹⁰ It is natural to conjecture why Kierkegaard chose not to present these lectures publicly, but I will resist such temptations here.¹¹ For our purposes we must acknowledge both that he stands behind the lectures and that he realizes their inevitable inadequacy.

“The Ethical as Universal” and Communication

Communication often involves the conveyance of some sort of knowledge from one party to another. Kierkegaard calls the knowledge one conveys the ‘object’ of communication. More often than not, we communicate knowledge that we assume our recipient lacks. For example, I communicate the concept of Kant’s categorical imperative to my students because I suspect that they might not have read their assignment or perhaps have not fully understood it. One can also communicate knowledge that is less serious. One might discuss the weather with the mailman or the recent ballgame with a stranger at the coffee shop. While such interactions might not result in great increases of knowledge, the ‘spin’ of a different perspective can be viewed as an addition to what one previously knew, despite its trivial nature. That some sort of ‘object’ is conveyed in a communication of knowledge “is apparent from the lowest

¹⁰Ibid., 1:298 (#656).

¹¹In another journal entry, Kierkegaard explains why he is generally opposed to lecturing. “I am accustomed to working things out in detail; the burgeoning fertility of my style and exposition, every line is thoroughly thought out, is too essential for me. If I were to give lectures, I would insist on working them out like everything else and as a consequence read them aloud from manuscript, which I do not care to do” (Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 5:381 (#6004)).

empirical knowledge to the highest.”¹² The idea that communication typically involves a conveyance of some sort of knowledge is a general claim, but significant for our purposes is the fact that this sort of communication is, according to Kierkegaard, ill-equipped to bring about ethical or religious transformation in the recipient of the communication.

Kierkegaard distinguishes between types of communication based upon the particular object of knowledge: “All knowledge is *either* knowledge about something... *or* self-knowledge.”¹³ Thus, knowledge will be communicated differently based on the sort of thing being communicated. The focus of his lectures and the focus of his authorship primarily concern the category of self-knowledge, and for Kierkegaard, the content of self-knowledge is the ethical and religious. It involves what sort of character one should have, how one should relate to others and how one should relate to God. In *Postscript Climacus* refers to these matters as constitutive of “essential truth”—truth essential to or required for human existence. While the term ‘self-knowledge’ resonates with the Socratic conception of the moral life that Kierkegaard prefers to its modern counterpart, he wishes to do away with the component “knowledge” because he feels that it obscures the very task implied by the ethical. “Insofar as the ethical could be said to have a knowledge in itself, it is a “self-knowledge,” but this is improperly regarded as a knowledge.”¹⁴ Thus, instead of viewing the communication of ethical truth as a communication of knowledge, he refers to it as a communication of capability.

¹²Ibid., 1:283 (#653:1).

¹³Ibid., 1:270 (#649:8). Climacus understands Socrates as putting ethical knowledge in its own distinct category as well (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 317).

¹⁴Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 1:289 (#653:30).

Communication of ethical and religious truth, therefore, is of a special sort unlike most other forms of communication.

Kierkegaard's conception of the ethical in the lectures on communication plays an essential role in any attempt to understand indirect communication. It is through his presuppositions about the ethical that his reason for taking up indirect methods gets off the ground. Unfortunately he never provides an exact definition of the ethical in the lectures. Nonetheless, we can begin by distinguishing it from the existence-sphere of the same name, which is characterized positively by commitment to one's duty and negatively by an inappropriate sense of self-sufficiency.¹⁵ While the conception in the lectures does suggest a Kantian notion of 'ought-ness' reminiscent of the ethicist Judge William, it is not a categorization of one sphere among many, but rather a claim made about every human being.

Kierkegaard believes that the ethical is a universal human trait. Everyone has knowledge of the ethical,¹⁶ "it is *in* the individual,"¹⁷ and everyone thereby possesses the ability to become an ethical or virtuous person (this is why knowledge of the ethical is "essential"). He does not argue for this conception of the ethical but assumes it to be true, supported by both the Greek and Christian traditions.¹⁸ Kierkegaard accuses the modern era of dishonesty, self-deception, or in the least, forgetfulness, in regard to its

¹⁵In the lectures Kierkegaard does maintain the 'trichotomy' of aesthetic, ethical, and religious, but he does so in reference to different communicative strategies rather than in relation to the existence-spheres per se.

¹⁶See *Ibid.*, 1:267-76 (#649:5, 10, 11, 13, 19).

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 1:269 (#649:5).

¹⁸Cf. chapter one's discussion of Kirmmse's view of Kierkegaard and ancient Greece.

view of what it means to be a human, and relatedly, what constitutes the ethical. Modern *philosophy* in particular has been dishonest about the ethical by communicating it in an inappropriate (unethical) way.¹⁹ Confusion entered in “when that which should be communicated as art is communicated as science and scholarship.”²⁰ Instead of presupposing universally human ethical knowledge and moving forward to the Socratic task of luring that knowledge out of the individual, modern approaches to ethics have sought to contribute more knowledge to humanity.²¹

Several times in the lectures Kierkegaard returns to an analogy that conveys modern philosophy’s misunderstanding of the ethical. “A sergeant in the National Guard says to a recruit, ‘You, there, stand up straight.’ Recruit: ‘Sure enough.’ Sergeant: ‘Yes, and don’t talk during the drill.’ Recruit: ‘All right, I won’t if you’ll just tell me.’ Sergeant: ‘What the devil! You are not supposed to talk during drill!’ Recruit: ‘Well, don’t get so mad. If I know I’m not supposed to, I’ll quit talking during the drill’.”²² Kierkegaard comments, “The recruit’s mistake is that he continually wants to transform an ability-

¹⁹Ibid., 1:287 (#653:18). More will be said about this in chapter five. He also levels blame at Christian preaching (Ibid.).

²⁰Ibid., 1:268 (#649:5). In the next section we will discuss further what it means to communicate something *as art*.

²¹I hesitate to give a concrete example of what it might mean to contribute more ethical knowledge to humanity, in part, because Kierkegaard himself does not provide one. There is some overlap of this concern of Kierkegaard’s with Bernard Williams’s concerns about modern moral philosophy. In constructing rules about how to act ethically, modern ethics might be understood as trying to give more knowledge to humanity in the form of prescriptive rules when, as Williams argues, 1) it is not at all clear that it has the authority to do so, and 2) such rules hurt us more than they help insofar as they reduce something complex (i.e. the ethical life) to something (apparently) simple. The relationship between Kierkegaard and Williams will be taken up in chapter five.

²²Ibid., 1:272 (#649:14).

communication into a communication of knowledge.”²³ Likewise, in trying to dispense new knowledge about the ethical, modern philosophy commits a sort of category mistake by attempting to make a communication of capability [*Kunnens Meddelse*] into a communication of knowledge [*Videns Meddelse*].²⁴ Ethical truth is something which, by its nature, involves a way of existing. While such truth includes propositional claims, those claims are secondary to the primary function of ethical truth as determinate of a human life. Given this, communication of ethical truth is not simply nor primarily a matter of getting propositions correct, but instead of assisting the receiver in becoming a particular sort of person whose existence becomes characterized by ethical truth. Thus, to communicate ethical truth (in this primary sense) is to *move* an individual toward ethical existence. In the anecdote above, the recruit (i.e. modern philosophy) mistakes a communication of an ability for a communication of some proposition. He misses the point that the proposition “don’t talk!” requires he act a certain way.

The negative result of modern philosophy’s ‘miscommunication’ of the ethical is twofold. First, a misdiagnosis of the problem—thinking that what the receiver lacks is propositional knowledge rather than appropriation of that knowledge—exacerbates the condition; “every new communication of knowledge only nourishes sickness.”²⁵ This causes a situation where individuals, according to Kierkegaard, come to “know too much.” The idea here is not that one’s knowledge of moral concepts is superfluous or that one possesses so much virtue that the excess leads to vice. Rather, in rehearsing

²³Ibid., 1:289 (#653:32).

²⁴Ibid., 1:281 (#651).

²⁵Ibid., 1:269 (#649:5).

various principles and rules posited by various philosophers one comes to know so much about the discipline “ethics,” that she forgets that the primary task of existence is to *live* an ethical life. This relates closely to the second consequence of modernity’s approach to ethics: “The whole modern science of ethics is, ethically understood, an evasion.”²⁶

While it is possible to be self-deceived and genuinely think that more knowledge of philosophical ethics is the proper solution to the quest for self-knowledge, Kierkegaard suspects that, as stated above, dishonesty lurks in philosophical ethics because in its ‘scientific’ approach, the Socratic question, “how should one live?” falls to the side. Removed discourse or “chatter” about ethics is easier than the actual practice of the virtues. If endless ethical theorizing was restricted to small departments of philosophy, perhaps Kierkegaard’s concern would be trivial and overblown. However, Kierkegaard believes this mentality has permeated the surrounding culture. “In a certain sense there is something horrible about contemplating the whole mob of publishers, book-sellers, journalists, authors—all of them working day and night in the service of confusion, because men will not become sober and understand that relatively little knowledge is needed to be truly human—but all the more self-knowledge.”²⁷ We can thus see how Kierkegaard’s polemical comments directed against modern philosophy (and especially modern ethics) pertain as well to the culture in which such philosophy is undertaken.

To reiterate, Kierkegaard does not give us much information as to the content of the ethical knowledge possessed by all humans. Perhaps he has the conscience in mind. Perhaps ethical knowledge is just the nascent ability to become a person with definable

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

character. But what is ethical knowledge *of*? The good, duty, virtue? If all humans possess it, if it cannot be taught, then how does it unfold in the development of a person? While the lectures on communication are silent on such questions, Kierkegaard does make clear (both there and in various places in the signed and pseudonymous works) an egalitarian concern that no one has an advantage over another in terms of ethical knowledge. As the quote states above, “little knowledge is needed to be truly human.” Academic understanding is neither necessary nor advantageous for becoming a good human being. (In fact, it can get in the way). The theme of becoming a self or the self God intends one to be—in *The Sickness Unto Death*, in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, in *Works of Love*—presupposes fundamental human equality not with respect to intelligence or academic proficiency but with respect to ethical capability and the ability to know God. Thus, not only is ethical knowledge a universal human trait, but every human possesses this capability more or less equally.

If in fact every human being more or less possesses ethical knowledge equally, what is left to say to one another? What does Kierkegaard’s view of the ethical as capability imply for ethical communication? Kierkegaard writes, “From this it would follow: (1) the object drops out, for if we all know it, one person cannot communicate it to another; (2) the concept communicator drops out; and (3) the receiver. The only communicator remaining would be the one who had given all men this knowledge and inasmuch as everyone is a receiver, the concept receiver is abrogated.”²⁸ Direct communication, which Kierkegaard identifies with a communication of knowledge (i.e. not self-knowledge), is not appropriate in this case. What must be elicited in the

²⁸Ibid., 1:271 (#649:9).

communication of the ethical is a *realization* of ethical knowledge each individual already possesses. Direct methods such as a lecture or a sermon can easily make the ethical a cerebral matter and thus are often misguided from the start. According to Kierkegaard, “*All communication of capability is more or less indirect communication.*”²⁹ Indirect communication presupposes and plays off of a particular ability or capacity. For example, in humor one plays off of another’s capacity to ‘get the joke;’ one assumes that the recipient possesses the requisite ‘knowledge’ that will allow the joke to be understood. Likewise, in a communication of the ethical, one presupposes knowledge of the ethical on the part of the recipient and the ability to ‘get’ the communication when it is offered to him.

Therefore, according to the lectures, indirect communication does not in the first place concern literary devices like pseudonymity or irony.³⁰ Rather, the salient factor of indirect communication involves what Kierkegaard calls a ‘communication of capability,’ as opposed to a ‘communication of knowledge.’³¹ Nevertheless, one can begin to see how elements like irony and humor can serve the end of a communication of ethical

²⁹Ibid., 1:308 (#657).

³⁰I thank Sylvia Walsh for clarifying this point.

³¹If this is how we are to understand Kierkegaardian indirect communication, then it is no wonder that Poole sets up the false dilemma as he does. Neither the lectures on communication nor the notion of an indirect communication as a ‘communication of capability’ play a significant role in his formulations of indirect communication. In “The Unknown Kierkegaard” Poole lists five facets that constitute indirect communication: 1) pseudonymity, 2) irony, 3) upbuilding discourses that accompanied the early pseudonymous works, 4) Kierkegaard’s “lived presence” in Copenhagen, and 5) his reclusive response to the Corsair affair (Roger Poole, “The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth Century Receptions,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alastair Hannay and Gordon Marino (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 59). While each of these is on the periphery of the indirect communication and certainly related to it, Poole—because he places in opposition the notion of indirect communication and the possibility of earnest or religious intentions—sidesteps what is most essential to Kierkegaard’s conception of indirect communication—its aim to lure out the ethical.

capability. Irony and humor are tools of communication that “individuate.” They divide groups into individuals—no one else can ‘get the joke’ *for you*.³² When irony or humor or pseudonymity is used in the service of an ethical communication, it places each person in relation to an ethical or religious truth that requires an individual response.

While the aim of this section is not to defend Kierkegaard’s view of universal ethical knowledge but instead to show how it informs any proper definition of Kierkegaardian indirect communication, we might wonder whether Kierkegaard is right that one cannot communicate ethical knowledge to another, or that humans are in no need whatsoever of new ethical knowledge. (Of course it would be easier to speculate on this problem if we had a more concrete definition of ethical knowledge with which to work.) In answering this question we might recall a distinction introduced in chapter two between conceptual (quantitative) and existential (qualitative) dialectic. I think it would be a mistake to take Kierkegaard as saying one cannot communicate conceptual knowledge about the ethical. After all, he considers countless ethical concepts himself. Perhaps what he means is that one cannot—as I illustrated above in the example about my love for my wife—communicate ethical knowledge *existentially*, or to put it another way, one cannot communicate ethical truth *as it is realized in an individual’s own life* to another individual. There is nothing a communicator can do to make another individual humble, for example, though this does not preclude the possibility that through some discussion of humility the recipient can grow in knowledge of humility and begin to

³²In one sense no piece of communication can be gotten for you—that is, no one can serve as a surrogate ‘understander’ for another person. Unique about ethical communication, and the reason why the comic is linked to it, is the fact that the meaning of a joke or an ethical communication is something one must personally wrestle with, reflect on, even if for a moment, and that the message of the communication is not immediately contained in the communication itself. The receiver’s active participation is required, and it is assumed that she already possesses a significant measure of knowledge that will facilitate her coming to understand the message.

appropriate the virtue. Fundamental to Kierkegaard's claim about ethical knowledge is the Socratic point that one must grasp an ethical truth and thus ethical communication *for oneself*.³³ Furthermore, ethical truth is of such a nature that to grasp it for oneself means to respond *in actuality, in one's existence*. A grasping of the ethical is not equivalent to success on a test in an ethics course, but to a life lived in accordance with particular sorts of ethical truths. Thus, what makes any communication of an ethical proposition possible is the underlying capability of the recipient—what Kierkegaard would call her innate ethical knowledge—to see for herself the truth of the matter. Therefore, what Kierkegaard means by ethical knowledge when he says it cannot be taught is a capacity or receptivity for ethical truth that informs existence. We all have this, he believes. Compatible with this, therefore, are the ideas that *one can learn more* about virtues like justice, humility, or love, and that *one can learn more* about how to appropriate those virtues more genuinely in her life.

The claim that humans possess an innate capacity for ethical knowledge might be an overly optimistic view about natural moral knowledge, but it is not completely unlike Kant's view of moral knowledge as *a priori*.³⁴ I will leave open the question of whether or not Kierkegaard's view of universal human knowledge is defensible.³⁵ Fundamental

³³We should keep in mind that while Kierkegaard addresses problems that have resulted from or been exacerbated by modern philosophy (or the modern era generally), his claims about ethical knowledge—whether plausible or not—do not seem constrained by *that* fact. The idea, for example, that one must grasp an ethical truth *for oneself* seems *prima facie* plausible even though we may not suffer from the diseases of reflection that, according to Kierkegaard, characterize his own age.

³⁴Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), 57. Of course Kierkegaard does not hold to a rationalist account of epistemology.

³⁵There may be another point of contact between Kierkegaard and Bernard Williams. While Williams will not follow Kierkegaard's claim that humans possess some innate ethical knowledge or faculty, there is something about how he recommends we deal with the one who denies the import of ethical truth (the amoralist) that appears Kierkegaardian. No philosophical argument, no appeal to reason,

to our purposes is to see how his view of this sort of knowledge informs his reasons for indirect communication. Neither Roger Poole nor Joakim Garff have much to say about indirect communication's service of the ethical and its ability to promote a communication of capability as is required, on Kierkegaard's account, by the ethical.

Communication's Mediums: Imagination and Actuality

Kierkegaard believes that a communication of knowledge occurs in the 'medium of imagination,' or 'possibility,' whereas a communication of capability takes place in the 'medium of actuality.'³⁶ If we consider the fact that a communication of knowledge, by definition, has as its object some piece of knowledge that is, in itself, inessential to what it means to be human (as 'self-knowledge' only ethical-religious knowledge is essential), then that knowledge does not necessarily bind its recipient. Instead, the gaining of that knowledge brings with it a new, non-binding possibility that one is free to consider or imagine. Someone who receives a communication of a mathematical insight, an historical claim, or a philosophical proposition, receives the knowledge in the medium of imagination and is not bound to become a certain kind of person by virtue of that newly acquired knowledge. "In the communication of knowledge there is only the dialectical transition."³⁷ At best, a communication of knowledge results in a transition or leap of the

will cause this person to accept moral considerations. One cannot argue with this person 'from the ground up.' Instead, Williams suggests that one way to deal with him is to 'extend his sympathies' (*Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 11-12). By sympathies Williams certainly does not mean ethical knowledge in Kierkegaard's sense. However, these sympathies are something we all seem to possess (save perhaps the psychopath). More importantly, this solution involves an attempt to *move* an individual in a way that presupposes some sort of commitment he already maintains.

³⁶Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 1:282 (#651).

³⁷*Ibid.*, 1:284 (#653:5).

imagination in one's thinking; there is no requisite result in one's actual life (although such a 'result' certainly remains possible).

A communication of (ethical) capability is predicated on the assumption that the receiver possesses ethical knowledge already, and thus, can become an ethical person—can *realize* or *actualize* that knowledge in the 'medium of actuality.' This realization changes the dialectic of communication so that a communication of knowledge "is done away with."³⁸ Instead of a communication of knowledge where one communicates in the manner of "a science" (as something one knows), a communication of capability "communicates something as an art," that is, as something one *does*.³⁹ Kierkegaard refers to this 'medium of actuality'—a place that is not really a place but more like an event—as "the existential reduplication of what is said."⁴⁰ In this way the 'medium of actuality' involves a kind of exemplarism⁴¹ as a means to communicate ethical capability. "To teach in actuality that the truth is ridiculed, etc., means to teach it as one ridiculed and scoffed at himself. To teach poverty in actuality means to teach it as one who is himself

³⁸Ibid., 1:272 (#649:12).

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid., 1:286 (#653:17). Reduplication (*Reduplikation*) implies one duplicates *in one's existence* a truth one already knows, or as Julia Watkin says, "being what one says—that is, putting into practice how one thinks one ought to live" (*Historical Dictionary of Kierkegaard's Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2001), 210).

⁴¹John Lippitt explores exemplarist themes in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* in the third chapter of his *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 27-46. He argues that Climacus views (and relates to) Socrates as an exemplar of subjective thinking and indirect communication. Socrates encourages his interlocutor to pay attention to himself, which means "*paying attention to that potential 'next' or 'higher' self which the exemplar discloses to me*. In other words, I should not let the resonance of the exemplar as other override my concern with the exemplar as 'higher self'" (44). In the medium of actuality one gains an "impression" of what he or she might become (ethically-speaking) by viewing the exemplar (in specific regard to the instantiation of an ethical truth) as one's next or higher self. For Lippitt's detailed argument and response to objections (including the criticism that a relation to an exemplar stunts one's ability to become *one's self*), see *Humour and Irony*, 39-46.

poor⁴²... To that extent all instruction ends in a kind of silence; for when I existentially express it, it is not necessary for my speaking to be audible.”⁴³ Whereas a communication of knowledge brings about a dialectical transition, or a transition in thought, the communication of capability enables a “pathos-filled” transition.⁴⁴ Through the reduplication of an ethical truth in another’s life, the recipient may respond with personal interest and passion to make good on the ethical knowledge he possesses, and this occurs when he appropriates in real life the truth that the ethical exemplar has placed before him.

If ethical character and action do not inform a person’s actuality or everyday existence, then he has failed to make the pathos-filled transition of the ethical, and in this he demonstrates a dismissive attitude toward communications of capability that others have offered. In effect, he has not received this communication, where ‘received’ means ‘actively appropriated.’ Kierkegaard does not assume that communication of capability somehow ensures a transformation of the recipient’s existence; at least it facilitates it, prods it. The ethical response to an existential reduplication of, for instance, poverty of spirit, is likewise a reduplication of that truth in his own life. A communication of capability thereby awakens such existential reduplication in a fellow ‘apprentice.’

⁴²Kierkegaard may have in mind literal poverty (as in the Sermon on the Plain of Luke 6:20) or poverty of spirit (as in the Sermon on the Mount of Matthew 5:3). Mother Teresa might be viewed as an exemplar of both forms of poverty. The humility with which she cared for the impoverished in India was “to teach in actuality” the beatitude of Christ’s sermon(s). In Mother Teresa one is able to catch a glimpse of one’s higher self, though “all instruction ends in a kind of silence” as the individual must choose to realize the modeled truth in her own life.

⁴³Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 1:286 (#653:17).

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 1:284 (#653:5).

Indirect Communication and the Maieutic

As suggested above, the ethical as ‘universally-human’ levels the ethical playing field of humanity. “In regard to the ethical, one person cannot have authority in relation to another....”⁴⁵ Thus, one carries out indirect communication not from a privileged perspective of ethical knowledge—not with ‘ethical authority.’ “Confusion arises when the upbringer instead of upbringing teaches as if he were imparting knowledge. It becomes sophistry...”⁴⁶ To invoke St. Paul’s words, the one who indirectly communicates the ethical is instead a ‘co-laborer’ with the recipient. The communicator and recipient *are both* apprentices of the ‘master-teacher,’ God, who alone grants each individual knowledge of the ethical.

Of course it stands that while no human has more knowledge of the ethical than another, someone might be further along in realizing the ethical in her life. As such, there remains a place for moral pedagogy. “In regard to the ethical and the ethical-religious, the genuine communication and instruction is *training* or *upbringing*. By upbringing a person becomes that which he is essentially regarded to be (a horse, if it is trained and the trainer has good sense, becomes precisely a horse). Upbringing begins with regarding the one who is going to be brought up as being *κατα δύναμιν* that which he shall become, and by regarding him from this point of view brings it out of him. He *brings* or *draws it up*, consequently—it is there....”⁴⁷ Kierkegaard believes that the related tasks of becoming oneself and assisting others to become or realize themselves

⁴⁵Ibid., 1:272 (#649:16).

⁴⁶Ibid., 1:279 (#650:12).

⁴⁷Ibid. The horse analogy comes from Plato’s *Apology*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, in *Plato’s Complete Works*, ed. John M Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 25b.

are ‘difficult.’ Thus, we might go so far as to say that the ‘upbringer’ offers a ‘work of love’ to the recipient of his indirect communication.

Given the notion of upbringing and the idea that the indirect communicator claims no special knowledge of the ethical, one can see why Kierkegaard understands his indirect communication as essentially Socratic. He confesses, “If I were to call myself anything, I would rather declare that I am a kind of teacher in the ancient style.”⁴⁸ By ‘ancient style’ Kierkegaard refers to the practice of philosophical midwifery, the maieutic, where Socrates sought to draw out of his interlocutors ethical understanding and wisdom that he felt they already possessed, all the while claiming no ethical authority for himself. Before he could do this, however, he had to confront the hubris of those interlocutors who deludedly thought they knew more than they actually did. The practice of purging them of pseudo-knowledge and, in doing so, leading them to a subsequent state of puzzlement or aporia, earned Socrates the reputation of being an insincere trickster.⁴⁹ Kierkegaard notes the inherent risks of Socrates’ method: “To what extent must the receiver first be cleansed—the negative in the maieutic. To communicate can mean tricking out of, a kind of communication which is very dangerous for the communicator, for Socrates does say that men could become so angry with him that they would have gladly bitten him—when he tricked them out of a stupidity or two.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 1:303 (#656).

⁴⁹As we will see below, Garff borders on such a view of Kierkegaard, inviting another comparison between Kierkegaard and Socrates.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 1:275 (#649:30).

In Kierkegaard's opinion,⁵¹ while Socrates appeared unserious and antagonizing (not to mention insulting), his intentions were earnest; as Socrates put it, he hoped to persuade Athens to care for virtue.⁵² Not only did Socrates' ironical methods at bottom contain a serious intention; the irony involved in the maieutic method, according to Kierkegaard, exemplified "the highest earnestness."⁵³ Why? "To help a man relate himself to God as an individual is earnestness."⁵⁴ Kierkegaard conceives of his adaptation of the Socratic method—of his communication of ethical capability—as assisting an individual to relate to God by way of realizing the ethical potential God has placed within him. In the maieutic the receiver is assisted, "To stand alone—by another's help."⁵⁵ And, "the communicator in a sense disappears, steps aside."⁵⁶ Kierkegaard's religious use of the maieutic enables *his* interlocutor to stand alone, *before God*.⁵⁷

⁵¹Wayne Booth, in *The Rhetoric of Irony*, distinguishes between stable or controlled irony and unstable or uncontrolled irony. The former presupposes an ethical position and employs irony for ethical reasons (e.g. to bring about moral transformation). In contrast, unstable or uncontrolled irony lacks a definite ethical position and consequently, lacks ethical interests and aims. I agree with John Lippitt that the view of Socrates as 'controlled ironist' was held by Kierkegaard in his mature writings, whereas a view of Socrates as 'total ironist' or 'negative ironist' is present in the earlier work, *The Concept of Irony*. Kierkegaard would place the anonymous authors of the *Corsair* in this latter category. We will briefly discuss the *Corsair* and its unethical use of irony in section three.

⁵²Plato, *Apology*, 31b. We might imagine Socrates as the ethicist whose incognito is irony, per the discussion of chapter two.

⁵³Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 1:274 (#649:23).

⁵⁴Ibid. Socrates would not put his elenctic activity in these terms, of course.

⁵⁵Ibid., 1:280 (#650:15).

⁵⁶Ibid., 1:283 (#651). In *The Point of View* he puts it another way: "the communicator is in the background" (Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 56).

⁵⁷For a similar view of communication that leaves the other person alone with God, see Climacus's discussion of the first thesis by Lessing (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 78). At the end of section three below I consider the ultimate inadequacy of the maieutic method for religious (Christian) communication.

The Special Case of Christian Communication

Kierkegaard's conception of the maieutic in the lectures on communication resonates with the thought of Climacus in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. There Climacus considers what it might require for someone to communicate the "conviction" that truth is inwardness. He knows that this kind of communication must be indirect—that it must be a communication of ethical capability. He writes, "Actually to communicate such a conviction would require art and self-control: enough self-control to comprehend inwardly that the God-relationship of the individual human being is the main point, that the meddling busyness of a third person is a lack of inwardness and a superfluity of amiable obtuseness..."⁵⁸ As a humorist Climacus sympathizes with both ethical and religious concerns, but as I stated above, Climacus is not a Christian, nor does he offer a Christian perspective. While 'the ethical' Kierkegaard discusses in the lectures includes the religious generically-speaking, specifically Christian communication involves a variation on indirect methods.

Climacus famously calls Christianity an existence-communication⁵⁹ implying both that it is a communication *about* existence and that one best communicates it—relays its truth—through one's very life and existence rather than through doctrine.⁶⁰ In other words, Christianity is best communicated indirectly rather than directly. While Kierkegaard affirms Climacus's claim that Christianity is an existence-communication,⁶¹

⁵⁸Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 77.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 380.

⁶⁰This does not entail a denial of the truth of Christian doctrine. The point is rather, Christianity is the *kind* of doctrine whose truth is best expressed in the lives of Christ's followers.

⁶¹Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 1:316 (#676).

in the lectures he distinguishes it from indirect, ethical communication. Instead, he calls Christianity “direct-indirect.”⁶² He writes, “When the ethical communication also contains initially an element of knowledge, we have the ethical-religious, specifically Christian communication.”⁶³

The communication of Christianity remains a communication of capability, but instead of drawing upon one’s strictly ethical capability, it elicits “religious capability or religious oughtness-capability.”⁶⁴ That which makes Christian communication partially direct is the return of an ‘object’ to the communication, a “preliminary” element of knowledge that comes “in advance” of the work of eliciting the capability.⁶⁵ This preliminary element of knowledge signifies some aspect of Christian revelation that, unlike ethical knowledge, humans do not naturally possess. For instance, the preliminary knowledge might be the Christian teaching about sin or perhaps the saving truth of the

⁶²Ibid., 1:308 (#657). In “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense,” James Conant argues that Climacus’s revocation in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, like Wittgenstein’s at the end of the *Tractatus*, is meant to demonstrate that what has preceded is nonsense (James Conant, “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Nonsense,” in *Pursuits of Reason: Essays in Honor of Stanley Cavell*, ed. Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer, and Hilary Putnam (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 1993). Lippitt describes this view: “The ‘subjective truths’ of ethics and religion are not expressible in language, but only in the ‘existential’ context of an individual’s life” (*Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought*, 48). Some recent Kierkegaard commentators are applying this claim not just to Climacus, but to Kierkegaard himself. However, as we will see in the current section, Kierkegaard believes that the ethical-religious communication of Christianity requires both direct and indirect methods. More importantly, in the actual composition of his works we see both direct and indirect methods in the conveyance of ethical and religious truth. Thus, to claim that Kierkegaard holds to this doctrine of nonsense goes against both the lectures and the corpus itself. For responses to the ‘nonsense’ thesis, see chapter four of Lippitt’s *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought*, Lippitt’s and Daniel Hutto’s “Making Sense of Nonsense: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 98 (1998), and C. Stephen Evans’s “The Role of Irony in Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments*” in *Kierkegaard Studies, Yearbook* (2004), ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Hermann Deuser, and Jon Stewart (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004).

⁶³Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, 1:307 (#657).

⁶⁴Ibid., 1:289 (#653:29).

⁶⁵Ibid.

absolute paradox of the God-man. In concert with Church tradition, Kierkegaard believes these (and other) doctrines to be God's essential revelation to humanity. Thus, a direct communication of these truths is essential to Christian communication.

Of course, this direct aspect of Christian communication reflects the historical practices of the Church. "Until now, from generation to generation, men have taught Christianity as a knowledge (the first course) and then the next course, again, as a knowledge."⁶⁶ Historically absent from Christian pedagogy, the second, more transformative 'course' is the training in Christian capability or, in Climacus's words, Christian "truth as subjectivity," revealed doctrine realized in the lives of its adherents. In this sense, Christian communication remains essentially a communication of capability—essentially indirect communication.

The difference between upbringing in the ethical and upbringing in the ethical-religious is simply this—that the ethical is the universally human itself, but religious (Christian) upbringing must first of all communicate a knowledge. Ethically man as such knows about the ethical, but man as such does not know about the religious in the Christian sense. Here there must be a communication of a little knowledge first of all—but then the same relationship as in the ethical enters in. The instruction, the communication, must not be as of a knowledge, but upbringing, practicing, art-instruction.⁶⁷

In ethical-religious (Christian) communication, the teacher "has authority with respect to the element of knowledge which is communicated."⁶⁸ Only, "the teacher" refers to God revealed in Christ, not a human pedagogue. As Climacus says in *Philosophical*

⁶⁶Ibid., 1:280 (#650:13).

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid., 1:289 (#653:28).

Fragments, “The teacher, then, is the god himself,” “a *savior*,” “a *deliverer*,” and “a *reconciler*.”⁶⁹

To summarize, the lectures on communication effectively explain the distinction between a direct and indirect communication in reference to whether the communication aims to elicit from its receiver some sort of ethical or ethical-religious capability.⁷⁰ If we apply this to Kierkegaard’s praxis, then the indirect methods are primarily concerned with the earnest endeavor of moral and religious pedagogy, with assisting readers to grow in virtue and Christian faith. Kierkegaard employs an artistic, maieutic method because his readers ‘know too much,’ and consequently, like Socrates, his activity gets misunderstood. “Indirect earnestness is in a certain sense (dialectical) far more earnest (the dialectical in fear and trembling). Once it is all settled that this is earnestness and that this man is earnest, illusion becomes the support.... The fact of the matter is that most people have not the slightest intimation of this kind of earnestness. As soon as the one regarded as earnest establishes the misunderstanding, they actually believe that he has become a joker. They do not suspect what a terrible strenuousness it is to be truly earnest in this way.”⁷¹ Kierkegaard feels that such ‘treatment’ is required for ‘that enormous illusion,’ Christendom. Given the lectures’ philosophical backdrop to the

⁶⁹Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 15, 17.

⁷⁰Kierkegaard also outlines the indirect communication of ‘aesthetic capability’ (for instance, teaching one how to sculpt). I have withheld discussion of this because it is not particularly relevant to the topic at hand. See *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 1:281-83 (#651).

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 1:312 (#664).

indirect communication, let us turn to Kierkegaard's retrospective, *The Point of View*, where he offers yet another direct statement about his indirect methods.

*Deconstructing The Point of View*⁷²

In an 1849 journal entry Kierkegaard writes, "It would be untrue to say unconditionally that I used the esthetic productivity as maieutic from the very beginning, but for the reader the whole authorship actually will still be maieutic in relation to the religious, which in me was most basic."⁷³ The seemingly humble concession Kierkegaard makes in the first half of this sentence, alongside the confident assertion following in the second, anticipates a great tension in Kierkegaardian interpretation that has begotten vastly divergent opinions about how to understand the authorship as a whole, and especially *The Point of View's* attempt to make sense of it. How can Kierkegaard—after admitting how little control he had over the beginnings of the authorship—judiciously make claims about the whole?

⁷²*The Point of View* is a volume in the Princeton University Press edition of *Kierkegaard's Writings* that includes *On My Work as an Author*, an abbreviation of *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* (also included) that was published during Kierkegaard's lifetime (whereas the longer version was published posthumously). *The Point of View* also includes "The Single Individual." Two "Notes" Concerning My Work as an Author and *Armed Neutrality*. For the sake of space I have confined this section to a consideration of Fenger's and Garff's views. For similar though not identical readings of *The Point of View*, see also Louis Mackey's *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard* (especially chapter seven). Mackey does a better job than Garff of presenting the straightforward meaning of *The Point of View*, yet draws similar suspicious conclusions that seem based less upon argument or evidence and more upon instinct or suspicion. For instance, Mackey wonders (i.e. does not argue) why we should trust Kierkegaard when he tells us that with regard to the duplicate strains in the authorship—the aesthetic and the religious—the religious is of greater importance or is the privileged point of view. He writes, "The privilege here awarded the religious reading does not appear to emerge inevitably from the mere perusal of the texts" (Louis Mackey, *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard* (Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, 1986), 166). But it seems quite plausible that the distinction between works Kierkegaard signs (religious) and those he does not (aesthetic) is suggestive of what represents Kierkegaard's own views and what does not (and this is true particularly in light of the First and Last Explanation in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*). Mackey makes no mention of this very obvious authorial distinction.

⁷³Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 293.

In this section I will review and critique Fenger's and Garff's (and to a lesser extent Norris's) interpretations of *The Point of View*, which allege that Kierkegaard's retrospective fudges the truth, that it exemplifies Kierkegaard's ongoing, self-deceived self-production. First, I will consider the assumptions at the root of such interpretations and conclude that their assumptions in the main do not warrant their conclusions. Second and more importantly, I will highlight their methodologies and ultimately suggest that the approaches they take to the text are uncharitable, evasive, and consequently, un-Kierkegaardian.⁷⁴ Their sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit hermeneutic of suspicion all but trivializes Kierkegaard's apparent interest—as we saw in the discussion of indirect communication's essential feature—in the communication of ethical capability. That is to say, if we read the corpus (and *The Point of View*) as they recommend, ethical implications come last, if at all. And certainly, ethical-religious or Christian implications have no place whatsoever. Throughout *The Point of View* Kierkegaard's explanation of his authorship relies upon particular views of God and Governance that proceed from a standpoint of faith. Unsurprisingly, these views are the first things 'to go' in a hermeneutic of suspicion, and they are explained away as Kierkegaard's *own* explaining away of his runaway authorship. Besides explanations that rely on or proceed from Christian faith, however, Kierkegaard believes that the account that he was a religious author from the beginning is a rational one that can be easily substantiated (as he attempts to do himself).

Fenger on Kierkegaard's Mythic Religious Beginnings

⁷⁴My focus is primarily on Joakim Garff, whose work is more current and more concentrated on *The Point of View*. Also, Garff represents a growing number of deconstructive readers of Kierkegaard.

Henning Fenger's *Kierkegaard: The Myths and Origins* functions as an exposé that tries to distinguish between what we might call 'the historical Søren' and 'the Kierkegaard of faith,' where the former represents the factual individual who never got over his failure to impress Professor Heiberg,⁷⁵ and the latter represents the fictional subject whom the secondary literature believes, or rather naively assumes, to be "Kierkegaard." Fenger's account relies primarily on the impressions of Kierkegaard's contemporaries and colleagues, a variety of the unpublished papers, and a generous application of psychoanalytic theory. He conceives of the pseudonyms as a collection of stage roles that the actor Kierkegaard, who "was more frequently in the theater than in church," carried out with great mastery.⁷⁶ As such, the author we see in books like *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* and *On My Work as an Author* is just one more role Kierkegaard plays for his audience. As he puts it, "What are the autobiographical writings save a confession of a lifelong piece of playacting in the service of a higher cause?"⁷⁷ The "pretentious" *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* represents Kierkegaard's dissatisfied adjustment to feeling underappreciated for his monumental *Postscript*.⁷⁸

Fenger agrees with Kierkegaard's own assessment of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* as the centerpiece and turning point of the authorship, but whereas

⁷⁵Fenger refers to this as Kierkegaard's "Heiberg complex." See Henning Fenger, *Kierkegaard, The Myths and Their Origins*, trans. George C. Schoolfield (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 29.

⁷⁶Ibid., 21. These roles include the manic depressive, the doubter and the seducer (Ibid., 22). Mackey agrees with this assessment of Kierkegaard as actor and also agrees with Kierkegaard's brother, Peter, that "Søren Kierkegaard" might be another name for a pseudonym (*Points of View*, 187).

⁷⁷Fenger, *Kierkegaard: The Myths and Their Origins*, 21.

⁷⁸Ibid., 26.

Kierkegaard perceives the help of Governance in guiding the dual streams of the esthetic and religious productions up to this point, Fenger regards Kierkegaard's glance backward as one of several "rationalizations-after-the-fact."⁷⁹

When he did not feel satisfied with the applause he got for his performances up to and including the *Postscript*, he changed to other and somewhat more elderly roles—the Socratic peripatetic who instructed his sole disciple in the wisdom of life, the reverent author of edifying tracts, the preacher who seldom appeared in his pulpit, the favorite victim of the *Corsair*, the genius who was not understood and who chose not to cast his pearls before swine, the sinner doing atonement, the pious hermit—and many other roles, all of which are both true and acted.⁸⁰

Fenger assures us that this explanation is not intended with disrespect, despite the fact that it clearly runs against Kierkegaard's self-interpretation. "This writing of literature with his own life is Kierkegaard's true greatness."⁸¹

Fenger's explanation of Kierkegaard's continuous play-acting is quite fascinating and even convincing when we consider an account of Israel Levin, Kierkegaard's secretary, whose opinion should be taken seriously (as it undoubtedly is by Fenger). Levin describes Kierkegaard as "such a person of moods that he often made untrue statements, persuading himself that he spoke the truth."⁸² Whatever one can make of historical facts, the important question for our purposes is whether Fenger correctly concludes that Kierkegaard, in claiming religious purpose from the beginning of the authorship, offers another "rationalization-after-the-fact," another untruth.

⁷⁹Ibid., 20.

⁸⁰Ibid., 24.

⁸¹Ibid., 25.

⁸²Israel Levin, quoted in Fenger, *Kierkegaard: The Myths and Their Origins*, 15.

In the shorter piece, *On My Work as an Author*, Kierkegaard anticipates the very objection that his religious interests were not present from the beginning, with the publication of *Either/Or*. (In fact, the very possibility of claims like Fenger's are, in my opinion, what motivated Kierkegaard to give an accounting in the first place). Explaining the dual streams of esthetic and upbuilding literature, Kierkegaard refers to the presence of the latter as proof that, "The directly religious was present from the very beginning."⁸³ Kierkegaard does not claim to understand how the hand of Governance would work as the authorship unfolded, but he adamantly sticks to the claim that the possibility was there insofar as the religious was present at the beginning, alongside the esthetic. Why then, does Fenger present the following argument? "The chronological facts do not support Kierkegaard's later interpretations of the authorship as having been planned from the start in accordance with religious categories."⁸⁴ If Fenger means that the authorship was "planned" in a particular sort of way, then Kierkegaard would undoubtedly concede the point.⁸⁵ But that is not his claim. Instead, he believes that because Kierkegaard did not *simultaneously* publish his first pair of *Upbuilding Discourses* with the esthetic work *Either/Or*, this demonstrates that the religious was *not* present from the beginning. For that would have been "the only consistent thing" to do.⁸⁶ Fenger offers Kierkegaard another alternative—respecting the actual dates Kierkegaard did choose to publish, he

⁸³Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 7.

⁸⁴Fenger, *Kierkegaard: The Myths and Their Origins*, 5.

⁸⁵See also C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Fragments and Postscript: the Religious Philosophy of Johannes Climacus* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1983), 51.

⁸⁶Fenger, *Kierkegaard: The Myths and Their Origins*, 28.

could have claimed that the religious was present from the beginning in the sermon that concludes *Either/Or II*, the “Ultimatum.”

Both of these claims are problematic. Beginning with the latter advice, Fenger fails to see that whereas Kierkegaard endorses the religious truths of the upbuilding discourses (even if they are not explicitly Christian), such is not the case with the sermon (whose ‘upbuilding thought’ is that in relation to God one is always in the wrong).⁸⁷ Rather, that sermon represents the problematical view of the religious that ethicists like Judge William hold—that is, a view of the religious that remains in immanence, a view whose conception of God comes from ‘below,’ not from revelation. Therefore, Kierkegaard would never have made that sermon the departing point of his religious authorship.

Second, concerning the need to be consistent and publish the two streams “simultaneously,” Fenger concludes that because Kierkegaard waited two months and three and one-half weeks to publish⁸⁸ the first set of signed, religious works, that therefore the authorship was not religious from the beginning.⁸⁹ In effect, had Kierkegaard published those two religious works seventy days earlier, Fenger would be silenced because this would then be “consistent.” Fenger’s critique on this point is

⁸⁷In “A Little Explanation” Kierkegaard publicly distances himself from the Ultimatum, when he responds to an accusation that a sermon he presented in 1841 was identical to the concluding piece of *Either/Or II*. He strongly denies this, writing “the two sermons do not have even the most fleeting resemblance” (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Corsair Affair*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 22).

⁸⁸Kierkegaard actually dated the preface as early as May 5th, his birthday, although *Two Upbuilding Discourses* was published the 16th. (*Either/Or* was published February 20th.) For a description of this time in his life, see Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 37.

⁸⁹That span of time appears inconsequential to Kierkegaard, who in *On My Work as an Author* recalls: “*Two Upbuilding Discourses* (1843) is in fact concurrent with *Either/Or*,” and again, “At the very same time when the sensation *Either/Or* created was at its peak, at that very same time appeared *Two Upbuilding Discourses* (1843)” (*The Point of View*, 8-9).

remarkably trivial, or perhaps simply the best he can offer to support his own presumptions about the authorship (and even then it is trivial). It can only underscore the distrustful agenda that he brings to the text. If Kierkegaard had actually asserted that the whole authorship was planned from the beginning, Fenger's suspicion would find much greater warrant. But Kierkegaard claims no such thing. The fact remains that Kierkegaard's retrospective look is constantly hedged by claims like the following: "This is how I *now* understand the whole. From the beginning I could not quite see what has indeed also been my own development."⁹⁰ Kierkegaard's claims throughout *The Point of View* are consistently modest concerning his limited role in the unfolding of the authorship and deferential with regard to the role of God or Governance.⁹¹ As we turn to more current deconstructive readings, Kierkegaard's explanation of Governance becomes an even greater stumbling block to commentators.

Garff's Deconstructive Point of View

Like Fenger, Joakim Garff offers a psychologically-reductive explanation of Kierkegaardian pseudonymity, viewing it as "a reaction to the crisis of self-relation."⁹² That is, the "pseudonymity appears to be more personally than maieutically motivated."⁹³ This conception of the esthetic writing rests on a broader belief about the authorship

⁹⁰Ibid., 12.

⁹¹This is not to dismiss or ignore Kierkegaard's abundance of pride about being a genius.

⁹²Joakim Garff, "'To produce was my life': Problems and Perspectives within the Kierkegaardian Biography," in *Kierkegaard Revisited: Proceedings from the Conference "Kierkegaard and the Meaning of Meaning It"*, Copenhagen, May 5-9, 1996, ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn and Jon Stewart (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), 86.

⁹³Ibid., 88.

which differentiates Garff from Fenger. According to Garff, “Fenger naturally enough considers any fiction to be truth’s worst enemy and the literary element in Kierkegaard’s self-descriptions to be falsity’s firmest friend. Fenger would get to the “real” Kierkegaard, and he is so vehement in that endeavor that two substantially important reflections get painted out of the picture completely.”⁹⁴ What does Fenger miss? First, it is not clear what would be gained by discovering or isolating the ‘real’ Kierkegaard. Second, “what one needs to consider in the search for the “real” Kierkegaard is the possibility that myth-making and fiction-writing could be constitutive elements in Kierkegaard’s self-description; and, for that reason, they especially reveal the “real” Kierkegaard.”⁹⁵ As we will see, however, Garff seems just as interested as Fenger in finding the “real” Kierkegaard, and like Fenger, he suspects that Kierkegaard engages in some degree of make believe play-acting. Unlike Fenger, however, Garff believes that this Kierkegaard—stage-producer and actor—is the closest we can come to any “real” Kierkegaard.

Like Poole, Garff and Norris believe that Kierkegaard’s texts “require” a deconstructive approach.⁹⁶ What would this look like? Norris states the aims of deconstruction: “Deconstruction sets out to demonstrate that meaning can never coincide with its object in a moment of pure, unimpeded union; that language always intervenes to deflect, defer or differentially complicate the relation between manifest sense and

⁹⁴Ibid., 82.

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Ibid., 92, and Christopher Norris, “Fictions of Authority: Narrative and Viewpoint in Kierkegaard’s Writings,” *Criticism* 25, no. 2 (1983): 103, and “The Ethics of Reading and the Limits of Irony: Kierkegaard among the Postmodernists,” *Southern Humanities Review* 23, no. 1 (1989), 32.

expressive intent. Meaning can be neither straightforwardly referential nor ultimately grounded in the speaker's (or author's) will-to-express."⁹⁷ Norris candidly admits that, although Kierkegaard's work lends itself to deconstruction, Kierkegaard himself would have reservations about particular deconstructive assumptions about, for instance, the nature of truth. Kierkegaard's belief in "the existence of a grounding-authenticity which can call a halt to the mazy indirections of language and motive" exemplifies where deconstructionists would 'part company' with him.⁹⁸ Norris also honestly concedes that Kierkegaard would condemn the deconstructive tendency toward "'aesthetic' reflection lost in the abysmal regressions of its own creating."⁹⁹

While Norris qualifies the marriage of Kierkegaard and deconstruction, Garff dismisses what Kierkegaard might think about his successors and instead devotes his time to the task of deconstruction itself. While Norris is hesitant to read *The Point of View* "as a species of fiction," he does believe that it "lies open" to a reading where "Fact can no longer be separated from fiction."¹⁰⁰ Garff blatantly calls *The Point of View* a "fictive documentation" or a "Documenta(fic)tion."¹⁰¹ But just as Fenger's view rests shakily on the factual minutia that Kierkegaard waited almost three months to publish his first set of

⁹⁷Norris, "Fictions of Authority," 102.

⁹⁸Ibid., 90.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 95, 96.

¹⁰¹Joakim Garff, "The Eyes of Argus: *The Point of View* and Points of View on Kierkegaard's Work as an Author," in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, ed. Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 86.

religious works, so does Garff's fictional reading of *The Point of View* rest on a questionable foundation.

According to Garff, the notion of a privileged point of view within Kierkegaard's authorship runs aground when one considers the many points of view Kierkegaard has already offered.¹⁰² First, in his review of Kierkegaard's other pseudonymous writings, Johannes Climacus gives his own point of view in a section of the body of the *Postscript*.¹⁰³ Second, following the *Postscript* Kierkegaard himself offers 'A First and Last Declaration' that clarifies his perspective particularly on the pseudonymous writings. Third, the published and signed *On My View as an Author* provides a very brief overview or 'accounting' of the authorship. Finally, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* which Kierkegaard did not have published until after his death gives readers yet another, more extensive and direct perspective on the authorship.

As his title indicates, Garff makes use of Kierkegaard's allusion to the mythical Argus, a giant with one hundred eyes, to assert that Kierkegaard's own *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* should receive no special place among other explanations of the authorship. "Each of these four pieces makes normative pronouncements about Kierkegaard's work and gives more or less explicit directions for its proper reading. The problem, of course, is that each piece does this separately from a different point of view, which not only undermines the normative status of each individual piece but also compromises the fourth point of view, which stubbornly claims that it is simply *The*

¹⁰²Louis Mackey agrees; *The Point of View* "is only a point of view. Another point of view in a series from each of which the texts that compose the corpus regroup themselves. A plurality of wholes and no totality" (*Points of View*, 190).

¹⁰³"A Glance at a Contemporary Effort in Danish Literature," in Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 251-300.

Point of View.”¹⁰⁴ Does each of these separate conceptions really claim normativity with regard to the authorship? Even if that is the case, are these four pieces somehow contradictory, so that each ‘loses its punch’ and consequently all of them become unreliable commentaries? Because Garff assumes a deconstructive perspective where “Writing has no perspective-opening qualities” but only “gets in the writer’s way and deflects his self-understanding,”¹⁰⁵ he is predisposed to reject retrospective glances at an authorship, even if multiple explanations do not exist. With that in mind, let us briefly consider the four disparate perspectives, beginning with the second.

In the well-known ‘A First and Last Explanation’ that follows the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard distinguishes himself from the pseudonyms and requests that if someone makes mention of a pseudonymous work he should quote the particular pseudonym and not Kierkegaard himself. “Thus in the pseudonymous books there is not a single word by me.”¹⁰⁶ While Kierkegaard draws a clear line between the pseudonyms’ words and his own, this quotation does not imply that he disagrees with his pseudonyms on every point. It strongly suggests that he does not agree with them or with them all, nor on every point—that their point of view is *not* his point of view. But it is clearly possible for Kierkegaard to agree with Climacus, for example, that Christianity is an existence-communication (as I noted above) while also claiming that Climacus’s words to that effect are Climacus’s and not his own. But if this is the case, then Climacus’s review of the other pseudonymous writings in ‘A Glance at a Contemporary Effort in Danish

¹⁰⁴Garff, “The Eyes of Argus,” 79.

¹⁰⁵Garff, “‘To produce was my life’,” 93.

¹⁰⁶Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, [626].

Literature,' while interesting, is not a live option as an authority on Kierkegaard's work, even though some of his judgments might reflect Kierkegaard's views.

Garff somehow finds contradictory on the one hand, Kierkegaard's disclaimer¹⁰⁷ in 'A First and Last Explanation,' and on the other hand, *The Point of View's* assertion that Kierkegaard has used the pseudonyms as part of his maieutic method—to draw readers in. But how do these two claims contradict one another? By distinguishing between his own words and his pseudonyms', does Kierkegaard thereby deny the pseudonyms' function and importance in the authorship? Such a conclusion does not follow at all. Garff continues to develop this thesis of contradiction by pointing out that Climacus "seems neither to be interested in pseudonymity as a maieutic strategy nor to have any idea that it is supposed to be a religious author's dissimulating form of presentation."¹⁰⁸ But what importance is Climacus's opinion about these issues? And, if Climacus-as-humorist does not share the perspective of Kierkegaard-as-Christian, then why should we suppose some semi-omniscient perspective on the part of the pseudonym? What difference does it make if Climacus has 'any idea' about the religious author's methods? If we observe Kierkegaard's request in 'A First and Last Explanation,' Climacus's insights or lack thereof have no bearing on trying to clarify what Kierkegaard thought himself. In fact, it might be the case that for the pseudonyms to serve their maieutic purpose, they themselves will not understand such a purpose. Why suspect that they could (or should), especially if many of them represent life views that are to be surpassed? To summarize, even if Climacus and Kierkegaard disagree on a particular

¹⁰⁷He calls it a renunciation.

¹⁰⁸Garff, "The Eyes of Argus," 79.

issue, this does not lend itself to confusion over multiple *Kierkegaardian* points of view; it merely suggests that Kierkegaard does not hold the same view as his pseudonym.

What about the two retrospective works? *On My Work as an Author* is an abridged version, published during Kierkegaard's lifetime, of the longer *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* that Kierkegaard felt revealed "too much personal material."¹⁰⁹ Among the pieces of personal material removed from the longer text is discussion of the role of Governance (which we will discuss shortly).¹¹⁰ It is neither surprising nor suspicious that Kierkegaard would produce a shorter, less revealing version of the longer account. While one can speculate as to the reasons he omitted so much in *On My Work as an Author*, the differences between the two pieces do not amount to contradiction. So far as I can tell, nothing Kierkegaard says in the longer piece contradicts or undermines his claims in the shorter, which may be why Garff makes no attempt to support the idea that these two pieces, in particular, contradict one another.

To summarize, contrary to Garff's claims, the four works do not contradict or undermine one another. Each is what it is—in the first case a pseudonymous account, in the second an account about reading the pseudonyms, in the third an abridgement of a larger piece, and in the fourth the 'report' itself that, for whatever reasons, Kierkegaard was comfortable publishing only posthumously. Garff's claim that *The Point of View* attempts to "overwrite the other texts with *its* meaning" trades on contradictions that do not exist. Furthermore, it overstates the function of *The Point of View*, which is not to

¹⁰⁹Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, "The Retrospective Understanding of Søren Kierkegaard's Total Production," in *Kierkegaard: Resources and Results*, ed. Alastair McKinnon (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1982), 29.

¹¹⁰I thank Joseph Westfall for pointing this out to me.

denude other texts of their own meaning or importance, but rather to provide a clarifying presentation of the whole and to anticipate those who would assume *they* knew better the truth of the authorship.

Garff seeks to discredit the legitimacy of *The Point of View* further by questioning Kierkegaard's categorization of aesthetic and religious works. I will neither rehearse nor challenge his argument here, primarily because the implications of his argument are quite similar to the other arguments I am reviewing (and Sylvia Walsh has made an excellent response already).¹¹¹ Suffice it to say, Garff's aim in this section—as he condenses it in a later article—is “to show the fluctuation in Kierkegaard's own motivations for publishing (and, concomitantly, for not publishing) and, in part, in order to draw attention to the problematical nature of his own genre categorizations when they become polarized between the so-called aesthetic and religious productivity.”¹¹² Garff hopes to add this insight to his collection of evidence that, out of uncertainty in the authorship, Kierkegaard resorts to fictionalizing history. But as in the case of Fenger, Kierkegaard's occasionally awkward attempts to understand the authorship's development are not concealed, but confessed. Kierkegaard writes, “If the author had been a richly endowed intellect, or, if he was that, if he had been a doubly richly endowed intellect, he probably would have needed a longer or a doubly long period in order to describe this path in literary production and to reach this point.”¹¹³ To repeat, Kierkegaard's explanations

¹¹¹Walsh convincingly undermines his analysis of Kierkegaard's categorization of works, where Garff accuses Kierkegaard of “shameless inexactitude.” See Walsh's “Reading Kierkegaard with Kierkegaard against Garff,” in *Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter* 38 (1999): 5-6. In the same newsletter, Garff responds to Walsh's response; see “Rereading Oneself.”

¹¹²Joakim Garff, “Rereading Oneself,” in *Søren Kierkegaard Newsletter* 38 (1999): 12.

¹¹³Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 7.

suggest deception only to a reader who is looking hard to find it. Kierkegaard does not cover up the ways in which the authorship's direction was, in a manner of speaking, out of his hands.

In the first chapter (of part two¹¹⁴) of *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* Kierkegaard explains how he employed an indirect, maieutic method to wrest from their delusions his contemporaries who claimed to be Christian, yet lived in aesthetic categories. The indirect method, “in the service of the love of truth dialectically arranges everything for the one ensnared and then, modest as love always is, avoids being witness to the confession that he makes alone before God....”¹¹⁵ This explanation of the indirect communication, compatible with both the views of the lectures and of Johannes Climacus, brings out the explicit religious intentions Kierkegaard has in mind for the authorship. Garff, whose hermeneutic of suspicion informs his approach to the texts and to Kierkegaard as an author, offers Kierkegaard's reader a check: “If one assumes that Kierkegaard is a ‘religious author’, this certainly does not establish that his ‘work-as-an-author’ must be religious, since that depends less upon ‘the author’ than on the ‘work’—that is, on the text.”¹¹⁶ Of course by ‘work’ Garff means the majority of texts that *do not presume* to explain the overall point of the authorship. The effect of this first chapter, which “wants to *prove* the presence of a ‘duplicity,’”¹¹⁷ is apologetic, according to Garff,

¹¹⁴Each chapter subsequently considered is from part two, which constitutes the majority of the text.

¹¹⁵Ibid., 44. This quotation lends support to the idea of reading Kierkegaard's authorship as itself a ‘work of love.’

¹¹⁶Garff, “The Eyes of Argus,” 83.

¹¹⁷Ibid., 84.

and thus contrary to what *The Point of View* was supposed to be in the first place.¹¹⁸ On this point Walsh corrects Garff's understanding of Kierkegaard's intention: "But Kierkegaard appeals to the reader (or to his own role as a third party reader) and the works themselves not in order to *prove* that a third party can discern ... the intentionality of a work, but merely to *substantiate* the author's claim, that is, to show that his claims have some basis in the text as far as the reader can see."¹¹⁹ As Walsh states, Kierkegaard is well aware that other interpretations remain open, but he establishes criteria that 'substantiate' the point of view he offers. Kierkegaard writes, "But presumably everyone will admit that if it can be shown that such and such a phenomenon cannot be explained in any other way, and that on the other hand it can in this way be explained at every point, or that this explanation fits at every point, then the correctness of this explanation is substantiated as clearly as the correctness of an explanation can ever be substantiated."¹²⁰ Having provided an explanation of the authorship (that it was religious from the beginning and that its author is a religious author) that is objectively reasonable, and that explains the duplicity more effectively than a Kierkegaard-as-aesthetic-author hypothesis would, Kierkegaard claims that if a reader *still* disbelieves, then the problem concerns a lack of earnestness. Garff treats this turn in Kierkegaard's explanation as a kind of moral trump card Kierkegaard plays when he presupposes "uncritical seriousness" in his reader. Garff writes, "the reader's "seriousness" becomes identical to

¹¹⁸“What I write here is for orientation and attestation—it is not a defense or an apologetics” (Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 24; see also p. 52).

¹¹⁹Walsh, “Reading Kierkegaard with Kierkegaard against Garff,” 6.

¹²⁰Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 33.

a tacit approval of the fiction.”¹²¹ Assuming *The Point of View* to be a fictional “script,” Garff prefers a less-than-serious hermeneutic to Kierkegaard’s prescription of a straight reading/earnest hermeneutic, thereby ensuring that Kierkegaard—under deconstruction—has no possible way to convey serious intentions.

The second chapter of *The Point of View* explains how Kierkegaard related his life to his literary output. During the aesthetic writings Kierkegaard ‘played’ the aesthete by frequently attending the Royal Theater’s productions, as Fenger reminds us. Upon the publication of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and the controversy of the *Corsair*, Kierkegaard—whose writings turned in an almost entirely religious direction—harmonized his life to his work almost out of necessity for fear of being scorned by an increasingly hostile public. Dubious (as Fenger was) about Kierkegaard’s testimony, Garff once again takes up a posture of suspicion. “By providing the reader with such an insight into the intricate machinery of the deception, Kierkegaard involuntarily exposes himself to the suspicion that the virtuoso of deception is still master of his art and is now demonstrating his proficiency.”¹²² (Garff seems to overlook the possibility that Kierkegaard is actually explaining his bizarre behavior.) Garff continues, this time commenting on a heart-wrenching passage where Kierkegaard reflects on being the object of the public’s mockery. Garff writes, “Here, as so often, the reader is tempted to ask whether Kierkegaard is writing in good faith, or whether he is the rather impious (stage-)producer of a pious deception.”¹²³ He quotes yet another passage where

¹²¹Garff, “The Eyes of Argus,” 85-6.

¹²²Ibid., 87

¹²³Ibid.

Kierkegaard reflects on his voluntary acceptance of persecution from the public and refers to it as ‘Christian self-denial.’ Garff assures, “There is no denial of self-assertion in Kierkegaard’s Christian self-denial, which can confusingly resemble an aesthetic self-production which the many metaphors of disguise—‘costume’, ‘finery’, ‘clothing’—among other things, contribute to. That such an arrangement is mainly a textual (stage-) production, the value of which should be endorsed and redeemed by the reader, is obvious and appears, for example, in the following erotic appeal:...”¹²⁴ The passages Garff considers here are some of the most expressive and heart-wrenching of any of Kierkegaard’s writings. Such a presumptuous (I daresay judgmental) reading all but eliminates the possibility of sincerity or seriousness on Kierkegaard’s part.

Garff’s reading of the third chapter of *The Point of View*, “Governance’s Part in My Authorship,” best showcases his hermeneutic of suspicion.¹²⁵ He begins his analysis of this chapter by reminding us that the purpose of *The Point of View* is to “prescribe” a correct reading of the authorship, presumably one that would otherwise not occur to a reader, and presumably one that is less than accurate.¹²⁶ Again he quotes *The Point of View* at length: this time a lyrical, confessional passage that ends with Kierkegaard referring to his production as a sort of worship of God. Garff mistrusts the passage

¹²⁴Ibid., 89.

¹²⁵It is interesting to note that a few years before Kierkegaard wrote *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, he maintained similar gratitude toward Governance’s role in his authorship. In ‘A First and Last Explanation’ to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, he wrote as a man convinced of the end of his authorship: “First of all, I want to give thanks to Governance, who in such multitudinous ways has encouraged my endeavor, has encouraged it over four and one-quarter years without perhaps a single day’s interruption of effort, has granted me much more than I had ever expected, even though I can truly testify that I staked my life to the utmost of my capacity, more than I had at least expected, even if to others the accomplishment seems to be a complicated triviality” [628].

¹²⁶He does not consider the obvious possibility that the *The Point of View’s* account of the authorship may occur to certain kinds of readers, while it may *not* to occur to others.

because of its lyrical quality, calling it “an aesthetic writing about the religious.”¹²⁷ With this description Garff implies that Kierkegaard’s second trump card—that of religion, God, or Governance—cannot be taken seriously given its encasement in a lower, aesthetic form.¹²⁸ (One wonders if the beautifully written *Upbuilding Discourses* are, in Garff’s view, ‘aesthetic writings about the religious.’¹²⁹) Garff calls Kierkegaard’s God “the super-metaphor of the writing, which is to provide the writing with consistency and evenness, and partly—in terms of instinct psychology—as the super-ego that masters desire.”¹³⁰ He continues, “Kierkegaard’s confessional writing is therefore handing it on a plate to every Freudian gourmet...”¹³¹ Kierkegaard’s invoking of Governance initially “resembles rampant megalomania.”¹³²

¹²⁷Garff, “The Eyes of Argus,” 92.

¹²⁸Garff’s point is based upon Kierkegaard’s own warning against ‘aestheticizing’ the religious. However, according to Walsh “Kierkegaard is suggesting that the religious writer who proposes to use the aesthetic to get in touch with people must be sure of himself and relate to God in fear and trembling—or else he risks getting mired in the aesthetic” (“Reading Kierkegaard with Kierkegaard against Garff,” 6). There is no *prima facie* incongruity in a lyrical (aesthetic) expression of the religious.

¹²⁹Of course in one sense, they are, precisely because they are beautifully written. To equivocate on ‘aesthetic,’ and to suggest that beautiful (aesthetic) descriptions of the religious somehow undermine the religious is completely unjustified; it denies the possibility of, e.g., Christian art.

¹³⁰Garff, “The Eyes of Argus,” 93.

¹³¹Ibid. Interestingly, in “Rereading Oneself” Garff claims, *contra* Walsh and *contra* appearances, that he is “not a Freudian of any stripe,” but instead he parodies Freudian readings (13). Commenting on Kierkegaard’s claim that he could write “uninterrupted day and night,” Garff responds: “Marvelous stamina in 1001 nights with writing. Anyone can see how the erotic desire for Regine has here been sublimated and displaced onto God who as a (second) father watches over the son’s uncontrollable desire for ‘discharge’ and therefore must time and again ask the wayward pen to behave ‘properly’” (“The Eyes of Argus,” 93). I am dubious that Garff intends such words as a parody of a Freudian reading and that this is not a Freudian reading itself. For another Freudian reading of Kierkegaard and his authorship, see chapter seven of Louis Mackey’s *Points of View: Readings of Kierkegaard*.

¹³²Garff, “The Eyes of Argus,” 94.

So while Kierkegaard believes that Governance has guided the authorship from the beginning to present, Garff interprets ‘Governance’ as the texts *writing Kierkegaard*. Whereas the recognition and subsequent invocation of Governance symbolizes Kierkegaard’s movement from someone who peddles ‘the interesting’¹³³ (read: aesthetic) to a penitent, Garff’s interpretation of Governance as the omnipotent texts themselves transforms “the penitent Kierkegaard into an aesthetically interesting Kierkegaard who conceals himself in the process of supposedly revealing himself.”¹³⁴ And again, Garff offers this reading in exact opposition to *The Point of View*’s text. There Kierkegaard concedes the loss of ‘the interesting’ to an imaginary interlocutor: “The interesting I lose; in its place is substituted what is anything but interesting, *direct communication*, that the issue was and is: becoming a Christian.”¹³⁵ Walsh gives us reason to think that perhaps this imagined interlocutor is Garff himself, “who wants to keep Kierkegaard “interesting” by deconstructing and distorting his explanation into fiction.”¹³⁶

Deconstructive Conclusions

Let me attempt to unpack the preceding bombardment of claims about Kierkegaard, his authorship, and specifically *The Point of View*. Garff begins by showing that Kierkegaard offers several points of view throughout the authorship and that these varied

¹³³On Kierkegaard’s relinquishing of ‘the interesting,’ see the Epilogue to *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*.

¹³⁴Walsh, “Reading Kierkegaard with Kierkegaard against Garff,” 7.

¹³⁵Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 91. An admission that Christian communication has a direct component confirms the account of the lectures on communication discussed above.

¹³⁶Walsh, “Reading Kierkegaard with Kierkegaard against Garff,” 8.

‘eyes of Argus’¹³⁷ stand in contradiction to one another. As such, *The Point of View* receives no special status in its telling of the authorial tale. In fact, as one more attempt to ‘overwrite’ the authorship, it instead clues us in to Kierkegaard’s penchant for deception. Garff makes explicit the implication that the maieutic intentions of the indirect communication represent just one point of view that Kierkegaard provides, and moreover, this particular view, relative to the others, tends to pour on the fiction even thicker. As I have argued, however, Garff’s argument founders at the outset because the four ‘points of view’ do not stand in tension at all. We might then apply our own hermeneutic of suspicion to *his* reading.

In reading “Kierkegaard with Kierkegaard against Kierkegaard,”¹³⁸ Garff drags his well-oiled hermeneutic of suspicion through the three primary sections of *The Point of View* claiming that Kierkegaard is something of an actor¹³⁹ who is writing his own script in his own play for his own stage. Kierkegaard’s work is fictive documentation, so the part that *he* writes is fiction; however, there is also a part that, according to Garff, ‘writes him.’ At least this is Garff’s best reductive explanation for Kierkegaard’s belief in the help of God, or Governance.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷We should note that Kierkegaard employs this metaphor to describe how the religious (which he says “is decisively present already from the first moment”) keeps patient watch while the poetic is ‘emptied out’ in the aesthetic production (*The Point of View*, 77). The religious keeps patient watch because the poetic, aesthetic production will soon ‘pass the baton’ in the presentation of the issue (in *Postscript*), and then a multitude of religious works will follow. Thus, the metaphor is introduced to explain how other life views (e.g. aesthetic and ethical) are to give way to the Christian life view.

¹³⁸Garff employs this motto in many places, including “The Eyes of Argus” (77).

¹³⁹Fenger would agree with at least this point.

¹⁴⁰It might be fascinating to explore the depth psychology of such deconstructive readings. It is possible that Garff does not ‘buy’ Kierkegaard’s explanations of God and Governance because he does not *understand* the explanations, or in Climacus’s words, he lacks “the autopsy of faith.”

As this shows, much of Garff's reading pertains more or less directly to Kierkegaard's ethical and especially religious claims that run throughout *The Point of View*. He believes that Kierkegaard introduces the moral category of earnestness as a last resort, to diffuse suspicion that he is not himself serious in his retrospective narrative. Garff thinks that Kierkegaard's lyrical (read: aesthetic) confessions¹⁴¹ about his authorship implode because the religious gets represented by a sphere Kierkegaard "annulled"—the aesthetic. Garff accuses Kierkegaard of religious pretension and false humility, and claims that such reflections instead bespeak a kind of inverted 'self-assertion.' Kierkegaard's relation to God, his view of God as refuge and 'lover,' are tools of deception, used to bring about the 'evenness' that Kierkegaard, according to Garff, so compulsively desired in his authorship. As I stated, Governance gets the same treatment. Garff puts it: "to write is also to be written, and a writer who writes him or herself into a text, writes off the empirical 'I'."¹⁴² 'Writing off the empirical "I"' means that direct accounts about one's authorship are impossible—doomed to fail. Kierkegaard never had a chance in the first place. As Norris writes, "[Deconstruction] affirms the irreducibility of writing to any preconceived idea of authorial design,"¹⁴³ or we might add, any retrospective glance at Governance's design.¹⁴⁴ One cannot look back and reflect and make conclusions about what one sees. This is akin to the sin of claiming a God's eye

¹⁴¹Kierkegaard calls himself a penitent (*The Point of View*, 24).

¹⁴²Garff, "The Eyes of Argus," 95.

¹⁴³Norris, "Fictions of Authority," 106.

¹⁴⁴Of the role of God or Governance in the authorship, once again Kierkegaard anticipates Garff: "In garrulous talk this [Governance] could be explained easily by saying, as some have also said about me without having any idea of the totality of my authorship, that I was a genius of reflection" (*The Point of View*, 77).

view. But for deconstructionists, an author like Kierkegaard does not even have a Kierkegaard's eye view.

Garff presents his hermeneutic of suspicion as one that the text not only invites, but requires. However, the project of deconstruction precludes any possible interpretation that claims to be final. Does this include *Garff's* deconstructive interpretation? The more modest interpreter, Norris, admits that a deconstructive interpretation involves "the decision not to take his edifying motives on trust, but to read his entire life's-work as subject to those eminently deconstructive strategies and ruses that characterize the "aesthetic" or pseudonymous productions. Of course such a treatment would invite the charge of sheer bad faith, of ignoring Kierkegaard's manifest intentions in pursuit of its own self-promoting puzzles and paradoxes."¹⁴⁵ What would a reading look like that approached Kierkegaard's un-deconstructed conception of indirect communication and his 'edifying motives' in good faith? If *The Point of View* is largely an account of the role and function of the indirect communication in Kierkegaard's authorship, what does it have to say about the communication of ethical and religious capability?

Virtue in The Point of View

Niels Jørgen Cappelørn argues that, alongside the journals, *The Point of View* offers the best angle on the authorship because "A complete understanding of the entire production can be obtained only through a retrospective process of interpretation."¹⁴⁶ The retrospective glance offered by *The Point of View* is best captured by the first half of one of Kierkegaard's most famous sayings: "Philosophy is perfectly right in saying that

¹⁴⁵Norris, "The Ethics of Reading and the Limits of Irony," 32.

¹⁴⁶Cappelørn, "The Retrospective Understanding of Søren Kierkegaard's Total Production," 19.

life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other clause—that it must be lived forwards.”¹⁴⁷ A retrospective look does not entail a God’s eye perspective (the *sub specie aeterni* perspective which is impossible for humans¹⁴⁸), but instead a considerable degree of reflection about one’s life and—in the case of a religious author—the role God has played in its unfolding.

While the lectures on communication emit a more theoretical, dry account, *The Point of View* retells Kierkegaard’s actual practice of indirect communication. Nevertheless it will become clear that the lectures corroborate the conception of Kierkegaard’s indirect communication in *The Point of View*. In both accounts of indirect communication, Kierkegaard’s *ethical interests* are at the fore, as we saw in the instances of conceptual clarification in chapter one, and as we saw in the description of the existence-spheres in chapter two.

In what follows I will present a reading of *The Point of View* that highlights the role of the virtues Kierkegaard thought necessary for 1) readers grasping his authorship, 2) his composing the authorship, and 3) his actual life as an author. There is good reason to take up a ‘virtue approach’: “What I have wanted has been to contribute, with the aid of confessions, to bringing, if possible, into these incomplete lives as we lead them a little more truth (in the direction of being persons of ethical and ethical-religious character, of renouncing worldly sagacity, of being willing to suffer for the truth, etc.), which indeed is always something and in any case is the first condition for beginning to exist more

¹⁴⁷Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 1:450 (#1030).

¹⁴⁸This theme runs throughout *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. See for example pp. 81, 118, 217, 305-09.

capably.”¹⁴⁹ Having reviewed the lectures, the role of the spheres, and Kierkegaard’s dialectical approach to a host of ethical and religious concepts, a virtue approach interprets *The Point of View* at face value, in part, because it is compatible with these other sources. In this, Kierkegaard’s upbuilding interests will become apparent, and we will discover a way to approach the fourth chapter—Kierkegaard’s clarification of faith—with an eye toward edification.

Reading the Authorship Virtuously: a Hermeneutic of Belief

If Garff presupposes suspicion, I will presuppose what Thomas Reid calls ‘credulity,’ or to put it another way, I will presuppose Kierkegaard’s ‘veracity.’¹⁵⁰ There are two reasons for such a reading. First, the fact that Kierkegaard employs pseudonyms at certain times and does *not* employ pseudonyms at other times suggests that we can read books he chose to sign as his own. In the journals, where Kierkegaard often reflects about his deliberation over the use of pseudonyms and over the possibility of placing his name as ‘editor’ of a pseudonymous work, he suggests that the latter choice reflects the way in which that work is closer to his own thinking. The point is that Kierkegaard—in distancing *himself* from his pseudonyms—does possess his own opinions, and these come through in the works he chose to sign.¹⁵¹ Thus, as a work he signed, *The Point of View* should be read as his ‘opinion,’ his thought on the matter. Of course this does not entail

¹⁴⁹Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 17.

¹⁵⁰Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, ed. Derek R. Brookes (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 193-94.

¹⁵¹“Here one will see the significance of the *pseudonyms*, why I had to be pseudonymous in connection with the esthetic production, because I had my own life in altogether different categories and from the very beginning understood this writing as something temporary, a deception, a necessary emptying out” (Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 86n).

that irony and other devices of indirection get confined to the pseudonyms, but rather, merely that the ‘master of irony’ himself has his own position on things.¹⁵²

A second, ethically-rooted reason why we should approach *The Point of View* with the Reidian principle of ‘credulity’ stems from Kierkegaard’s own criticism of skepticism in a deliberation of *Works of Love*. In “Love Believes All Things,” Kierkegaard considers what it means for someone with neighbor love to ‘believe all things’ about his neighbor.¹⁵³ While I will not rehearse his argument in detail here, Kierkegaard suggests that with every person we see, every potential neighbor, we possess some degree of knowledge about him or her.¹⁵⁴ This knowledge might reflect a rich history, “she’s the love of my life,” or merely a spur of the moment, judgmental observation, “that man across the restaurant is glaring at me.” The Christian principle, “love believes all things,” prescribes that whether I know a person well or hardly at all, it is my duty to “presuppose love” in that person—to believe that at bottom, *every* human being is a creation of God, is related to God in a fundamental sense. As a consequence, every human being has the ethical capability to become an individual of praiseworthy character. Of course this notion of neighbor love defies our natural, “sagacious” inclinations, which instead incline

¹⁵²Kierkegaard’s use of irony presupposes, in particular, an *ethical* position. See Lippitt’s *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*, chp. 8, and Evans’s “The Role of Irony in Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments*.”

¹⁵³This does not mean ‘believe all propositions’ about one’s neighbor. It rather suggests a sort of attitudinal approach to every human being one encounters. When one “presupposes love in the other” (Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 215-24)—views every person as a creation of a loving God—one gains a new orientation for interpreting events that might suggest otherwise (i.e. that the person is “unlovely”). Believing the best does not imply naiveté or blindly believing whatever someone says. Rather, it represents a way of construing the other person that responds to unlovely words and actions of the other by drawing upon the resources of divine love. Believing the best, or presupposing God’s love in the other, means viewing no one as ‘beyond repair,’ despite what appearances might suggest.

¹⁵⁴For an in-depth explanation of this view see my own “Doubts about Doubting: Kierkegaard’s Response to Skepticism in *Works of Love*,” in *Southwest Philosophy Review* 21, no. 2 (2005): 25-35.

us to believe the best about those for whom we have ‘good reason’ to believe it, and the worst about others.

The opposite of believing all things or believing the best is to mistrust the other. The problem with this posture is that besides being judgmental, it presumes that this person *is not* related to God as I am, that this person is, in an important sense, not equal to me. “Mistrust cannot maintain knowledge in equilibrium; it defiles knowledge and therefore verges on envy, malice, and corruption, which believe all evil.”¹⁵⁵ That is, to make suspicion a default position—when it comes to sizing up our fellow humans—misuses fragments of knowledge, and ignites within the skeptic an abundance of vices. It closes one off to a relationship of love, respect, and concern for the other.

In applying this ethical, dispositional exhortation to a reading of Kierkegaard, I am arguing that *how* one approaches Kierkegaard’s texts is not perfectly intellectual or academic—that it is not neutral—but instead that it reflects our passions, interests, and to a certain extent, our character.¹⁵⁶ Just as the exhortation “love believes all things” does not entail gullibility, I am not suggesting that we close our eyes to Kierkegaard’s jest, but that we presuppose love in the other, in Kierkegaard, not only because he has told us that his authorship is itself a work of love, but because if Kierkegaard has earnest intentions in the authorship, then as a result we may be edified in approaching it earnestly. As he states in the beginning of *Works of Love*, “We can be deceived by believing what is untrue, but we certainly are also deceived by not believing what is true.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 234.

¹⁵⁶This applies just as much to Garff’s and Fenger’s readings as it does to my own.

¹⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 5.

In the introduction to *The Point of View* Kierkegaard begins by laying out the content and purpose of the book: that he is and was a religious author and that the whole authorship concerns itself with the issue of becoming a Christian. He follows this preview with instructions for *how* to read the text. “I request everyone who truly has the cause of Christianity at heart, and I request more urgently him who has it at heart more earnestly, to become acquainted with this little book, not inquisitively, but thoughtfully, as one reads a religious book.”¹⁵⁸ As I suggested above, one naturally brings to the text and to the authorship a particular bent, and Kierkegaard directs the entire book to those who have an interest in the ‘cause of Christianity.’ What does he mean by the cause of Christianity? Later he will justify his indirect methods “On the assumption that it is an enormous illusion that all these many people call themselves and are regarded as being Christians....”¹⁵⁹ Presumably, then, the cause pertains to eradicating Christendom of this illusion that all are Christians by virtue of a particular birth certificate. Notice how narrowly Kierkegaard draws his invitation. But to those sympathetic to this cause, he adds that they should approach “not inquisitively, but thoughtfully”—presumably with genuine concern. Kierkegaard does not welcome ‘uncritical seriousness’ as Garff suggests, but rather those seeking to grow ethically and religiously—those whose aim in reading is not to satisfy their curiosity. As he puts it at the end of *The Point of View*, the “well-disposed reader” who reads “attentively”—only he will understand Kierkegaard as an author.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 23.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., 44.

¹⁶⁰Ibid., 94.

Kierkegaard brackets the entire book in a confession that begins on the second page with the posture “Humble before God,” and likewise concludes on the second-to-last page “Humble before God.”¹⁶¹ Because Kierkegaard presents the entire retrospective confessionally, one only appropriately reads it as “a religious book,”—with earnestness as one might hear a confession from a confidant.¹⁶² And while Kierkegaard does the confessing, this does not give ground for ethical superiority on the part of the reader. Once again he characterizes the like-minded, proper reader: “Only the one who personally understands what true self-denial is, only he can solve my riddle and see that it is self-denial.”¹⁶³ Kierkegaard anticipates Garff’s claim that Kierkegaard’s self-denial is no such thing, but instead self-assertion. “The one who does not personally understand it [self-denial] may rather call my conduct self-love, pride, eccentricity, madness, for all of which I, consistently, do not indict him, because in my service of self-denial I myself have indeed contributed to it.”¹⁶⁴ Kierkegaard does concede that, as a part of his deception, he has contributed to such judgments of himself (though this concession is not itself a concession of self-assertion and pride). This granted, Kierkegaard now discloses the greater picture and demands a reader who personally understands, who has reduplicated the truth of self-denial in his life.

As we saw above, Kierkegaard does not present an apologetic for his indirect communication and its purposes but instead a ‘substantiation’ that the best explanation,

¹⁶¹Ibid., 24 and 94 respectively. (The calculation about the final page does not include the brief words of Kierkegaard’s ‘poet’ that follow on pgs. 95-97.)

¹⁶²Ibid., 23.

¹⁶³Ibid., 25.

¹⁶⁴Ibid.

the one he gives, is that the duplicity of the aesthetic and religious works is at bottom religiously motivated. Kierkegaard considers the converse: that one might just as well read the aesthetic as the more fundamental, as the guiding principle of the authorship. Of this interpretation Kierkegaard writes, “This seems very perspicacious and yet is actually only sophistical.”¹⁶⁵ Such an interpretation lacks earnestness and substitutes for earnestness “an infatuation with mystification in and for itself instead of having its teleological truth.”¹⁶⁶ This statement, which complements Climacus’s remark quoted at the beginning of this chapter, demonstrates how readings reflect readers, and in particular, how this reading aestheticizes the religious.¹⁶⁷ What, then, is the function of such mystifications? “Thus where a mystification, a dialectical redoubling, is used in the service of earnestness, it will be used in such a way that it only wards off misunderstandings and preliminary misunderstandings, while the true explanation is available to the person who is honestly seeking.”¹⁶⁸ One might object, if the purpose of the indirect communication is a communication of ethical capability—on the assumption of the possession of ethical knowledge—how does one just get earnestness? Either the reader brings earnestness to the authorship or he does not.

¹⁶⁵This is a variation on the Hongs’ translation that Sylvia Walsh makes in “Reading Kierkegaard with Kierkegaard against Garff” (6, 8n).

¹⁶⁶Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 34.

¹⁶⁷John Lippitt applies the notion of non-discursive dismissal whereby someone can dismiss an assumption or a default position of the prevailing, deluded culture, with the wave of a hand, with a joke or bit of irony (*Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought*, 21, 111). However, this is only permissible from a ‘dominant’ or superior position. So, Kierkegaard can ethically or religiously employ irony in a discursive dismissal of the aesthetic, but the aesthetic cannot do the same with the ethical or religious. This doctrine seems to underlie Kierkegaard’s criticism of the unearnest reader in this passage.

¹⁶⁸Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 34.

One response to this dilemma is to view the function of the indirect communication—of the duplicity and especially the luring aesthetic productions—as a tool that helps cultivate in the reader an attitude of seriousness or earnestness. It is natural that with regard to traits like earnestness, humans possess them in varying degrees. Kierkegaard believes that the aesthetic writing can effect greater earnestness in a reader *because* it is a communication of ethical capability. Even more, when read alongside the edifying stream, the aesthetic becomes ‘existentially interactive’—it calls forth choice, an either/or, which is itself a serious predicament for the reader. (This is not to suggest that Kierkegaard’s method is failsafe.) Assuming this, Kierkegaard writes “Once the requisite earnestness takes hold, it can solve it [the duplicity], but always only in such a way that the earnestness itself vouches for the correctness.”¹⁶⁹ Kierkegaard hopes to cultivate in the reader a kind of virtuous character that will consequently believe the explanation that he offers. Kierkegaard’s assumption about most of his contemporaries—that aesthetic categories rather than Christian categories characterize their lives—is validated by the fact that Copenhagen took great interest in the aesthetic-ethical production of *Either/Or* rather than the religious writings he published shortly thereafter. “With my left hand I passed *Either/Or* out into the world, with my right hand *Two Upbuilding Discourses*; but they all or almost all took the left hand with their right.”¹⁷⁰ This draws into doubt the likelihood, at least initially, of the success of his methods as they sought to evoke ethical and religious capability in his readers. Nonetheless, he leaves the door open in *The Point of View* that perhaps others might

¹⁶⁹Ibid.

¹⁷⁰Ibid., 36.

reread the literature with a little more earnestness, and if so, understand the intentions of the authorship.

Writing the Authorship Virtuously: Kierkegaard's Maieutic Practice

As we saw in the lectures on communication, Kierkegaard openly admits that indirect communication and the maieutic method deceive the reader. We might then ask, what justifies this method? On the surface, it seems distant from any approach that might be considered virtuous. However, in *The Point of View* Kierkegaard provides several reasons for his use of indirect communication and specifically the maieutic method, and his explanation demonstrates how he viewed the composition of the authorship as a moral practice.

As stated, Kierkegaard employs his indirect methods on the assumption that Christendom is an enormous illusion, and from the comparative sales of *Either/Or* and *Two Upbuilding Discourses*, he seems justified in this assumption. However, “an illusion can never be removed directly,” but only indirectly, “from behind.”¹⁷¹ What constitutes an approach from behind? “Instead of wanting to have for oneself [i.e. the indirect communicator] the advantage of being the rare Christian, one must let the one ensnared have the advantage that he is a Christian, and then oneself have sufficient resignation to be the one who is far behind him—otherwise one will surely fail to extricate him from the illusion....”¹⁷² Not having the advantage of being the Christian means that the indirect communicator does not approach the receiver claiming to be right and thereby implicitly judging the receiver to be wrong. Herein lies Kierkegaard’s deception; “to deceive”

¹⁷¹Ibid., 43.

¹⁷²Ibid.

means “one does not begin *directly* with what one wishes to communicate but begins by taking the other’s delusion at face value.”¹⁷³ To condemn the delusion directly will undoubtedly alienate the receiver, as is shown by most reactions to what Kierkegaard calls the ‘religious enthusiast.’

Kierkegaard believes that a religious enthusiast ultimately accomplishes nothing. That a religious enthusiast thinks his approach—“denouncing nearly all as not being Christians”—will succeed, reflects not only poor judgment but an attitude of impatience. “Generally speaking, there is nothing that requires as gentle a treatment as the removal of an illusion. If one in any way causes the one ensnared to be antagonized, then all is lost.”¹⁷⁴ Entailed in the idea of patience is another Galatian ‘fruit of the Spirit:’ gentleness. When proclaiming Christianity, one cannot forget that Christianity itself “is just as gentle as it is rigorous.”¹⁷⁵ The religious enthusiast fails because he lacks Christianity’s gentleness, and because he lacks the patience necessary for the deluded one to come around, to see his error. The virtuous communicator awaits his reader patiently because he has given much forethought to his plan. “Therefore he must have everything prepared in order, yet without impatience, to bring forth the religious as swiftly as possible as soon as he has gained their attention.”¹⁷⁶

As such, the indirect communicator is very attentive to the state of the person in the illusion, and realizes that a direct approach—“I’m right, you’re wrong”—will not

¹⁷³Ibid., 54.

¹⁷⁴Ibid., 43.

¹⁷⁵Ibid., 16.

¹⁷⁶Ibid., 44.

succeed. But surely this sounds paternalistic? It sounds as if Kierkegaard is not strong or self-confident enough to admit publicly that he thinks he is right and his readers are wrong. Kierkegaard does not shy away from the claim that his conception of Christianity is correct. In *Armed Neutrality* he writes, “I do maintain that I know with uncommon clarity and definiteness what Christianity is, what can be required of the Christian, what it means to be a Christian.”¹⁷⁷ However, he eagerly distinguishes between knowing the dialectic of true Christianity and exemplifying that or living the perfect Christian life. This exemplifies the distinction between the conceptual dialectic and the existential dialectic.¹⁷⁸ The quotation above is preceded by, “I do not say of myself that I am a remarkable Christian.”¹⁷⁹ While Kierkegaard claims to present the ideal, he humbly, penitentially denies living the ideal. For this reason he credits the pseudonym Anti-Climacus with the authorship of *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity*. These works present Christianity in its ideal form, and he does not want readers to conclude that he represents (or claims to represent) the ideal. To make the distinction between presenting and embodying the ideal even stronger, Kierkegaard constantly refers to the authorship as *his own* upbringing. Toward the end of *The Point of View* he recalls, “Thus my entire work as an author revolves around: becoming a Christian in Christendom. And the expression for Governance’s part in the authorship is this: that the author is himself the one who in this way has been brought up, but with a consciousness

¹⁷⁷Ibid., 138.

¹⁷⁸See section two of chapter two.

¹⁷⁹See also *On My Work as an Author*: “Never have I fought in such a way that I have said: I am the true Christian; the others are not Christians, or probably even hypocrites and the like. No, I have fought in this way: *I know what Christianity is*; I myself acknowledge my defects as a Christian—but I do know what Christianity is” (Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 15).

of it from the very beginning.”¹⁸⁰ Kierkegaard’s method does not force beliefs upon its receivers that they do not already claim to hold. Rather, it presupposes the illusion—that they are Christians. The indirect method “in the service of the love of truth dialectically arranges everything for the one ensnared and then, modest as love always is, avoids being witness to the confession that he makes alone before God.”¹⁸¹ This essential aspect of the indirect method assumes the view of the lectures: “to stand alone—by another’s help.”¹⁸² And in the case of Christianity, to assist another to stand alone *before God*.

“But all true helping begins with a humbling.”¹⁸³ As one might surmise, when ‘from behind’ one lets the deluded person presume to be in the right, humility is a requisite virtue. Humility here involves patience and long-suffering with regard to one’s reputation before the recipient of the indirect communication. Humility also requires openness to one’s own penchant for self-deception; again, Kierkegaard is aware of this ever-present possibility, which is why he refers to himself as a penitent and why he does not claim to represent the ideal Christian. Humility, charity, acute listening skills, and openness all play integral roles in Kierkegaard’s maieutic pedagogy. Concerning his own role as a teacher, however, Kierkegaard presents us with an apparent contradiction. Like Socrates, he denies that he is a teacher, that he performs the task of bringing up the

¹⁸⁰Ibid., 90. According to Norris, deconstruction largely disallows authorial interpretation of one’s own texts. One wonders if Kierkegaard is permitted by deconstruction to make claims about his own upbringing *by* the composition of his works. If he cannot, we are left with another facet of Kierkegaard’s authorial explanation to be deconstructed.

¹⁸¹Ibid., 43-4.

¹⁸²Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 1:280 (#650:15).

¹⁸³Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 45.

reader.¹⁸⁴ As we saw above, he instead claims that *he* is brought up through the authorship. However, earlier in the text Kierkegaard depicts the maieutic teacher through an explanation of his own practices. “To be a teacher is not to say: This is the way it is, nor is it to assign lessons and the like. No, to be a teacher is truly to be the learner. Instruction begins with this, that you, the teacher, learn from the learner, place yourself in what he has understood and how he has understood it...”¹⁸⁵ Clearly this passage and the disclaimer are compatible, and he merely employs the term ‘teacher’ in two different, though complementary ways. Kierkegaard is a teacher of the sort who sees teaching as a kind of humble learning from the student. *And*, he is not a teacher of the sort who claims to effect the upbringing.¹⁸⁶ Seen in this light, Kierkegaard does not contradict himself. He believes that God or Governance ultimately effects one’s upbringing. In the epilogue Kierkegaard considers the way that God brought him up and in doing so, humbled him. “... Governance took the liberty of arranging the rest of my life in such a way that there could be no misunderstanding—which indeed there never was from the beginning—as to whether it was I who needed Christianity or Christianity that needed me.”¹⁸⁷ Hence the confession is made on the next page: “Humble before God.”

In his explanation of each section of the authorship—the aesthetic, the *Postscript*, and the religious—Kierkegaard devotes thirteen pages to the first section and less than one half of a page to the latter two, presumably aware of those ‘sophistical’ readers who

¹⁸⁴Ibid., 78.

¹⁸⁵Ibid., 46.

¹⁸⁶Socrates would undoubtedly be and not be a teacher in these two senses as well.

¹⁸⁷Ibid., 93n.

will attempt to prioritize the aesthetic above the religious. In those thirteen pages Kierkegaard provides step-by-step instructions for how to dispel illusions of the sort he is confronting. As we saw, the first step involves humbling oneself by presenting one's position not as authoritative or 'the right position,' but by deferring to the assumptions of the other. One takes what the aesthete offers 'as good money.' In this preliminary stage up to the point where one explicitly presents the religious, Kierkegaard warns: "do not forget one thing ... that it is the religious that is to come forward."¹⁸⁸ He repeats this over and over, as we can assume he repeated it to himself during the few years between *Either/Or* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. The virtues of fidelity, committedness, singularity of purpose, or—as Kierkegaard would call it—purity of heart,¹⁸⁹ are absolutely necessitated by the "daring venture"¹⁹⁰ of the indirect method. Kierkegaard knows that the aesthetic is seductive and can divert one's attention away from a focus on the religious. The virtues of steadfastness and courage, as this quote suggests, are thereby also required for the duplex authorship, and, as we saw earlier in the discussion of Socrates' elenctic practices, external danger is likely to come the way of the maieutic communicator.

Granted the context of illusion, Kierkegaard also justifies his method by its attempt to wrest the deluded person free from the bondage or 'blindness' that Christendom proffers. He does not engage in force or violence, but rather assists his interlocutor to

¹⁸⁸Ibid., 46.

¹⁸⁹See *The Point of View* (97) and "Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing" in Søren Kierkegaard, *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

¹⁹⁰Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 50.

stand alone. “Compel a person to an opinion, a conviction, a belief—in all eternity, that I cannot do. But one thing I can do ... I can compel him to become aware.”¹⁹¹ This is even less offensive when what Kierkegaard makes his recipient aware of is something that the recipient thinks he already embodies. The religious enthusiast pridefully condemns the other and cowardly avoids the trenches where he might relate to aesthetes on their own terms. Kierkegaard says of the religious enthusiasts that they “do not have the courage to make people aware. That is, they do not have sufficient self-denial in relation to their cause.”¹⁹² Kierkegaard’s method respects the interlocutor’s autonomy, even his current life view, yet hopes to set him free from the contradictions that beset that life view—the incongruity that a Christian lives as an aesthete.

I have mentioned Kierkegaard’s need for several virtues in the writing of the authorship, but I should qualify those claims by saying that these virtues are necessitated by Kierkegaard’s posture *before God*. That is, because he carries out his work as service to the love of truth and ultimately God, these virtues might all be supplemented by a phrase Kierkegaard uses throughout *The Point of View* and the authorship itself: with fear and trembling.¹⁹³ Relaying how his “poetic impatience” and “poetic passion” needed an outlet, Kierkegaard claims that not until he submitted his work to God’s guidance in fear and trembling was he able to gain focus and compose. “I seem to hear a voice that says to me: Obtuse fellow, what does he think he is; does he not know that obedience is dearer to God than the fat of rams? Do the whole thing as a work assignment. Then I become

¹⁹¹Ibid.

¹⁹²Ibid., 51.

¹⁹³Ibid., 44, 46, 52.

completely calm; then there is time to write every letter, almost meticulously, with my slower pen. ... Even though some glowing expressions perhaps did elude me, what has been produced is something else—it is not the work of the poet passion or of the thinker passion, but of devotion to God, and for me a divine worship.”¹⁹⁴ The virtue of obedience to God in one’s vocation gets lost in the deconstructive reading we considered earlier. But such obedience is hardly dispensable because of how integral it is to Kierkegaard’s self-conception. The fact that the “poet-dialectician” gets almost no credit in this passage, save that of submitting to God, is a central part of Kierkegaard’s dialectical authorship. On the converse side are the claims to genius for which Kierkegaard is famous. The result for Garff is less dialectical—Kierkegaard is a genius and beyond that, a self-deceived genius.

It is convenient for Garff to explain Kierkegaard’s explanation of Governance away, because those passages are where Kierkegaard most explicitly admits the degree to which the authorship was out of his control. It is convenient for Garff because one of Garff’s chief accusations is that Kierkegaard fictionalizes *because* of his compulsive interest in the evenness or symmetry of the authorship. But where are these interests of evenness and symmetry in Kierkegaard’s confessions of reliance about God and Governance?

If ... I were to go ahead and say that I had had an overview of the whole dialectical structure from the very beginning of the whole work as an author or that at every moment I had in advance exhausted in reflection, step by step, the possibilities in such a way that reflection did not teach me something later, at times something else, that what I had done was surely the right thing but that nevertheless only now did I myself properly understand it—if I were to do that, it would be a denial and an unfairness to God. No, in honesty I must say: I cannot understand the whole simply because I can understand the whole down to the

¹⁹⁴Ibid., 73.

slightest detail; but what I cannot understand is that I can now understand it and yet by no means dare to say that I understood it so accurately at the beginning—and yet I certainly am the one who has done it and with reflection has taken every step.¹⁹⁵

That Kierkegaard understands the whole down to the slightest detail does not reflect an attempt to fit the authorship into some cramped construct, but rather suggests a hermeneutic by which he can understand every facet of the authorship. His perspective on the authorship proceeds through the eyes of faith, where God and Governance have been present with him from start to finish. To make mockery of these claims is to strip Kierkegaard of the apparent virtues of humility, obedience, submission, and openness to the work of God. It is no wonder that Garff's Kierkegaard (where God and Governance are contrivances) is crafty, cunning, and deceiving (away from the truth).

To summarize, Kierkegaard wrote the authorship *morally* and the authorship's intentions were *moral*—to lead his reader to the realization of ethical and religious truth in one's life. Kierkegaard's Christian maieutic method reflects genuine concern for the well-being of his contemporaries, tact in his indirect approach, and the hope that his worshipful literary production has sufficiently expressed gratitude to God.¹⁹⁶

Living the Authorship Virtuously: Kierkegaard before Humanity and Kierkegaard before God

“This is how I understand myself in my work as an author: it makes manifest the

¹⁹⁵Ibid., 77.

¹⁹⁶See the very last sentence of *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* (Ibid., 97).

illusion of Christendom and provides a vision of what it is to become a Christian.”¹⁹⁷ So far we have examined the virtuous character Kierkegaard thinks is necessary to understand his authorship as well as the virtuous method by which Kierkegaard executed his authorial task. We might expand the idea of ‘writing the authorship virtuously’ to ‘living the authorship virtuously.’ After all, it seems possible to exemplify a virtue *in* one’s writing while lacking it in one’s life. Kierkegaard opposes this divide between an author and her life. “In these days and for a long time now we have utterly lost the idea that to be an author is and ought to be a work and therefore a personal existing.”¹⁹⁸ The virtue lacking in the authors of Kierkegaard’s day is integrity.¹⁹⁹ Such authors fail to integrate their whole lives with their writing. To recall the late paleontologist Stephen J. Gould’s term, such a view understands the categories of ‘my life as author’ and ‘my life otherwise’ as “non-overlapping magisteria.”²⁰⁰ Such anonymity on the part of those authors who compartmentalize their lives from their writings Kierkegaard calls “a basic source of demoralization.”²⁰¹ How did Kierkegaard understand the moral aspect of relating his life as author with his life otherwise?

The relation of life to literary production is complicated by the dual streams of the authorship. To review, Kierkegaard believes that with *Concluding Unscientific*

¹⁹⁷Ibid., 88.

¹⁹⁸Ibid., 57.

¹⁹⁹In *Early Polemical Writings*, Kierkegaard criticized his contemporary, Hans Christian Andersen, for this. For a helpful discussion of this criticism see the first chapter of Sylvia Walsh’s *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard’s Existential Aesthetics* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

²⁰⁰See Stephen Jay Gould’s *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine Pub. Group, 1999).

²⁰¹Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 57.

Postscript the authorship takes a decisive or explicit religious direction from which it will never veer. Prior to that point, and especially upon publishing *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard sought to integrate into all facets of his life his status as author of the pseudonymous works. “By means of my personal existing, I attempted to support the pseudonymous writers, all the esthetic writing.”²⁰² During the esthetic period, Kierkegaard “in a certain sense...found a satisfaction in that life, in that inverted deception.”²⁰³ The deception Kierkegaard speaks of pertains to the idea that he and Copenhagen were fast friends upon his publication of *Either/Or*, “that I was in vogue proclaiming a gospel of worldliness.”²⁰⁴ What gives Kierkegaard’s ‘deception’ warrant is the steady focus he maintains on his ultimate goal of reintroducing Christianity into Christendom.

Two events marked a shift from the esthetic toward the religious in Kierkegaard’s authorship. First was the publication of *Postscript* where the issue of becoming a Christian was explicitly presented. Second, and around the same time, Kierkegaard became embroiled in a public conflict with a newspaper, the *Corsair*, which resulted in constant attacks upon his character (and bodily idiosyncrasies). He underwent “daily drenchings of rabble-barbarism” to the degree that he could no longer roam the streets of Copenhagen as he was wont to do beforehand.²⁰⁵ Elitist sparring usually confined to the small, educated class, filtered down to “schoolchildren and cobblers’ apprentices.”²⁰⁶

²⁰²Ibid., 62.

²⁰³Ibid., 62.

²⁰⁴Ibid., 62.

²⁰⁵Ibid., 67.

²⁰⁶Ibid., 64.

The possibility of Copenhagen's "complete moral disintegration" threatened when the *Corsair* anonymously picked on person after person in satirical fashion. There seemed to be no end to their criticisms and no purpose greater than a laugh. In *Two Ages*, written during the *Corsair* Affair, Kierkegaard claims "anyone who understands the comic readily sees that the comic does not consist at all in what the present age imagines it does and that satire of our day, if it is to be at all beneficial and not cause irreparable harm, must have the resource of a consistent and well-grounded ethical view, a sacrificial unselfishness, a high-born nobility that renounces the moment; otherwise the medicine becomes infinitely and incomparably worse than the sickness."²⁰⁷ Here Kierkegaard's view of the comic resembles similar views of irony that are present, as I have shown, in many places including *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, *Practice in Christianity*, and the lectures on communication.²⁰⁸

While the publishers of the *Corsair* were unwilling to own up to the anonymous criticisms they leveled at Kierkegaard and others, Kierkegaard—who never denied his connection to the ironical pseudonymous works—decisively turned away from his use of pseudonyms at this time.²⁰⁹ He publicly exchanged his esthetic, friendly relation to Copenhagen with an explicitly religious orientation. "It was of importance to me to alter

²⁰⁷Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 74.

²⁰⁸The anonymous writers of the *Corsair* engaged in 'unstable irony,' to employ Wayne Booth's distinction in *A Rhetoric of Irony*. See also Lippitt's *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (chapter 8) and Evans's "The Role of Irony in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*."

²⁰⁹He still wrote a few pseudonymous works after *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* but the two most important of them, *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Practice in Christianity*, were written by the ideal Christian pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, whose views Kierkegaard shares (unlike A's or Judge William's) to a significant degree. Kierkegaard creates Anti-Climacus to deflect the possibility of readers seeing him as an authority on Christianity.

my personal existing in accordance with my transition to setting forth the religious issues.”²¹⁰ To be clear, Kierkegaard was not a passive recipient of the cruelty of ‘the crowd.’ He acknowledges that his actions toward the *Corsair* brought such treatment upon himself. In fact, his interaction with the *Corsair* was itself a deliberate manifestation of reorienting his life toward the ethical and religious. “[A] considerable dose of the ethical was added by my requesting to be abused by that nauseating instrument of nauseating irony.”²¹¹ The integrity that Kierkegaard sought was characterized by his desire for his life to match the message he communicated. Thus, the persecution of laughter and scorn that began during the *Corsair* Affair and followed him for years to come—persecution that he in a sense welcomed or at least invited—coincided with his self-perception as religious author. “A triumphant religious author who is *in vogue* is *eo ipso* not a *religious* author.”²¹² Analogously to the dangerous consequences of Socratic philosophizing, Kierkegaard believed that persecution and even martyrdom would follow the Christian practitioner of the maieutic.

To review, prior to the *Postscript* Kierkegaard ‘set the table,’ seduced Copenhagen with esthetic writings with a view toward ultimately presenting the issue of what it means to become a Christian. His integrity is demonstrated by the fact that during this early period he did not seek to prop himself up religiously (and alienate himself) in such a way that the religious enthusiast might do, but instead, sought to relate to the esthetes around him via esthetic writings. Then, once he presented the issue of Christianity, his direction

²¹⁰Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 65.

²¹¹Ibid., 66.

²¹²Ibid., 67.

became explicitly religious, and with the *Corsair* as the catalyst, he relinquished his ‘esthetic,’ friendly relation to Copenhagen and faced the consequences of the unpopularity of his message. Here, then, is Kierkegaard’s integrity manifest: not only did he draw upon his own virtuous character for the difficult task of composing his complex collection of writings with great care for style, timing, and obviously content, but in both esthetic and religious writing, he integrated his authorship into his very existence and life. As he summarizes it, “in short, it was religiously my duty that my existing and my existing as an author express the truth, which I had daily perceived and ascertained—that there is a God.”²¹³

Conclusion: Kierkegaard’s Christian Witness

Kierkegaard’s diagnosis of Christendom as an ‘enormous illusion’ motivated him to employ a Socratic, maieutic method. This method enabled Kierkegaard to communicate ethical capability to his contemporaries who already presumed to be Christian. Able to step aside and leave his reader alone with God, Kierkegaard did not claim to be the ideal Christian, but to understand and communicate the ideal Christian, and in doing so, to lead a reader out of aesthetic categories toward genuine Christian existence.

To recall the discussion of Kierkegaard’s lectures on communication, however, Christian communication is not strictly indirect, but rather ‘direct-indirect.’ Christianity requires an ‘element of knowledge’ that comes only through revelation. As such, the maieutic method fails as a complete explanation of Kierkegaard’s production.

Yet the communication of the essentially Christian must end finally in “witnessing.” The maieutic cannot be the final form, because, Christianly

²¹³Ibid., 72n.

understood, the truth does not lie in the subject (as Socrates understood it), but in a revelation that must be proclaimed.

It is very proper that the maieutic be used in Christendom, simply because the majority actually live in the fancy that they are Christians. But since Christianity still is Christianity, the one who uses the maieutic must become a witness.

Ultimately the user of the maieutic will be unable to bear the responsibility, since the maieutic approach still remains rooted in human sagacity, however sanctified and dedicated in fear and trembling this may be. God becomes too powerful for the maieutic practitioner and then he is a witness, different from the direct witness only in what he has gone through to become a witness.²¹⁴

This passage illuminates many things. First, it sets in proper context Kierkegaard's own use of the maieutic method in Copenhagen and helps us situate *The Point of View's* emphasis on the maieutic in light of Kierkegaard's overall project of Christian communication. That is, if the primary subject Kierkegaard communicates is becoming a Christian, or Christianity itself, we know that—per the lectures—the maieutic must at some point be preceded by or give way to a more direct approach.²¹⁵

Second, this passage helps us to distinguish between Kierkegaard and Socrates, which is not always easy to do, given the former's admiration of 'the ancient, wise man of old.' Reminiscent of Climacus's thoughts in *Philosophical Fragments*, this passage corroborates the lectures on communication in their assertion of an innate measure of *ethical* truth in each human, though this is not 'ultimate truth' or that of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Third, this passage suggests a way to describe what Kierkegaard has done in *The Point of View*. Perhaps the best reading of *The Point of View* is as a Christian witness. The shortcomings of the maieutic method and the sense in which this clever approach is

²¹⁴Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 2:383 (#1957).

²¹⁵At times the word 'preliminary' is used to describe the element of knowledge in direct-indirect communication. In practice, Kierkegaard seems to apply the element of knowledge at different times.

ultimately rooted in “human sagacity” is, to a degree, admitted by Kierkegaard when, countless times, he expresses his reliance upon God and God’s assistance. That *The Point of View* is a kind of witnessing, which “is the form of communication that strikes the truest mean between direct and indirect communication,” enables Kierkegaard to communicate straightforwardly what his authorship has done, yet not so directly that it contradicts the aims of his authorship and suggests a deception (as Garff would have us think).²¹⁶ As Kierkegaard writes in the quotation above, the witness has ‘gone through’ the indirect on his way to a direct communication. Kierkegaard clarifies: “Witnessing is direct communication, but nevertheless it does not make one’s contemporaries the *authority*. While the witness’s *communication* addresses itself to the contemporaries, the *witness* himself addresses God and makes him the authority.”²¹⁷ But what else does *The Point of View* do besides offer a ‘direct communication, report to history’ to Kierkegaard’s contemporaries, while simultaneously confessing before God his reliance on Governance? A witness or testimony is precisely that communication which relays the work of God in one’s life to others, that they might be ‘made aware,’ not of what they should do, but of what God can do and has done. Witnessing, a Christian communication, is direct-indirect, and *The Point of View* exemplifies Kierkegaard’s Christian witness.

In the following chapter we will turn to a selection of Kierkegaard’s texts—all of which are indirect and some of which are direct-indirect—to examine how he develops a rich, dialectical conception of faith in the works of *de silentio*, *Climacus*, and *Anti-*

²¹⁶Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 1:314 (#670).

²¹⁷Ibid.

Climacus. If in reading *The Point of View* we do so in ‘good faith,’ with an appropriate principle of credulity, then we can see how Kierkegaard elucidates the concept of faith with the earnest intention that his reader might come to grow in faith, to cultivate this Christian virtue.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Dialectic of Faith

Introduction

In *On My Work as an Author* Kierkegaard states his desire to contribute to “these incomplete lives as we lead them a little more truth (in the direction of being persons of ethical and ethical-religious character...).”¹ If we interpret Kierkegaard’s authorship through the lens of his unpublished lectures, we come to see the indirect communication as more than the employment of pseudonyms and irony. Rather, its primary aim is to facilitate the reader’s coming to actualize ethical and religious truth for herself. That is, it has a moral function that seeks not so much to convey knowledge (as, according to the lectures, direct communication does) but what Robert Roberts calls wisdom, or a kind of conceptual understanding that “involves the heart.”² In chapter five I will explore Roberts’s particular views of “wisdom” and “understanding” in reference to Kierkegaard’s authorial intentions and argue that contemporary moral philosophy could benefit from a consideration of Kierkegaard’s approach to ethics. If it is true that Kierkegaard seeks to impart a kind of wisdom to his reader, this provides another way to describe my own thesis that Kierkegaard’s overall authorial goal is to build up his readers, “in the direction of being persons of ethical and ethical-religious character.”

¹Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 17.

²Roberts, “Kierkegaard and Ethical Theory,” forthcoming, 10. Similarly, Evans describes Kierkegaard’s ethic of Christian love as a “soul-making ethic.” See especially chapter four of *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2004.

Kierkegaard as Poet-Dialectician

In chapter one I argued that Kierkegaard carries out the task of edification through conceptual clarification, and specifically (as we saw in chapter two), dialectic. In the present chapter we will explore Kierkegaard's dialectic of faith. If the end of such dialectical clarification is wisdom—in this case, the cultivation of one's own faith-relation to God—then if the heart and not just the mind must be targeted, Kierkegaard's communicative tactics must engage the heart and not just the mind. Kierkegaard calls this sort of communication the poetic or pathetic-dialectic.³ Concerning the overall aim of his authorship, Kierkegaard writes: "Therefore, to present in every way—dialectical, pathos-filled (in the various forms of pathos), psychological, modernized by continual reference to modern Christendom and to the fallacies of a science and scholarship—the ideal picture of being a Christian: this was and is the task."⁴ A pathetic-dialectical exploration of a virtue, for instance, not only examines that virtue and its relations to other concepts in great detail, but it does so in an aesthetically-appealing as well as instructive way that engages the reader's emotions and seeks to effect the pathos characteristic of that virtue.

In *Armed Neutrality* Kierkegaard presents the pathetic-dialectical approach as one necessitated by the spiritual ills of Christendom. Distinguishing between knowledge of Christianity and knowledge of *what it means to be a Christian*, Kierkegaard argues that

³Poetic conveys the lyrical style present, for instance, in *Fear and Trembling*. It is a style that lends itself to the cultivation of the particular pathos under consideration, and we see both Kierkegaard and his pseudonymous authors writing in this way. De silentio's beautiful writing about Abraham encourages the reader to consider her own religious pathos (or lack thereof) and thereby edifies. In his discussion of romantic literature in *The Concept of Irony* and *From the Papers of One Still Living*, Kierkegaard criticizes poetic literature whose aim is purely aesthetic (in the sense of the sphere) or not directed toward upbuilding. See also Sylvia Walsh's *Living Poetically*.

⁴Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 131.

the latter is absent in Christendom. “[W]hat has been lost, what seems to exist no longer, is the ideal picture of being a Christian.”⁵ Three factors support Kierkegaard’s suspicion, the latter two relating specifically to deficiencies in dialectical clarity and proper Christian pathos. The first sign that knowledge of what it means to be a Christian is lacking is the fact that “Christendom is an established order” that consists of “a conciliatory perspective within the temporal.”⁶ Unlike its New Testament counterpart, Denmark’s Christianity is anything but counter-cultural. It is utterly indistinguishable from the prevailing culture and has lost its distinctive “saltiness,”⁷ thereby rendering the Gospel impotent to transform lives. Second, a “scientific-scholarly annulment of the dialectical element” of Christianity has taken place so that the essential, decisive categories of Christian existence (e.g. neighbor love, repentance, Christian hope) have been reduced to “aesthetic” categories hardly distinguishable from “thoroughgoing worldliness.”⁸ Third, the undialectical, aesthetic categories have initiated a shift in “the medium for being a Christian” toward the intellectual, the academic, the speculative and imaginative.⁹ The pathetic element, the cultivation of proper emotions and affections that correspond to genuine neighbor love and repentance and hope,¹⁰ has been lost. This

⁵Ibid., 130.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Mt. 5:13.

⁸Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 130.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰We might add to this Johannes Climacus’s expressions for religious pathos: resignation, guilt and suffering.

crucial element of Christian faith, in particular, is taken up by each of the three pseudonyms to be considered (thus demonstrating an important similarity between Kierkegaard's and his pseudonyms' 'agendas').¹¹ To elicit proper pathos, Kierkegaard has to appeal to his readers' emotions and passions but also make careful dialectical distinctions between, for example, Abrahamic faith and Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*. As Johannes Climacus tells us in the *Postscript*, a religion that includes pathos but not the proper dialectic remains in immanence and is *not* Christianity.

Preliminaries

In what follows I will illustrate Kierkegaard's pathetic-dialectical practice. I will show how through the pseudonyms he aims not only to elucidate concepts like faith, or negatively, to corrode misconceptions of faith, but to assist readers to "care for virtue" by growing in their desire to acquire and appropriate the specific virtue under consideration. Before proceeding, I will clarify and respond to some preliminary objections about the scope, emphasis, and order of this chapter.

As stated, the thesis that Kierkegaard aims to build up his reader does not strike me as controversial when it is confined to the signed, religious writings. Many of them are, in fact, titled "upbuilding" or subtitled "for upbuilding." It is less apparent (as the views of Roger Poole or Joakim Garff suggest) that the "indirect" writings—the pseudonymous

¹¹The other two pseudonyms under consideration would agree with the following quotation by Johannes Climacus, which shows the problematic tendency of faith to become intellectualized. "Faith, then, is not a lesson for slow learners in the sphere of intellectuality, an asylum for dullards. But faith is a sphere of its own, and the immediate identifying mark of every misunderstanding of Christianity is that it changes it into a doctrine and draws it into the range of intellectuality" (Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 327).

works—share this end.¹² Thus, I will consider only pseudonymous works. While one might object that in limiting the study in this way I lose the right to speak of *Kierkegaard's* intentions, I would ask the reader to be patient as I will explore the different reasons Kierkegaard chose to employ particular pseudonyms. For example, in the case of Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard's reason for pseudonymity does not pertain to a disagreement in viewpoint, but to Kierkegaard's concern that the picture of Christianity he presents not be confused with his own fallible attempts to live accordingly. That is, Kierkegaard wants to avoid the possible implication that by presenting the ideal Christian, he himself somehow *represents* or *manifests* the ideal Christian. Thus we can take the statements that Kierkegaard writes under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus as representing Kierkegaard's own views about (ideal) Christianity.

One might further wonder, if the two works by Anti-Climacus present the ideal Christian, and the larger point of Kierkegaard's authorship is (as I argue) to clarify what it means to be a Christian, why bother considering Johannes de silentio or Johannes Climacus's views of faith in the first place?¹³ While the answer to this question will grow clearer as our examination proceeds, we can make at least two initial responses. First, in considering Kierkegaard's conception of faith I am interested in faith's *dialectic*—a rich and multi-faceted analysis that approaches the concept from many angles, through similarity and difference. It is a *strength* of Kierkegaard's account of

¹²I place 'indirect' in scare quotes to allude to the common categorization of the pseudonymous writings. Based on the insights from Kierkegaard's lectures and my argument in the last chapter, however, the upbuilding discourses and other religious writings are also indirect (or direct-indirect) insofar as they seek to communicate ethical-religious capability alongside, in most cases, Christian truth.

¹³Kierkegaard makes it very clear (in part through the pseudonyms' own admission) that de silentio and Johannes Climacus are *not* Christians. It follows that they do not write from a Christian perspective, and this point is not insignificant. We will explore the implications of this detail as we turn to each pseudonym's comments on faith.

faith that he chooses to approach faith not just from the perspective of the ideal Christian, but also from the perspective of two characters who admire faith or understand it to a degree, yet do not possess it. If there were space, we could open the investigation further to consider Judge William's view of faith. Second and relatedly, an approach from different angles is preferable insofar as the different perspectives have different polemical interests. Presumably Kierkegaard's clarification of faith in juxtaposition with various, often incommensurate conceptions of faith or morality, benefits different sorts of readers whose misconceptions of faith have been muddled or contaminated by diverse influences like Kant, Hegel, etc. Thus, in considering the concept of faith in five different works, our conception will grow richer in relation to the various targets each pseudonym addresses.¹⁴ We might understand this reason, therefore, as motivated by Kierkegaard's upbuilding concerns in that he tries to anticipate opposing perspectives that his reader might bring to the table.

Why faith, and why not love or hope? First, underlying my thesis about Kierkegaard's upbuilding intentions is the claim that Kierkegaard's overarching conceptual clarification concerns Christianity itself, or more specifically, what it means to become a Christian. Faith and 'what it means to become a Christian'—if not synonymous—are overlapping concepts. In *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus writes, "But whether faith is abolished or whether the possibility of offense is abolished, something else is also abolished: the God-man. And if the God-man is abolished,

¹⁴In *Christian Discourses* Kierkegaard explores insights about the Christian life that can be gleaned from the examples of the lily and the bird, which Jesus speaks of in his sermon on the mount. Notice the dual function of such insights that clarify Christianity while illuminating its opposite: "the Gospel uses the lily and the bird to make clear what paganism is, but thereby in turn in order to make clear what is required of the Christian" (Søren Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses / The Crisis and a Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 9).

Christianity is abolished.”¹⁵ Kierkegaard believes, and I think rightly, that a lot is at stake in one’s conception of faith. If someone misunderstands Christian faith, she misunderstands what it means to be a Christian and she misunderstands Christianity. Thus, a focus on Kierkegaard’s (and his pseudonyms’) dialectical clarification of faith can only strengthen the thesis that the large-scale clarification of his authorship concerns what it means to be a Christian. This is of course a view that he held himself in *The Point of View*. Second, Kierkegaard writes as much about faith as he does any other concept, and moreover, his interest in faith persists *throughout* the authorship. It follows that this study is far from exhaustive, given my attention to just five works: *Fear and Trembling* (1843), *Philosophical Fragments* (1844), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849), and *Practice in Christianity* (1850).

Following Robert Roberts, I will selectively approach these texts in search of the grammatical or conceptual remarks Kierkegaard makes about faith—remarks that bring clarity to the concept so that one may be better equipped to live a life of faith.¹⁶ We might distinguish these observations from what Roberts calls psychological, stipulative, historical, and methodological remarks.¹⁷ Conceptual remarks are *about concepts* insofar as they help one to ‘locate’ a concept vis-à-vis other concepts,¹⁸ they supply something of

¹⁵Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 144.

¹⁶I will refer to these remarks as ‘conceptual’ to avoid any lurking Wittgensteinian metaphysical implications.

¹⁷Robert C. Roberts, “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of ‘Virtue Ethics’,” in *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. and trans. Martin J. Matušík and Merold Westphal (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 152-53.

¹⁸E.g., passion, knowledge, truth, God, gift, worship, offense, rest, and grace, all of which will be considered in this chapter.

a definition (without trying to give the entire meaning), they concern *particular* aspects of a concept, and they are concerned with traditional usage (in the case of Kierkegaard, traditional Christianity).¹⁹ Together such remarks contribute to an “internal conceptual order” and they form the “rules” for that concept to qualify as the concept in question.²⁰ As we will see, each of the three pseudonyms under examination will have his own ‘grammar of faith,’ so in one sense, we will pay close attention to what Poole would call the ‘différance’ in these perspectives. However, as someone whose task it was to present the ideal of what it means to be a Christian, *Kierkegaard’s* grammar or dialectic of faith finally culminates in Christian faith, the view represented most richly by Anti-Climacus.²¹ My analysis, then, will consider not only those features of Christian faith that distinguish it from, for example, de silentio’s view, but also those aspects that the pseudonyms have in common. By this strategy I hope to show that a reader who approaches these texts from a Christian perspective will benefit not just from Anti-Climacus’s insights about faith, but from de silentio’s and Climacus’s²² too—even though their views are not the ‘ideal.’ Obviously, the fact that de silentio and Climacus are non-Christian pseudonyms does not entail that the remarks they make about faith are

¹⁹Cf. Kierkegaard’s “nothing new policy,” chapter three. Roberts, “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of Virtue Ethics,” 152-53.

²⁰Ibid., 154. Talk of an “internal conceptual order” does not, for me, entail a coherentist theory of truth or a denial of objective truth.

²¹Kierkegaard gives Anti-Climacus the task of presenting the ideal Christian in the authorship proper. But Kierkegaard also views the entirety of his own production as presenting the ideal Christian. See *Armed Neutrality*, especially p. 139 in *The Point of View*.

²²From this point forward I will refer to Johannes Climacus simply as ‘Climacus.’

not Christian remarks.²³ The basic outline will proceed according to the order of publication which, not coincidentally, is similar to the order in which the views of faith develop finally into their Christian form.

*Johannes de silentio*²⁴ and “*Existential Faith*”

Johannes de Silentio has never claimed to be a believer; just the opposite, he has explained that he is not a believer—in order to illuminate faith negatively.²⁵

Faith Is a Passion

De silentio and Climacus agree that faith is a special kind of passion. As such, faith is not a matter of detached cognition or reflection. Religious faith is neither equivalent to knowledge about the facts of a religion nor the ability to defend proofs for God’s existence, though it undoubtedly contains some epistemic component. While not an emotion per se, faith as a passion has an affective component, an inner sense that one best understands when she experiences or ‘feels it’ for herself.²⁶ To have faith or—generally speaking—to have passion for something is to be impressed by that thing, personally and intimately affected in a way that arouses care, concern, and an appropriate response. Let us consider each of these related facets of faith as a passion: its connection to rational reflection, its “primitivity,” and what de silentio calls its “conclusions.”

²³De silentio’s remarks on faith are also compatible with Judaism, which might be clear from the emphasis on Abraham.

²⁴As a reminder, Kierkegaard’s own reference to this pseudonym is by spelling the second name with a lower case ‘s.’ I will follow Kierkegaard’s own practice.

²⁵Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 7 vols. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967-78), 1:7 (#10).

²⁶While both de silentio and Johannes Climacus personally lack the ‘highest passion’ of faith, they certainly are passionate about the concept and getting it right, as is exemplified by their deep understandings of faith.

What is the relation of passion to reason and reflection? In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, David Hume writes: “Nothing is more usual in philosophy, and even in common life, than to talk of the combat of passion and reason, to give the preference to reason, and to assert that men are only so far virtuous as they conform themselves to its dictates. . . . On this method of thinking the greatest part of moral philosophy, ancient and modern, seems to be founded.”²⁷ Disagreeing with many of his predecessors, Hume argues—and Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms would agree—that “reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will.”²⁸ Instead, the passions are part and parcel of what it means to be a human; they inform who we are and the decisions we make, without exception. If humans are, in some sense, bound to their passions, or by nature passionate beings, it is the individual’s task to cultivate proper passion²⁹ as much as it is one’s task to cultivate his mind.

In *Two Ages*, Kierkegaard describes his own age as a “*sensible, reflecting age, devoid of passion, flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence.*”³⁰ De silentio undoubtedly agrees with this diagnosis, which suggests that philosophy’s combative conception of the relationship between passion and

²⁷David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, in *Hume’s Ethical Writings: Selections from David Hume*, ed. Alasdair MacIntyre (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), 177.

²⁸Ibid. This is not to suggest that Kierkegaard’s and Hume’s views of passion and emotion are identical. Kierkegaard’s views are closer to those of Plato and Aristotle, who conceive of, for instance, emotions, as in some sense rational.

²⁹As we will see below, the ‘proper’ passion of faith correctly prioritizes its relations to God and to everything else. Climacus describes the improper passion of placing the ‘finite’ above God (the ‘infinite’) as “the agonizing self-contradiction of worldly passion” (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 422).

³⁰Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 68.

reason has taken hold in the rational, modern era, where reason and reflection are privileged to the neglect of passion. Lives characterized by ‘superficial, short-lived enthusiasms’ carry on in aesthetic categories and, lacking passion, do not possess the resources that would bring significant meaning and unity. It follows that an age ‘devoid of passion’ is necessarily devoid of faith.

In *Fear and Trembling* de silentio considers the prevailing manner of philosophical reflection in his day to be an important instance of “superficial, short-lived enthusiasm.”³¹ In such reflection only miniscule passion is required to think one’s way through a scholarly treatise. It is unsurprising that in the modern age, this kind of reflection has been praised over the more strenuous passion required by the religious, and in particular, the virtue of faith. This mix-up bothers de silentio, as he honestly confesses his own difficulty in understanding the passion of faith:

It is supposed to be difficult to understand Hegel, but to understand Abraham is a small matter. To go beyond Hegel is a miraculous achievement, but to go beyond Abraham is the easiest of all. I for my part have applied considerable time to understanding Hegelian philosophy and believe that I have understood it fairly well; I am sufficiently brash to think that when I cannot understand particular passages despite all my pains, he himself may not have been entirely clear. All this I do easily, naturally, without any mental strain. Thinking about Abraham is another matter, however; then I am shattered. I am constantly aware of the prodigious paradox that is the content of Abraham’s life, I am constantly repelled, and, despite all its passion, my thought cannot penetrate it, cannot get ahead by a hairsbreadth. I stretch every muscle to get a perspective, and at the very same instant I become paralyzed.³²

³¹Anti-Climacus agrees with de silentio on the dangers of such reflection, claiming “the person who abolishes faith abolishes the possibility of offense, such as when speculation substitutes comprehending for having faith” (*Practice in Christianity*, 143-44). On the ‘possibility of offense,’ see part three below.

³²Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 32-3.

De silentio suggests that the passion of faith which he cannot muster and can hardly understand is qualitatively different from one's interest in what we might call 'removed' philosophical reflection,³³ and yet such philosophy acts as though it has surpassed the need or use of faith. However, the fact that the passion of faith is the most difficult does not imply that it should be discarded.

How is the passion of faith qualitatively distinct from the miniscule passion required in philosophical reflection? What differentiates *a relationship of faith to God* from, for example, philosophical speculation about the divine? Inasmuch as de silentio's illumination of faith is primarily negative, a sufficient answer to this question will come only as we move on to Climacus's and Anti-Climacus's accounts. Anti-Climacus's concept of "primitivity" in *The Sickness Unto Death* sheds initial light on the distinction. When one touches a hot stove, we might call the feeling of pain primitive—it is original, basic, not mediated by reflection or based on someone else's experience. Applying this to more serious matters, Anti-Climacus writes, "Every human being is primitively intended to be a self, destined to become himself..."³⁴ "[T]o lack primitivity or to have robbed oneself of one's primitivity" is equivalent to having "emasculated oneself in a spiritual sense."³⁵ To be human is to be passionate about existence itself; to lack such passion (or primitivity) is not to exist in any meaningful sense. Specifically, in the

³³Not all philosophical reflection is removed, and so de silentio's (and Kierkegaard's) critique does not apply to all ways of doing philosophy. Presumably Kierkegaard himself is doing philosophy yet attempting to do so in a way that cultivates wisdom in himself and his readers. More will be said about different approaches to philosophical reflection in chapter five.

³⁴Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 33.

³⁵Ibid.

passion of faith one relates to God in such a way that her existence—her character, her interests and pursuits, her relations to others—becomes formed *by* the divine, or she is enabled to become the self God intended her to be, her first or primitive self. While de silentio does not use the term “primitivity,” a similar, though less-developed notion is at work in *Fear and Trembling*. He writes: “Even if someone were able to transpose the whole content of faith into conceptual form, it does not follow that he has comprehended faith, comprehended how he entered into it or how it entered into him.”³⁶ In chapter two I noted how de silentio seems to grasp, at least in part, the conceptual dialectic of faith. Lacking in his life, however, is the existential dialectic of faith, faith’s primitivity. In other words, de silentio lacks the ‘highest’ passion of existence.³⁷

The one who lacks passion for existence (and by default, faith) tends to approach life and its decisions with an indecisive, even blasé attitude. One hears the scripture lesson read at church or attends a performance of *Faust*, yet if she lacks passion there is no ‘connect’ between her shallow reflection on these things and her own life. In *Two Ages* Kierkegaard writes, “The single individual (however well-intentioned many of them are, however much energy they might have if they could ever come to use it) has not fomented enough passion in himself to tear himself out of the web of reflection and the seductive ambiguity of reflection.”³⁸ The one who reflects in this disconnected way floats through life without serious commitment (as we saw in the aesthete), while the

³⁶Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 7

³⁷Passion for existence comes in degrees. De silentio has much more passion for existence than his speculative contemporaries. In fact, he has sufficient passion to make the first movement of infinite resignation. However, insofar as he lacks the passion for faith, he lacks the ‘highest’ passion of existence.

³⁸Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 69.

person with passion approaches what he understands to be true, good, and right, with earnestness and care.³⁹ De silentio writes, “The conclusions of passion are the only dependable ones—that is, the only convincing ones.”⁴⁰ If a scripture lesson or Goethe’s *Faust* strikes the heart of an individual who approaches them in the passion of faith, that person’s “conclusions” become convictions.

Faith, therefore, is a passion distinct from and significantly higher than the breed of philosophical reflection in de silentio’s sights *because* it is concerned and approaches its object with conviction and decisiveness. But what is the object of faith?

Faith Gives Up ‘the World’ and Gets Back ‘the World’

The object of faith is God, and in faith, an individual’s relationship to God takes the highest priority, transforming his relationship to anyone or anything else. Like Climacus in the *Postscript*,⁴¹ de silentio refers to this aspect of faith as relating absolutely to the absolute and relatively to the relative. In light of the concept of passion, faith means relating to God with the utmost interest and relating to all else in a way mediated by the passion of one’s relationship to God.

In his analysis of faith and particularly the relationship between an individual and God, de silentio has especially in view the Hegelian ethic of *Sittlichkeit*. For Hegel, the ethical is embodied in the norms of a society’s institutions. “[I]ndividuals have the ethical duties they have by virtue of the concrete social relations in which they

³⁹Judge William presumably has a passion for existence that represents the prerequisite for faith. He also possesses some sort of faith, though his faith reflects his immanent religious views where the God-relation is defined by *the individual* and, therefore, is not dependent upon Christian revelation.

⁴⁰Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 100.

⁴¹See especially pp. 406-08.

participate.”⁴² Therefore, to transgress societal conventions as Abraham does in the binding of Isaac—even though one’s action proceeds from a position of faith in God—is unethical. One problem with Hegel’s view is that “God comes to be an invisible vanishing point, an impotent thought.”⁴³ Why? For Hegel as well as Kant, one’s ethical duties do not go beyond, in the first case societal dictates, and in the second case, human reason (the seat of the moral law). On such views, when humans speak of duty to God, what they mean is just those duties derivable from human culture or human reason. But if our duty to God is no more than what I can figure out on my own by looking inside myself or to my own society, then the concept “God” becomes “an impotent thought.” If one is to be honest about faith, then “God” must be more than modern moral philosophy allows.

According to de silentio, faith has two “movements” and these are reflected in the abstract maxim of relating absolutely to the absolute and relatively to the relative.⁴⁴ What does this maxim mean? The first movement is an act of resignation where one resigns, gives up, dismisses everything but God. This does not imply that one drops everything and becomes a recluse in the wilderness. Rather, it is a way of construing the ‘things’ (e.g., possessions, hobbies, abilities, relationships) of one’s life, which implies the *potential* for overt renunciations. This movement is an act of resignation *before* God, or *unto* God. Abraham resigns Isaac before or unto God because it is God who requires him to revalue the finite. De silentio calls this *infinite* resignation because one does not

⁴²Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love*, 69.

⁴³Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 68.

⁴⁴Climacus also speaks of a double movement (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 409).

simply downgrade finite things to a lesser degree. Instead, it involves an all-out renunciation of such things, or rather a realization that any value that the finite possesses is in light of God and God's relation to that finite thing (e.g., as giver of a gift). At first glance, infinite resignation might appear similar to the existentialist recognition of life's contingency and absurdity—a recognition that prompts a decision about whether or not life is worth living.⁴⁵ Albert Camus explains this view: “in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. All healthy men having thought of their own suicide, it can be seen, without further explanation, that there is a direct connection between this feeling and the longing for death.”⁴⁶ One might think that both infinite resignation and the existentialist recognition of life's absurdity share in common a devalued sense of the finite goods that constitute each human's life. On the outside it would appear that Isaac is devalued by Abraham. However, the one who performs the movement of resignation values that which she resigns and does not pretend otherwise. In fact, the whole difficulty of resignation lies in the fact that humans naturally value finite goods and cannot easily give up that which is precious to them. The one who resigns the finite, however, comes to value those goods

⁴⁵It is interesting that Kierkegaard is considered the father of existentialism, when his closest thought to twentieth century French existentialism is the first, more easily-made movement of infinite resignation. Not only do his 'successors' have no conception of the second movement of faith, they ignore Kierkegaard's distancing of himself from the pseudonymous character of works like *Fear and Trembling* and *Either/Or*. For a comparison of Kierkegaard with Camus and Sartre see Robert C. Roberts's "The Virtue of Hope in *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*," in *International Kierkegaard Commentary: Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, vol. 5, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003).

⁴⁶Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth*, 6th ed., ed. Louis P. Pojman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 516.

in a different, paradoxical sense: by devaluing them. This comes through recognizing that finite goods are valueless without God. Infinite resignation is a decision one makes “which in its pain reconciles one to existence.”⁴⁷ The existentialist recognition of absurdity, while also a way of construing one’s world, might very well end in suicide—a view of or decision about one’s existence that is hardly reconciled. Even if it does not, its conclusion is that the value it finds in life is there not in an objective sense (or, for instance, because God declared it good) but through the projection of an individual’s preferences. For the existentialist, embracing that *this* is the reason why things have value reflects an honest assessment of one’s existence. For the one who makes the movement of infinite resignation, this existentialist view instead reflects dishonesty. The person of infinite resignation believes that honesty comes through embracing the fact that only in relation to God do finite things have meaning and value. Nonetheless, de silentio claims that while this movement takes courage and a certain level of passion, it nevertheless falls short of the passion of faith.

De silentio refers to the second movement as that “of finitude”⁴⁸ and it is the movement of faith proper.⁴⁹ It too requires courage, “the one and only humble courage.”⁵⁰ (The humility required further sets this worldview apart from the self-assertive philosophy of existentialism which supposes it can take control of existence

⁴⁷Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 45.

⁴⁸Ibid., 38.

⁴⁹The first movement of faith, infinite resignation, is not faith at all, though according to de silentio, is necessary for faith to come forth. “Faith is preceded by a movement of infinity; only then does faith commence...” (Ibid., 69).

⁵⁰Ibid., 73.

through an act of choice.) What makes the second movement courageous? The second movement is, paradoxically, an *act of reception*.⁵¹ We tend to think that in receiving something, one is passive—one takes in, gets, receives. In faith, one *actively receives* or takes back in a particular way. Again, like the first movement of infinite resignation, the second movement is a kind of construal, or ‘seeing-as.’ What does one receive back, from whom does one receive, and what is the manner in which one receives?

Simply put, one receives back “one’s world”—everything one gave up in the preceding resignation. One gets back one’s world *from God*, the one to whom one properly carries out the first movement. For only God has the power to infuse value, to bring meaning to the mundane.⁵² Whereas the first movement reconciles one with existence, the second movement—faith itself—reconciles one with God. De silentio cannot conceive how the person with faith is able to receive the finite back, to construe the finite as a gift of God after one has, in effect, pronounced “vanity of vanities.” That is, how was Abraham able to receive Isaac back after he had given him up for dead?

His explanation for how this occurs is insufficient. The biggest clue he gives is that it occurs “by virtue of the absurd.” ‘Absurd’ in this context does not imply a sense of utter meaninglessness as it might in existentialism. Rather, it is the view of faith from a position outside of faith. It is the way faith looks from without. In his journals

⁵¹This paradoxical dialectic is the seedbed of Climacus’s view of faith *as both* gift and task.

⁵²This view powerfully contrasts the Kantian or neo-Kantian view where human autonomy infuses the finite with value.

Kierkegaard reminds us that categories like the absurd signify how de silentio's illumination of faith is negative.⁵³ Kierkegaard writes,

The absurd is not the absurd or absurdities without any distinctions... The absurd is a category, and the most developed thought is required to define the Christian absurd accurately and with conceptual correctness. The absurd is a category, the negative criterion, of the divine or of the relationship to the divine. When the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd—faith transforms it, but in every weak moment it is again more or less absurd to him. The passion of faith is the only thing which masters the absurd—if not, then faith is not faith in the strictest sense, but a kind of knowledge. The absurd terminates negatively before the sphere of faith, which is a sphere by itself. To a third person the believer relates himself by virtue of the absurd; so must a third person judge, for a third person does not have the passion of faith. Johannes de silentio has never claimed to be a believer; just the opposite, he has explained that he is not a believer—in order to illuminate faith negatively.⁵⁴

What exactly does de silentio find absurd about faith? It is: if for God all things are possible, then through God, all things are possible for humans.⁵⁵ Negatively, “The absurd is the expression of despair: that humanly it is not possible...”⁵⁶ The second movement of faith, the movement where God gives Isaac back to Abraham, solidifying the promise that through him all nations shall be blessed, revalues the finite—whether the finite refers to a child or something of lesser value. The absurd is: after having renounced the finite, one actually believes she can receive it back with infinite, God-

⁵³According to Alastair McKinnon, the term ‘absurd’ does not occur in Kierkegaard’s signed works. See “Kierkegaard and His Pseudonyms: A Preliminary Report,” *Kierkegaardiana* VII, ed. Niels Thulstrup (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1968), 64-76. One might conclude that it does not occur from the vantage point of faith. While this is partly correct, we should note that Anti-Climacus uses the term in *The Sickness Unto Death* (as he does ‘paradox,’ another word McKinnon says is confined to the pseudonyms), which takes up the perspective of the ideal Christian.

⁵⁴Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 1:7 (#10).

⁵⁵Below we will see how Anti-Climacus’s Christian view of faith relies heavily on the biblical notion that for God, all things are possible.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 1:6 (#9).

given worth. This second movement of faith is where de silentio's 'understanding' hits a wall, where the incongruity between a conceptual and existential dialectic emerges.

While de silentio does not 'existentially understand' this movement (understand how to make it himself), he tries to describe it in a depiction of someone he calls "the knight of faith"—an individual who, from the outside, looks no different than anyone else. "He drains the deep sadness of life in infinite resignation, he knows the blessedness of infinity, he has felt the pain of renouncing everything, the most precious thing in the world, and yet the finite tastes just as good to him as to one who never knew anything higher, because his remaining in finitude would have no trace of a timorous, anxious routine, and yet he has this security that makes him delight in it as if finitude were the surest thing of all. And yet, yet the whole earthly figure he presents is a new creation by virtue of the absurd."⁵⁷ But if "the finite tastes just as good to him as to one who never knew anything higher," why bother with either movement in the first place? Why not just live life in enjoyment of 'the finite'? De silentio suspects that such a life would be dishonest,⁵⁸ a form of rebellion against God that fails to recognize life as a gift.⁵⁹ This provides another reason why faith requires passion and courage. If one is to be truly honest about existence—about the contingency that characterizes our lives—then one must indeed possess courage.

⁵⁷Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 40.

⁵⁸And, *Anti-Climacus* on honesty: "Honesty before God is the first and the last, honestly to confess to oneself where one is, in honesty before God continually keeping the task in sight" (Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 66).

⁵⁹There is here a sort of reverse analogy to the existentialist notion of bad faith—until we admit how much *we* fund our lives with meaning (because meaning is not given), we deceive ourselves. The Christian response to existentialism as Camus understands it is that alleged attempts to be honest with oneself about life's meaningless are, in point of fact, instances of dishonesty *before God* (e.g., a failure to admit that one is a sinner in need of redemption).

This brief study does not begin to plumb the depths of de silentio's conception of faith, but I have tried to show the ways in which his description is largely negative, and yet, how illuminating an 'outsider's' perspective can be. Further, in considering two conceptual remarks about de silentio's view of faith, I have set the stage for dialogue with Climacus's own outsider perspective. Contrary to Roger Poole's advice about reading the pseudonyms, Kierkegaard himself considers such a dialogue to be a natural and important consequence of his dialectical authorship. Consider *his own* comparison: "That there is a difference between the absurd in *Fear and Trembling* and the paradox in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is quite correct. The first is the purely personal definition of existential faith—the other is faith in relationship to a doctrine."⁶⁰ Here we have an admission of *différance*, yet an encouragement to juxtapose the points of view.

Johannes Climacus and Faith: An Imaginary Construction and an Historical Costume

the one who introduced the issue did not *directly* define himself as being Christian and the others as not being that; no, just the *reverse*—he denies being that and concedes it to the others. This Johannes Climacus does.⁶¹

In chapter two we saw that Climacus, a humorist, also discusses religion from a position outside of faith. In this respect, therefore, his illumination of faith and Christianity is negative. However, insofar as Climacus's two-book corpus devotes itself to presenting the issue of what it means to become a Christian, his account of faith has significantly greater content (and obviously greater Christian content) than de silentio's. In what follows, we will consider Climacus's view of faith as 1) a passion, 2) against the

⁶⁰Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 1:8 (#11).

⁶¹Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 8n.

understanding, 3) a task, 4) a gift, 5) a relationship of contemporaneity with Christ, and 6) having a historical point of departure.

*Faith Is a Passion,*⁶² *Part Two*

Like Hume, Climacus holds the concept of passion in high regard: “passion is existence at its highest.”⁶³ Like de silentio, Climacus views faith as a passion. “[F]aith is indeed the highest passion of subjectivity.”⁶⁴ “[T]here is no stronger expression for inwardness than—to have faith.”⁶⁵ What does Climacus mean by subjectivity and inwardness? These comments are made in the context of his attempt to distinguish two different conceptions of Christianity. Whereas an ‘objective’ approach understands Christianity in terms of agreement with a list of doctrinal statements about God, a ‘subjective’ approach prioritizes one’s *relating to God in the truth* reflected by Church doctrine.⁶⁶ That is, the subjective individual ‘makes inward’ those objective truths—desires to apply them in her life (attitudes, passions, actions).⁶⁷ For instance, the subjective individual responds to the objective doctrine, “Christ suffered and died to save humans from their sin,” by appropriating or making inward the truth that he is in error (Climacus says ‘untruth’) and Christ alone can remedy that error. Such inwardness might

⁶²On the specific forms of religious pathos—resignation, guilt, and suffering—see the discussion of existence-spheres in chapter two.

⁶³Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 197.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 132.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 210.

⁶⁶“To know a creed by rote is paganism, because Christianity is inwardness” (*Ibid.*, 224).

⁶⁷“To express, as existing, what one has understood about oneself, and in this way to understand oneself, is not at all comic, but to understand everything but not oneself is exceedingly comic” (*Ibid.*, 353).

reflect itself in an attitude of increased humility toward others and God, or a generous and giving spirit responsive to the gift of salvation. Anti-Climacus's conception of primitivity is once more relevant at this point, although Climacus has his own special term for this personal relating *in truth* to God. He calls it faith's autopsy, which literally means, faith's 'seeing for oneself.' "[T]he believer ... continually has the *autopsy* of faith; he does not see with the eyes of others and sees only the same as every believer sees—with the eyes of faith."⁶⁸ Autopsy suggests direct acquaintance⁶⁹ with what is seen through the 'eyes of faith,' and below we will consider a related Climacean term: contemporaneity (with Christ). It is clear that Abraham's faith exemplifies Climacus's notion of autopsy in that Abraham relates to God—sees God for himself—with the 'eyes of faith.' That is, Abraham's faith-relation to God is one of inwardness and subjectivity. Climacus's view of faith as a passion becomes even sharper when we place it in relief with human understanding.⁷⁰

(As a Passion) Faith Is Against the Understanding

⁶⁸Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 102.

⁶⁹De silentio calls faith a 'later immediacy' (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 82). In one sense, the passionate faith-relation to God is direct, just in that it is not mediated through society, the 'universal.' However, in another sense, it is not direct—one does not perceive God as one perceives another person or an idol he might worship. De silentio calls this 'esthetic' immediacy, and it is the only sort of 'faith' Hegel allows. Climacus mocks this pagan view of religion that wants a god to appear directly, perhaps in the form of "a rare, enormously large green bird, with a red beak, that perched in a tree on the embankment and perhaps even whistled in an unprecedented manner" (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 245). For another criticism of the Hegelian view of faith as (unqualified) immediacy, see Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 10ff.

⁷⁰This first section is quite brief not because Climacus has little to say about faith as a passion—it is quite the opposite. The subsequent five remarks all flesh out the notion of faith as a passion, and so when I make the subsequent remarks explicit, one is not to think that these are distinct from faith as a passion, but rather that they amplify that initial remark.

Whereas *de silentio* situates the passion of faith in opposition to disinterested philosophical reflection, Climacus explores faith's passion as a peculiar kind of faculty⁷¹ in tension with that of the human understanding (*Forstand*).⁷² One cannot understand Climacus's view of faith as a passion without grasping the notion of paradox. "[T]he paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like a lover without passion."⁷³ A paradox is "something that thought itself cannot think."⁷⁴ That an eternal God should enter time and even more, become a human being—this is what Climacus calls the 'absolute' paradox.⁷⁵ It defies thinking—rubs human intuition and reason the wrong way. But if it defies our faculty of reason or understanding, how are we to approach it? We saw above that one cannot approach this paradox with the minimal passion required by philosophical speculation.⁷⁶ One must confront the paradox in faith,

⁷¹I say a 'peculiar kind' because it is not a faculty in the sense that philosophers usually mean. It is something akin to the faculty of divine sense (*sensus divinitatis*) that Aquinas, Calvin, and some recent philosophers discuss, although there are important differences. Whereas the divine sense is a natural, generic kind of sense that god exists, faith as Climacus expounds it pertains specifically to Christianity and the God-man, Christ, and it is nonnatural. Below we will explore Climacus's remark that faith is a gift.

⁷²While philosophical reflection is a *practice* and 'the understanding' is a *faculty*, the two are intimately related, as the understanding often takes up the practice of philosophical reflection. My point is not to suggest that either pseudonym's view is one-sided, but that the focus shifts. In relation to philosophical reflection per se, the Hongs clarify Climacus's position: "Climacus's objection is not to thinking, to reflection. ... His objection is rather to a confusion of categories, a failure to make a crucial distinction..." (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, x). The distinction referred to is that between 'essential truth' (see below and also chapter three) and unessential truth.

⁷³Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 37.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*

⁷⁵He also refers to this as "the absurd." "The absurd is that the eternal truth has come into existence in time, that God has come into existence, has been born, has grown up, etc., has come into existence exactly as an individual human being, indistinguishable from any other human being..." (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 210).

⁷⁶Again, there is nothing immoral about having passion for one's academic discipline, nor do *de silentio*'s or Climacus's views preclude that possibility. The problem with philosophical reflection for Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms comes when it replaces or diverts attention from what Climacus calls

with the utmost passion. It is binary—one approaches with 100% passion in faith, or not at all.⁷⁷ There is no hedging of bets here.⁷⁸ This is clear from Climacus’s definition of truth, which he then calls a paraphrasing of faith: “*An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person.*”⁷⁹ Climacus thus qualifies the earlier statement that passion is existence at its highest, and claims that *faith is the passion* that is the highest form of existence.

Climacus describes the encounter of our faculty of understanding with the paradox as a sort of meeting of two powers, where the former must acquiesce to the latter. If it does not, if reason⁸⁰ rules the day, then the meeting is “unhappy,” and the result is

“essential truth”—truth that is central to what it means to be a human. For Kierkegaard this implies truth of an ethical or religious nature that should be lived, not (merely) studied. On essential truth see *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 189.

⁷⁷This might seem misleading because we tend to think that there can be degrees of faith, that some people have more faith than others or that we have more (or less) faith now than in the past. The idea that faith is ‘all-out’ reflects Climacus’s claim in the Interlude of *Fragments* that faith is a resolution. I think what he means here is that faith is the sort of thing that requires one’s whole life, and that faith in Christ is transformative of one’s whole life. This, however, is compatible with the idea that oftentimes we experiences moments of weakness in our faith, moments of doubt. But note that Kierkegaard’s response to moments of weakness is that one worship God, not try to answer one’s doubts. He believes that our faith will be strengthened by an act of resolution and commitment.

⁷⁸In *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus writes: “When a person lives in such a way that he knows no higher criterion for life than that of the understanding, then his whole life is a relativity, working only for relative goals; he does nothing unless the understanding with some help from probability can make more or less clear the advantages or disadvantages, can answer his question ‘why and to what end’” (Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 116). This view reflects the New Testament conception of faith: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1).

⁷⁹Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 203.

⁸⁰For now I am using the terms understanding and reason interchangeably to refer to the universal human capacity for rational reflection. Later I will consider a specifically modern sense of “reason,” and how it too is opposed to Christianity and its paradox(es).

“offense.”⁸¹ Climacus summarizes the proper way in which understanding, paradox, and faith interact.

How, then, does the learner come to an agreement⁸² [*Forstaaelse*] with this paradox, for we do not say that he is supposed to understand the paradox but is only to understand that this is the paradox. We have already shown how this occurs. It occurs when the understanding [*Forstand*] and the paradox happily encounter each other in the moment, when the understanding [*Forstand*] steps aside and the paradox gives itself, and the third something, the something in which this occurs (for it does not occur through the understanding [*Forstand*], which is discharged, or through the paradox, which gives itself—consequently *in* something), is that happy passion to which we shall now give a name, although for us it is not a matter of the name. We shall call it *faith*. This passion, then, must be that above-mentioned condition that the paradox provides.⁸³

Faith, then, is a nonnatural,⁸⁴ human faculty just in the sense that it has a particular domain as human reason or understanding has a particular domain.⁸⁵ Whereas philosophical, historical, and even theological speculation belong in the domain of the understanding, one’s relation to God (and to “essential”—ethical and religious—truth) belongs in the domain of faith. Moreover, as with de silentio’s maxim that faith relates absolutely to the absolute and relatively to the relative, one’s relation of faith to God must transform the domain of human reason; one becomes equipped to carry out various kinds

⁸¹When we move on to Anti-Climacus’s views, the notion of offense as an inverse determinant of faith will become even more important.

⁸²I offer my own translation of this word. Here and elsewhere in *Fragments* (it is particularly problematic on pages 47 and 49) the Hongs translate the Danish nouns *Forstand* and *Forstaaelse* as “understanding.” Though related, these words are not synonyms, and their distinct senses get lost in the equivocal translation. *Forstand* refers to what I have been calling one’s ‘faculty’ of understanding. *Forstaaelse* connotes a sense of understanding as in agreement or accord. For example, “the mob boss and the police have an ‘understanding’.”

⁸³Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 59.

⁸⁴By nonnatural I mean that it is not innate or present from birth but is instead a gift made possible by God. Of course it is natural in the sense that it is a trait that belongs to humans and not, for instance, animals.

⁸⁵Another similarity is that faith and understanding can develop, be cultivated.

of speculation through the eyes of faith. Thus, approaches to ethics (“How am I to live?”) or religion (“How do I relate to God?”) that are fundamentally ‘objective’—that proceed from human understanding—are liable to result in misconceptions of the notion of faith.

For example, the Christian doctrine of sin teaches that each person’s existence is mired in a state of untruth in relation to God. One begins to grasp this doctrine, however, not merely through human understanding (e.g., evidenced in the ability to repeat the doctrine or even write a lecture on it), but through inwardness—through the realization of *my own* guilt before God that weighs heavy on *my* heart. Likewise, the Christian doctrine of the forgiveness of sins gains its significance not through mere recitation, but when one senses within oneself the weight of despair lifted off through the atoning work of Christ. One ‘feels’ forgiven; one rests (as Anti-Climacus would say) in the truth of new life.

Given the notion that Christianity is inwardness, the passion of faith in which one becomes conscious of sin and conscious of the forgiveness of sins will often be in tension with the faculty of human understanding.⁸⁶ Why might this be the case? A primary tendency of human understanding is to objectify—to consider something by placing it outside oneself. The ability to think analytically and rationally about many things is itself a gift of God and is appropriate when one considers truths of mathematics, history, science, etc. However, with regard to essential truth—ethical and religious truths about how one should live—it is inappropriate for the understanding to ‘hijack’ these truths.

⁸⁶In his journals Kierkegaard states that in moments of weakness when the person of faith falters, the truths of Christianity can appear, once again, “absurd” as they do to those who do not have Christian faith at all (Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard’s Journals and Papers*, 1:7 (#10)).

Proper reflection about such truths naturally gives way to the appropriation of them in one's life and to the assistance of others in their own appropriation (i.e., the upbuilding).

Another reason why the understanding must submit to faith's appropriation of ethical and religious truth is to avoid the tempting thought that the more intelligent one is, the better a life one lives.

to become a Christian is actually the most difficult of all tasks, because the task, although the same, varies in relation to the capabilities of the respective individuals. This is not the case with tasks involving differences. With regard, for example, to comprehension, a person with high intelligence has a direct advantage over a person with limited intelligence, but this is not true with regard to having faith. That is, when faith requires that he relinquish his understanding, then to have faith becomes just as difficult for the most intelligent person as it is for the person of the most limited intelligence, or it presumably becomes even more difficult for the former.⁸⁷

Because of the tendency for the intelligent person to think she has an advantage with regard to faith, Climacus claims that the understanding must be "crucified."⁸⁸

Therefore, the primary reason why faith conflicts with the understanding is a moral one—the understanding tends to evade ethical and religious claims upon the self. According to Climacus (and, as we saw in his lectures, Kierkegaard), such evasion is a necessary consequence of the Hegelian infiltration of theology and dogmatics. But besides the Hegelian influence, there is the broader effect of the Enlightenment (of which Hegelianism is one outgrowth), which has saturated all forms of intellectual life by the time Kierkegaard is writing. Merold Westphal notes how the Enlightenment conception of "reason" we see present, for instance, in Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, runs counter to a traditional conception of Christian faith to which Kierkegaard

⁸⁷Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 377. On Kierkegaard's egalitarian concerns regarding ethical knowledge, see chapter three.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 559.

hopes to return. According to Westphal, “What goes under the name of reason are the fundamental assumptions of the established order.”⁸⁹ For Kierkegaard, “reason” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not a neutral concept merely brought to the fore by modern philosophers, but rather a kind of philosophical and societal construct of that age. Thus, while on the one hand there is a universal aversion to the paradox *because* of the natural (sinful) tendencies of the human understanding, there is also a contextual factor that contributes to a view of (orthodox) Christianity as irrational. “Reason calls the Paradox folly. The Paradox calls Reason absurd folly. And the point Kierkegaard seems to want to make is not simply that they are absolutely opposed, but that the Paradox has the honor of having started all the name calling.”⁹⁰ The ‘happy encounter’ that Climacus believes is possible between the paradox and the understanding explains why the two are not ‘absolutely opposed.’ Nevertheless, Westphal’s observation that Kierkegaard’s critique aims not just at a universal human propensity but especially at an audience disposed to an ‘unhappy encounter’ makes even more sense of Kierkegaard’s corrective remark.

Faith Is a Task for Life

In chapter one I briefly explored Kierkegaard’s comment on the grace versus works debate that has been central in Christian theology since St. Paul. Kierkegaard defends an orthodox view that conceives of good works *and* faith as responses to God’s work of salvation, but also as enabled by God. That is, one is empowered *by God* to do good

⁸⁹Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard’s Critique of Reason and Society* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 89.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 88.

works and to have faith. Below we will look specifically at how Climacus understands the Christian aspect of faith as a gift. First, however, let us consider how faith is an ongoing task to be taken up, with Abraham, in fear and trembling.

As we saw above, not only *is* faith a passion, but to have faith, one must first exist in passion.⁹¹ Prior to exploring the specifically religious pathos of faith, Climacus sets the stage by characterizing the ‘subjective thinker,’ the individual who approaches existence (and, importantly, thinking about existence) with passion. Like Kierkegaard, Climacus relies heavily upon the Greek, and in particular, Socratic conception of philosophy. “To understand oneself in existence was *the Greek principle*, and however little substance a Greek philosopher’s teaching sometimes had, the philosopher had one advantage: he was never comic.”⁹² A person becomes comic when he devotes his life to the type of speculation that causes one to ‘forget’ the most important task—to exist. In the *Phaedo* Socrates recounts his early interest in the work of Anaxagoras. Anaxagoras claimed to have explained the cosmos with the principle of Mind (νοῦς), but when Socrates read Anaxagoras’s books for himself, his “hope was dashed” because Anaxagoras’s mechanistic accounts were indifferent to the work and intention of the divine Mind (as well as the Good and the Beautiful).⁹³ Absent from the explanation was a sense of purpose in the cosmos, especially the sort of purpose that would assist Socrates

⁹¹In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Anti-Climacus writes, “But the more passion and imagination a person has—consequently, the closer he is in a certain sense (in possibility) to being able to believe...” (Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 86).

⁹²Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 352.

⁹³Plato’s *Phaedo*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, in *Plato’s Complete Works*, ed. John M Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 97c.

in his Delphic quest to ‘know himself.’⁹⁴ Socrates concludes that the task of coming to understand himself—his nature, purpose, and duty as a human—is a task for a lifetime, and further, that self-knowledge is fundamental to being a human, while knowledge of the universe’s mechanics—though significant and interesting—is not.

Climacus adds, “To understand oneself in existence is also *the Christian principle*....”⁹⁵ Central to the task of self-understanding in Religiousness A and Christianity is what Climacus calls “the practice of the absolute distinction,”⁹⁶ where, similar to de silentio’s ‘first movement’ of faith, one (infinitely) gives up all finite things before God. Reinforcing de silentio’s view, Climacus criticizes an aesthetic view of life that fails in the fundamental task of self-knowledge. “It is demented ... for a being who is eternally structured to apply all his power to grasp the perishable, to hold fast to the changeable, and to believe that he has won everything when he has won this nothing—and is duped—to believe he has lost everything when he has lost this nothing—and is no longer duped.”⁹⁷ The ‘practice of the absolute distinction’ where one relinquishes the value of all finite goods is such a challenging task that it results in a sort of conversion of the individual who accomplishes it. “[T]he daring venture is not one among several

⁹⁴The Socratic-Christian theme of self-examination runs throughout Kierkegaard’s authorship. In *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus exhorts the reader in Christendom, “Examine yourself, now,” to see if you have been ‘duped’ into thinking you are a Christian, when the truth might be otherwise (Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 39). Anti-Climacus claims that life’s ultimate examination is “to become and be a Christian” (Ibid., 192). Toward the end of *The Sickness Unto Death* he notes the words of institution, repeated before the Eucharist: “Let each man examine himself” (Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 128).

⁹⁵Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 353.

⁹⁶Ibid., 422.

⁹⁷Ibid.

undertakings, one more predicate about the one and the same individual—no, through the daring venture he himself becomes someone else.”⁹⁸ One can easily see how the ‘practice of the absolute distinction’ or ‘the first movement of faith’ is a task to work on throughout all of life.⁹⁹ That is to say, it will always be a challenge to rank one’s life’s interests with one’s relation to God. Even though infinite resignation is the *first* movement or, as Climacus calls it, the “initial expression” of existential pathos, one never completes this task. The same holds true for faith proper. “To relate oneself existentially with pathos to an eternal happiness is never a matter of occasionally making a huge effort but is constancy in the relation, the constancy with which it is joined together with everything.”¹⁰⁰ Just as constancy is required between spouses, so in one’s faith relation to God the individual must renew his commitment to ‘the absolute’ over and over again, must never consider this relation to be one she will eventually move beyond. This is why de silentio claims that one cannot ‘go further’ than faith. In the next two conceptual remarks, Climacus’s view of faith becomes markedly distinct from de silentio’s, as the former supplies the concept with decidedly Christian content.

Faith Is a Gift from God

⁹⁸Ibid., 423.

⁹⁹Anti-Climacus expands on how faith’s task of ‘living the truth’ of Christianity is ongoing. His polemic is directed toward the contemporary fallacy where “Christianity has been regarded as truth in the sense of results instead of its being truth in the sense of *the way*” (Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 207). This incorrect view of Christianity likens what it means to become a Christian to the case of the inventor who created gunpowder—all that matters is the result, the invention itself. Since he has succeeded, what has taken him twenty years to discover can be reduplicated by any decent technician in a half hour. Such is not the case in Christianity, where what counts is *the way* one lives.

¹⁰⁰Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 535.

So far I have withheld language that regards faith as a virtue, although in Climacus's understanding of faith as a task, one can note the ways in which faith might be considered an excellence that one seeks to master throughout one's life, just as one does courage, honesty, or temperance. While the passion of faith is binary—that is, a relation of faith is a *complete* commitment—this does not entail that one can carry out faith's movements easily or perfectly. The biblical text from which Kierkegaard draws his title for *de silentio*'s book states: "...work out your salvation in fear and trembling."¹⁰¹ This verse captures not only the sense of awe one must have in relation to God, but also the idea that faith is not a static trait. Rather it is something one practices and something in which one matures.

Let us briefly return to the classical list of the theological virtues: faith, hope, and love. Aquinas explains why these virtues are special: "[F]irst, because they have God as their object, inasmuch as by them we are rightly ordered to God; secondly, because they are infused in us by God alone; and finally, because these virtues are made known to us only by divine revelation in Sacred Scripture."¹⁰² The second criterion suggests what Climacus claims in *Philosophical Fragments*: that the virtue of faith (and hope and love) is a gift. This seems to conflict with faith as a task, an attribute that emphasizes the tremendous work and effort faith requires. Usually when we think of a gift, we do not think of it in terms of work, effort, labor, or task. Perhaps a simple analogy will make sense of the apparent opposition. Suppose a tutor volunteers to teach someone a foreign language and she supplies her pupil with some instruments for learning—perhaps a

¹⁰¹Phil. 2:12b.

¹⁰²Thomas Aquinas, *Treatise on the Virtues*, trans. John A. Oesterle (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 119 (question LXII).

grammar and some private lessons. With these tools the student has been given the opportunity to cultivate her knowledge of the language. She can diligently struggle with the strange pronunciations and tricky word order, or conversely, she can let the book collect dust and just show up for the occasional tutorial. Here, one can simultaneously perceive the senses in which the student has been given the chance to learn a language, but also the responsibility to make good on the gift. This elucidates the sense in which faith is a kind of capacity to relate to God that God instills.¹⁰³ Of course the analogy fails because on the Christian view of faith, one's 'studying the grammar at home'—one's daily, strenuous practice of faith—can only be carried out, itself, through the grace of God. Contrarily, although something like grace allowed the student to study on her own in the first place, her memorization of verb forms, for example, can be credited to her own efforts and not the tutor's. While in a sense, one's diligent growth and perseverance in faith can be credited to that individual, there is nothing meritorious or efficacious for salvation.

In *Philosophical Fragments* Climacus constructs an ironical deduction of Christianity, temporarily withholding the "historical costume" he later supplies in the *Postscript*. Using a Socratic conception of pedagogy as his foil, Climacus's performance of this deduction—a combination of jest and earnestness—serves to grab the casual reader who has become complacent in his Christianity, and make new the profound dialectic of Christianity and, in particular, Christian faith. He begins with the Socratic question, "can truth be learned?" and considers what things might be like if he took the opposite tack. The Socratic view presupposes the pre-existence of the soul, and

¹⁰³As a capacity or capability, one can see (per the lectures on communication) another reason why Kierkegaard chose to explore faith via indirect communication.

therefore, the pre-existence of knowledge and truth. Education does not involve the teaching of knowledge to a ‘blank slate,’ but instead teasing knowledge (that already exists) out of an individual—assisting someone to recollect that knowledge or truth. So, *contra* the Socratic, in Christianity humans naturally exist in a state of untruth (sin)¹⁰⁴ and can only escape that state through the help of a special teacher (savior) who does not so much teach the truth but *is* the truth.¹⁰⁵ To gain this truth—that is, to enter into a relationship with the teacher/savior—each learner must first possess an ability or the condition to receive the truth—but this condition he either already possesses or it is given to him. But if he exists in untruth (see above), then the condition to receive the truth must be given to him. The condition to receive the truth (i.e., the savior) is faith, and only the teacher dispenses this condition.¹⁰⁶ Once again, Climacus’s generic account reflects New Testament teaching: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”¹⁰⁷ Given Kierkegaard’s Lutheran context, scriptures like this one were ‘too familiar’ to his contemporaries, and so this clever, pseudonymous deduction indirectly conveys the basic truths of Christianity with an aim toward awakening the reader and redirecting her toward the Gospel.

¹⁰⁴This is compatible with Kierkegaard’s view of universal ethical knowledge (cf. chapter three) for the reason that the natural state does not entail a life lived in accordance with ethical knowledge (i.e., it is a state of untruth). If humans were naturally disposed toward ethical existence (moral perfection), then there would be no need of a Truth-giver/savior.

¹⁰⁵In considering Jesus’ invitation to the weary (Mt. 11:28-30), Anti-Climacus reflects in different language the idea that Jesus does not just teach the truth, but *is* the truth: “one is not permitted to take the invitation but must take the inviter also....” (Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 40).

¹⁰⁶Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 59.

¹⁰⁷Eph. 2:8-9.

*Faith Is an Ongoing Relationship with Christ*¹⁰⁸

Climacus's argument in *Philosophical Fragments* seems to run into trouble with the concept of the teacher-as-savior. In the Socratic scheme, the teacher only provides an occasion for the learner to recollect the truth she has forgotten. That is, the learner possesses the truth, and just needs to be reminded. As such, the teacher is 'accidental' or unessential to the learner's recollection of the truth. Socrates might assist the learner, or perhaps another pedagogue will. The particular identity of the teacher does not matter. In Christianity, however, since humans are in a state of untruth, they cannot simply recall or remember the truth; it must be given to them. Christ, who is the truth, is thus essential to the learner's gaining the truth, and moreover, what each person needs isn't a lesson about the truth, but Christ himself—his presence.

How can a human be present with someone who no longer walks the earth? This problem, not addressed by Climacus until more than half-way into the book, reflects the primary inquiry of *Fragments*, stated on the title page: "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?"¹⁰⁹ Let us momentarily withhold a response to these questions and return to them below. Climacus describes the relationship between Christ and each human as one of contemporaneity. Faith as contemporaneity with Christ does not mean 'physically present,' but "spiritually present; faith is a state of communion or presence with the son

¹⁰⁸Anti-Climacus, the 'ideal' Christian pseudonym, restates this remark in his Invocation to *Practice in Christianity*. See also pp. 62-66, 171.

¹⁰⁹Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 1.

of God.”¹¹⁰ And, as a gift, faith’s state of contemporaneity with Christ is initiated by Christ. Climacus considers the objection that someone who lived during Christ’s time on earth might have an advantage, and that a follower “at second hand” might be at a disadvantage. He thinks that this objection misunderstands the concept from the start. One might very well have witnessed Christ’s miraculous works and his claims to be the son of God, yet this does not entail a response of faith.¹¹¹ Climacus says that the only sense in which the ‘immediate contemporary’ has an advantage is that she has avoided the endless “chatter” about Christ that has persisted since his time on earth.¹¹² Since one cannot approach Christ through the faculty of human understanding or common sense¹¹³ but only through faith, then what makes someone a “genuine contemporary” is the fact that God gives her the condition of faith.¹¹⁴ What Calvin calls ‘the internal witness of the Holy Spirit’ two millennia after Christ walked the earth is a surer guarantee of contemporaneity with Christ than even being present when Christ walked on water. Why? Because the only genuine relation to the paradox can come about through the passion of faith, which is a gift God gives.

¹¹⁰Robert C. Roberts, *Faith, Reason, and History: Rethinking Kierkegaard’s Philosophical Fragments* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 96.

¹¹¹Anti-Climacus expands upon this: “[Christ] makes it clear that in relation to him there can be no question of any demonstrating, that we do not come to him by means of demonstrations, that there is no *direct* transition to becoming a Christian, that demonstrations can at best serve to make a person aware, so that made aware he can now come to the point: whether he will believe or he will be offended... Only in the choice is the heart disclosed....” (Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 96).

¹¹²Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 71.

¹¹³See Roberts, *Faith, Reason, and History*, chaps. 3-4 passim.

¹¹⁴Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 69.

*Faith Has a Historical Point of Departure*¹¹⁵

Returning to the passage cited just above, let us expound the idea that faith has a historical point of departure. Once again, the problem at issue is Christianity's claim that God, an eternal being (outside of time), became human, and in doing so, entered time and therefore history. The incarnation is 'the historical event' that claims to give humans eternal happiness, salvation. Can historical knowledge of the incarnation provide consciousness of the eternal, provide salvation? Climacus seems to answer *yes and no*. "The historical aspect must indeed be accentuated, but not in such a way that it becomes absolutely decisive for individuals."¹¹⁶ On the one hand, at least some bare amount of historical information is necessary. "Even if the contemporary generation had not left anything behind except these words, "We have believed that in such and such a year the god appeared in the humble form of a servant, lived and taught among us, and then died"—this is more than enough."¹¹⁷ Further, if—*contra* the Socratic—the truth does not exist eternally with a human, it must come *in time*, in the *moment*. Thus, it is essential to the story of faith that God provides the Truth—something which, temporally, the human did not previously possess.

On the other hand, there is a sense that the historical can never be 'absolutely decisive.' This is not to deny what has been said above, but rather to suggest that the mode of receiving the truth comes *not* through what Climacus calls "historical

¹¹⁵Vigilius Haufniensis, the pseudonymous author of *The Concept of Anxiety*, agrees with this remark about Christian faith, and claims that the Hegelian influence on dogmatics has deprived the concept of faith of this fundamental qualification (Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 10).

¹¹⁶Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 100.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, 104.

knowledge,” or means of human understanding. Coming to believe in Christ does not occur through sizing up the probability of such an event and then making a choice. In fact, in opposition to this way of thinking Climacus is at times quite harsh in his treatment of apologetics. Faith does not come through a demonstration or through some certainty gleaned from historical observation. Part of what lies beneath this remark is the egalitarian concern that no human has an advantage over another in relation to God, a point which, as we saw in chapter three, applies to ethical knowledge as well. The possession of faith is never based upon intellectual capability—memory skills, depth of study, analytic proficiency. Rather, faith is a gift of God.

That historical knowledge of Christ does not decide the issue of faith for individuals is clear not only in what has been said above regarding Christ’s demonstrations or miracles, but also given Christ’s own words that even demons know who he is—even they have a kind of ‘historical knowledge’—yet their lives clearly demonstrate a lack of faith or trust in him. The function of such knowledge, then, is as an occasion—the locus of ‘faith-giving’ where God dispenses the gift of faith, the crossroads where an individual confronts the possibility of offense that the God-man brings salvation from sin and gives the individual new life. Thus, we might view historical knowledge as a necessary, though not a sufficient condition of faith. And, once a human receives the gift of faith, historical knowledge of Christ becomes something different for her—it becomes sacred history, or history through the eyes of faith. Thus, even a small measure of historical knowledge can serve as the preliminary ‘direct’ knowledge of Christianity. However, that knowledge does not convey faith. Only God gives faith, and this occurs in time.

As we transition to the ‘ideal’ Christian perspective of Anti-Climacus, let us consider another sense in which faith relates to the historical. In *Practice in Christianity*

Anti-Climacus suggests that the little parcel of knowledge requisite for faith does not tell faith's whole story. While it is conceivable that faith can take root with such minimal knowledge (i.e., that God can use such knowledge as the occasion for dispensing faith), faith by no means remains there, but blossoms and grows in light of God's revelation through Christ and scripture. The one with faith takes seriously the scriptural claims and promises—she “really” believes them. In the Exordium to No. II of *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus writes, “blessed is the one who believes that Jesus Christ lived here on earth and that he was the one he said he was... blessed is the one who is not offended but believes that he fed five thousand people with five loaves and two small fish, blessed is the one who is not offended but believes that it happened, is not offended because it does not happen now but believes that it did happen.”¹¹⁸ If faith is a task for one's lifetime, then it can both be true that only a minimal amount of historical knowledge is necessary for faith to come about, yet also that the one with faith grows in her understanding and reliance upon the biblical witness. Let us now turn our full attention to Anti-Climacus's conception of faith.

Anti-Climacus and “the Ideal” of Faith

There is something (the esthetic) that is lower and is pseudonymous, and something that is higher and is also pseudonymous, because as a person I do not correspond to it.

The pseudonym is Johannes Anticlimacus [*sic*] in contrast to Climacus, who said he was not a Christian. Anticlimacus is the opposite extreme: a Christian on an extraordinary level—if only I myself manage to be just a simple Christian.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 75.

¹¹⁹Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 6:173-4 (#6431).

Faith's Alternative Is the Possibility of Offense at Christ

While Johannes Climacus presents ‘the issue’ of Christianity, and with that, a detailed elucidation of Christian faith, Anti-Climacus develops his conception of faith further, through the negative concepts of sin and offense.¹²⁰ “The possibility of offense is the dialectical element in everything essentially Christian.”¹²¹ To review, Kierkegaard chooses to communicate indirectly—in part—because Christendom is mired in religious delusion. One of the telling signs is that in a country considered to be almost entirely Christian, the notion of offense *at Christ* is conspicuously absent. The only sort of offense that exists is what Anti-Climacus calls “inessential,” where someone like Abraham relates first to God and only then to the ‘established order.’ Like Kierkegaard in the lectures on communication, Anti-Climacus believes Christendom’s Christians “know too much” or, put differently, they are all *too familiar* with Christianity and its offensive claims.¹²² He reminds his reader that Christ’s words, ‘eat my flesh, drink my blood’ are outrageously offensive to someone unacquainted with Christianity.¹²³

Generally reiterating the criticisms of de silentio and Climacus, Anti-Climacus recounts how the offense of Christianity became watered down. The following extended

¹²⁰We thus have a third sense in which a clarification of Christian faith can be negative. De silentio’s account is negative not just because he is not a Christian, but because Christianity is hardly on his radar. Climacus’s account is negative in that he does not exemplify the concept—Christian faith—that he expounds. Now, Anti-Climacus’s is negative insofar as faith finds its most decidedly Christian treatment in relation to its opposites: sin and offense. We might refer to the first clarification as cognitively negative, the second, existentially negative, and the third, conceptually negative.

¹²¹Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 125.

¹²²Of course in another sense, the combination of such familiarity with the gradual blurring of Christianity’s distinctive categories has left Christendom unacquainted with the offensive claims, precisely because they have not experienced a genuine confrontation *with them* (due to evasion or error).

¹²³Because of the Eucharist, the early church was accused of cannibalism.

quotation is especially important as it demonstrates how in *Practice in Christianity* Kierkegaard's 'attack upon Christendom' began, and thus, how Kierkegaard's relationship to different pseudonyms varies with the pseudonym.¹²⁴ Very similar words can be found in Kierkegaard's own name.

In an inadmissible and illicit way we have become "knowing" about Christ—for the admissible way is to become "believing." We have mutually fortified one another in the thought that by means of the outcome of Christ's life and the eighteen hundred years, by means of the results we have come to know the answer. As this gradually became wisdom, all the vitality and energy was distilled out of Christianity; the paradox was slackened, one became a Christian without noticing it and without detecting the slightest possibility of offense. Christ's teaching was taken, turned, and scaled down; he himself guaranteed the truth as a matter of course—a man whose life had had such consequences in history. Everything became as simple as pulling on one's socks—naturally, for in that way Christianity has become paganism. There is in Christendom an everlasting Sunday babbling about Christianity's glorious and priceless truths, its gentle consolation, but, of course, one bears in mind that it is eighteen hundred years since Christ lived. The sign of offense and the object of faith has become the most fabulous of all fabulous characters, a divine Mr. Goodman. One does not know what it is to be offended, even less what it is to worship. What we especially extol in Christ is the very thing that would make us most indignant if we were his contemporaries, whereas now, in reliance on the outcome, we are completely secure and, in reliance on the fact that history makes it absolutely certain that he was the great one, conclude: Ergo this is the right thing. ...

Christendom has abolished Christianity without really knowing it itself. As a result, if something must be done, one must attempt again to introduce Christianity into Christendom.¹²⁵

To mitigate the offense of Christ and Christianity is to confuse what it means to be a Christian and to have faith.

What is the offense? In one sense, Anti-Climacus's conception of offense is similar to Johannes Climacus's notion of paradox. In a sentence reminiscent of *Philosophical*

¹²⁴This also shows that Kierkegaard's 'attack' is not a category that can be confined just to the last two years of his life, but that it (at least) begins in a year, 1848, that he considers "the richest and most fruitful year I have experienced as an author" (Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, xi).

¹²⁵Ibid., 35-6.

Fragments, Anti-Climacus writes, “The God-man is the paradox, absolutely the paradox. Therefore, it is altogether certain that the understanding must come to a standstill on it.”¹²⁶ (We might pause to consider how quotations like this one capture the sense in which Roger Poole’s approach to the pseudonyms via *différance* is grossly undialectical. Each of the three pseudonyms under consideration takes up the faith-versus-reason debate common in the philosophy of religion. While I have pointed out differences, we can also see the ways in which—in the order Kierkegaard wrote them—each pseudonym builds on or relates his ideas to his predecessor’s.) Anti-Climacus presents an explanation of how and why the paradox of the God-man offends, and as he does so, we can see why in his two works the concept of offense takes precedence over that of the paradox. The reason is that the state of ‘untruth’ that characterizes human existence (according to *Fragments*), sin—the concept to which *The Sickness Unto Death* is devoted—has become the proper Christian explanation of why humans lack faith. That is, the story of the paradox that offends human understanding is not enough—missing is a psychological, existential, motivational, and theological explanation. Missing is the reason *why* the understanding is offended. Humans are offended by Christ primarily because they are sinners. To be a sinner is *not* to rest in God, rely on God, devote oneself to God, or receive God’s grace.

Anti-Climacus analyzes three ways in which Christ offends. First, Christ offends because he collides with the established order. Being offended in this way is no different than being offended by someone like Martin Luther King Jr., who defied the ‘established order’ of the segregationist South. Anti-Climacus calls the other two forms ‘essential

¹²⁶Ibid., 82.

offense’ because they come from one’s ‘unhappy’ confrontation with who Christ was as a person—both God and human. The one offended in relation to Christ’s *loftiness* is bothered “that an individual human being speaks or acts as if he were God, declares himself to be God.”¹²⁷ This skeptical individual desires demonstrations of divinity, yet as Johannes Climacus pointed out in *Philosophical Fragments*, such demonstrations are not what the skeptic needs—they do not convey faith. The other form of ‘essential offense’ comes in relation to Christ’s *lowliness*, his form of a suffering servant: “that the one who passes himself off as God proves to be the lowly, poor, suffering, and finally powerless human being.”¹²⁸ The person offended by Christ’s lowliness is further put off by the requirement to ‘take up her cross’ and become a follower (contemporary) of Christ—in *his debasement*. This suggests that not only must all human understanding “come to a halt”¹²⁹ in relation to Christ, but the human will falters at the implications for the Christian life.

What does all of this imply for faith? Anti-Climacus, aware of such strenuous demands, offers yet another explanation of what offends us about Christianity. “There is so much talk about being offended by Christianity because it is so dark and gloomy, offended because it is so rigorous, etc., but it would be best of all to explain for once that the real reason that men are offended by Christianity is that it is too high, because its goal is not man’s goal, because it wants to make man into something so extraordinary that he

¹²⁷Ibid., 94.

¹²⁸Ibid., 102.

¹²⁹Ibid., 105.

cannot grasp the thought.”¹³⁰ Through faith one becomes ‘extraordinary’ because through faith one realizes that *for God all things are possible*. (Notice once again the continuity with *Fear and Trembling*). While humans differ among themselves in what they think they can accomplish on their own, all humans despair in trying to *become a self* without God. Only through faith in God can one overcome despair. “The believer has the ever infallible antidote for despair—possibility—because for God everything is possible at every moment.”¹³¹ Only through one’s relation to God in faith can despair be put behind, can one be *with* hope.

To have faith, the possibility of offense must be a live option. “Jesus Christ is the object of faith; one must either believe in him or be offended.”¹³² Any response that is not in faith is one of offense, whether “curiosity, which misunderstands, light-mindedness, which misunderstands, instability, self-importance, conceit, prejudice...,”¹³³ etc. The response of the person who overcomes the offense, who relinquishes human understanding and instead believes in Christ, is one of worship. “But to worship, which is the expression of faith, is to express that the infinite, chasmic, qualitative abyss between them [the person of faith and Christ] is confirmed.”¹³⁴ Once again, we find a complementary account to Climacus’s, whose ‘practice of the absolute distinction’

¹³⁰Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 83.

¹³¹Ibid., 39-40.

¹³²Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 33.

¹³³Ibid., 78.

¹³⁴Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 129.

reflects faith's admission of the 'abyss.'¹³⁵ Faith's end in worship of the God-man supports the idea of faith as a passion—a point on which all three pseudonyms agree. One can hardly imagine worshipping someone for whom one lacked the 'highest' passion.

Faith Is Rest in God

While Johannes Climacus in his clarification of Christianity in *Fragments* remarks that faith is foremost a gift bestowed by the God-man, Anti-Climacus takes this insight a step further and articulates *how* the gift is given. Christ offers an invitation: "Come here to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest."¹³⁶ In the previous section we withheld discussion of the invitation itself to discuss the response of offense to this invitation, a response that must be possible for faith to come forward. Now let us consider salvation-rest, the end to which Christ invites the individual human.

In *The Sickness Unto Death* Anti-Climacus refers to the universally human phenomenon of despair as a sickness that needs to be cured.¹³⁷ In his exegesis of the scripture passage quoted above, he continues to use the motif of illness/remedy. He makes several distinctions between Christ-as-healer and normal conceptions of who and what a doctor is and does. First, unlike a doctor in the usual sense, Christ *seeks out* those in need of a remedy. He does not wait for the sick to find him, nor does he peddle his goods in the street for an "exorbitant price." Rather, he seeks the needy on his own

¹³⁵Johannes Climacus writes, "*Worship* is the maximum for a human being's relationship with God, and thereby for his likeness to God, since the qualities are absolutely different" (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 413).

¹³⁶Mt. 11:28.

¹³⁷He also refers to despair as a solution, because it is the universal phenomenon that points humans to their need for God.

initiative. Second, he seeks *all* who are needy, not just some. Christ's life exemplifies neighbor love at its highest in that he prefers no person over another—the only condition is that one be *in need*. Third, demonstrating his love in this sense, Christ makes himself lowly to invite the lowly sufferers. Next, all that he requires of the sick is that they admit their sickness—their need. Once they do, Christ gives them rest. What is the rest?

“The helper is the help.”¹³⁸ The remedy is not information (an objective doctrine or piece of advice), but the very presence of Christ. Here again Anti-Climacus's conception of faith resonates with Johannes Climacus's in regard to the notion of contemporaneity with Christ. Only Anti-Climacus fills in the content. Whereas a human doctor cannot spend much time with each patient but quickly moves on to the next one, “when the helper is the help, he must remain with the patient all day long....”¹³⁹ Christ is spiritually present with the one in need, and he remains with her. Further, Christ is present to each individual *in her individuality*. While in one sense the invitation “blasts away all distinctions in order to gather everybody together,”¹⁴⁰ it also finds everyone in his or her own need, whatever that might be. Most important is that the invitation *finds its way* to each individual in need.

In *Practice in Christianity* Anti-Climacus examines offense theologically, with a focus on what makes the person of Christ offensive—his loftiness and lowliness. *The Sickness Unto Death*, a ‘psychological exposition,’ explores what it is about human nature that causes a reaction of offense, the conclusion that Christ's invitation does not

¹³⁸Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 15.

¹³⁹Ibid., 15-6.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., 17.

apply *to me personally*. One sort of response to the divine might say something like, “I am neither weary or heavy-laden but doing just fine on my own.” Another might say, “I am so weary and heavy-laden that I cannot be helped.” Anti-Climacus diagnoses these reactions as despair—in the first instance, defiant despair and in the second, despair in weakness. Theologically speaking, despair is just the psychological phenomenon of sin—the unwillingness to find life’s meaning in God. *The Sickness Unto Death* largely concerns the development of an individual’s ‘sin-consciousness’ whereby one grows to see her need for salvation *from* sin. Building on this discussion in *Sickness*, Anti-Climacus describes Christ, the inviter, as a *gentle* savior. “And if you are **conscious of yourself as a sinner**, he will not question you about it, he will not break the bruised reed even more, but will raise you up when you accept him; he will not identify you by contrast, by placing you apart from himself so that your sin becomes even more terrible; he will grant you a hiding place with himself and hidden in him he will hide your sins. For he is the friend of sinners.”¹⁴¹ This beautiful passage, full of scriptural allusions, clarifies both how the helper is the help and how the help is rest. The helper knows what each individual needs better than the individual knows it herself. “...this is why the inviter did not dare to wait until those who labor and are burdened come to him—he himself lovingly calls them.”¹⁴² Christ calls each person to himself and all that he requires is that the individual come admitting her sin. This action of submission indicates the belief that Christ can provide rest from the weariness involved in ‘doing life’ on one’s own. How is the rest he gives unique?

¹⁴¹Ibid., 20 (emphasis mine).

¹⁴²Ibid., 21.

“In the grave there is rest, but *beside* the grave there is no rest.”¹⁴³ That is, only when one dies can one truly rest. Thus, in the admission of sin before Christ—in one’s confession of need—one finds rest in a sort of death, a death to the self. In the preface to *The Sickness Unto Death* Anti-Climacus distinguishes the Christian conception of death: “Thus, also in Christian terminology death is indeed the expression for the state of deepest spiritual wretchedness, and yet the cure is simply to die, to die to the world.”¹⁴⁴ Upon death to the world and to one’s own way of existing—that is, a way that does not rely on God—one ‘rises with Christ’ in new life. This conception of ‘Christian death’ is the fulfillment of de silentio’s first movement that we might now describe as death to the finite via the infinite.¹⁴⁵ Christian death-to-self is made simultaneously and *only through* the invitation to rest in Christ, to find salvation in the one who covers or hides one’s sin.

Conclusion

In the course of exploring the pseudonyms’ conceptual remarks about faith I have resisted the temptation to quote from Kierkegaard’s signed writings—in part, to follow Poole’s advice and avoid conflating the views of Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms. Having presented *their* perspectives, however, I shall now return to *For Self-Examination* where Kierkegaard writes about faith in his own hand. This passage, written three years after *Practice in Christianity*, follows very nicely the previous discussion of faith’s connection with ‘Christian death.’

¹⁴³Ibid., 18.

¹⁴⁴Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 6.

¹⁴⁵One of the most significant omissions from de silentio’s conception of faith is the concept of sin, and Anti-Climacus here shows why the notion of sin is integral to a Christian conception of faith.

The Spirit brings *faith, the faith*—that is, faith in the strictest sense of the word, this gift of the Holy Spirit—only after death has come in between. We human beings are not very precise with words; we often talk about faith when in the strictly Christian sense it is not faith. According to the diversity of natural endowments, we are all born with a stronger or weaker immediacy; the stronger, more vigorous it is, the longer it can hold out against resistance. And this endurance, this healthy confidence in oneself, in the world, in mankind, and, along with all this, in God, we call faith. But in the stricter Christian understanding it is not faith. Faith is against understanding; faith is on the other side of death. And when you died or died to yourself, to the world, then you also died to all immediacy in yourself, also to your understanding. It is when all confidence in yourself or in human support, and also in God in an immediate way, is extinct, when every probability is extinct, when it is dark as on a dark night—it is indeed death we are describing—then comes the life-giving Spirit and brings faith. This faith is stronger than the whole world; it has the power of eternity; it is the Spirit's gift from God, it is your victory over the world in which you more than conquer.¹⁴⁶

This quotation supports many claims I have made both in this chapter and in the dissertation as a whole. First, in passages like this there is no reason to deny that Kierkegaard's aims—at least in the signed writings—are sincere and earnest, and thus it is appropriate to view his authorship in light of the ethical and religious categories that he clarifies. If such signed works as *For Self-Examination* are devoted to the same concerns as his pseudonymous works (as is clear with faith), then more must be said about 'indirect communication' than that it is simply jest or play. One must consider Kierkegaard's reasons for the indirect communication (as I have tried to do above).

Second, this passage corroborates my argument at the beginning of this chapter that Kierkegaard and Anti-Climacus largely agree on Christianity and its distinctive categories. To repeat, the reason Kierkegaard chooses to employ this particular pseudonym is not to signal a difference in perspective, but to dispel the possibility that he himself represents Christianity in its ideality. Thus, both Anti-Climacus and Kierkegaard

¹⁴⁶Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination; Judge for Yourself!*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 81-2.

write *from a Christian perspective*, whereas de silentio and Johannes Climacus do not.¹⁴⁷

Why is this significant? It further supports my argument that reading the pseudonyms (and the pseudonyms with Kierkegaard) primarily in terms of their differences is to sell short the very differences between the pseudonyms and the differences in Kierkegaard's motivation for using various pseudonyms.¹⁴⁸

Third, this passage further substantiates my argument in chapter two that the overall movement of the authorship is toward explicitly Christian categories. In the quotation above one can see remnants of de silentio's thought, remnants of Climacus's thought, and merely a rewording of Anti-Climacus's thought. That is to say—de silentio's views of faith are never dismissed or cancelled wholesale, nor are Climacus's. Rather, each pseudonym presents a conception of faith in light of particular misconceptions that plagued Kierkegaard's contemporaries. Then, we see Climacus's conception enhancing de silentio's; then, Anti-Climacus's enhancing Climacus's. Kierkegaard heeds his own advice from *The Point of View*: “do not forget one thing...that it is the religious that is to come forward.”¹⁴⁹

Fourth, this passage begins to show us how—given its similarities with Anti-Climacus's thought—Kierkegaard's indirect communication seeks to bring about conceptual clarification with an aim not toward the conveyance of knowledge (to use the

¹⁴⁷Kierkegaard's 'First and Last Explanation' (in the *Postscript*), where he revokes his connection with the pseudonymous authors, comes before the Anti-Climacus works are written.

¹⁴⁸It would be interesting to consider Kierkegaard's unique relation to each pseudonym based upon what we know of him through the signed writings.

¹⁴⁹Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 46.

term of the lectures on communication¹⁵⁰) but toward the provocation¹⁵¹ of ethical and religious character and wisdom. The personal and confessional nature of de silentio's admiration of Abraham, the strange argument for something that looks just like Christianity in *Fragments*, the devotional, almost preachy prose in which Anti-Climacus describes Christ's invitation directly to the reader—all of these suggest that Kierkegaard's aims *in indirection* are to build his reader up, to 'add a little ethical and religious truth' to his reader's life, through the poetic/pathetic-dialectical. As Anti-Climacus writes in the preface to *The Sickness Unto Death*, "From the Christian point of view, everything, indeed everything, ought to serve for upbuilding. The kind of scholarliness and scientificity that ultimately does not build up is precisely thereby unchristian."¹⁵²

What can finally be said about the concept of faith? It is risky to offer a 'definition' for three reasons. First, if we gave a definition it would be difficult to determine *whose* definition it is. Each of the pseudonyms offers his own 'grammar' of faith and Kierkegaard has his own (e.g., in the signed writings like *For Self-Examination*) that we are unable to examine at this time. While I have argued that Kierkegaard's view is quite similar to Anti-Climacus's, Poole is correct to point out that one must be cautious speaking of "Kierkegaard's view" of this or that. Second, to establish some sort of firm

¹⁵⁰In light of the faith-versus-reason debate that each pseudonym has addressed, we can return to the lectures on communication and the notion of a direct communication as a communication of knowledge and consider how throughout his authorship Kierkegaard constantly is on guard against an approach to God or to faith via human understanding, philosophical or speculative reflection, etc.

¹⁵¹Incidentally, Charles Moore recently edited a selection of Kierkegaard's 'spiritual writings' that he has called *Provocations*.

¹⁵²Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 5.

definition is akin to speaking of Kierkegaard's (or his pseudonyms') 'doctrine' of the concept, but he adamantly opposes any examination that might possibly direct a reader away from his own task of existence. Consider Anti-Climacus's thoughts about the concept of sin: "The category of sin is the category of individuality. Sin cannot be thought speculatively at all. The individual human being lies beneath the concept... there is no earnestness about sin if it is only to be thought, for earnestness is simply this: that you and I are sinners."¹⁵³ One who wishes to speak of a Kierkegaardian 'definition' must always keep in mind *her own relation* to that concept. Third, as I disclaimed above, this study has not exhausted what can be said about faith in Kierkegaard's works—signed or unsigned. One could write an entire monograph on faith in one of the five books we have considered. Thus, any conclusions I could offer represent a limited perspective on this most important concept in Kierkegaard's thought.

Nevertheless, perhaps it is still appropriate to speak of 'Kierkegaard's pseudonymous dialectic of faith.' Without calling it 'Kierkegaard's own view' or 'Kierkegaard's personal view' (though such cases could be made) we can keep in mind his unique relationship to Anti-Climacus and his similar aims of presenting Christianity's ideal qualifications. In speaking of 'dialectic' we mean the 'conceptual dialectic' that Kierkegaard wishes to become his reader's realized or 'existential dialectic'—the dialectic that informs the reader's very existence. Further, we might add that this dialectic is provisional and subject to revision; it is not the final word on faith. Having said that, allow me to summarize the Christian view of faith that ultimately culminates in Anti-Climacus's conception. As Anti-Climacus states, faith is "an altogether

¹⁵³Ibid., 119.

distinctively Christian term,¹⁵⁴ and so aspects of this dialectic that bear similarity to de silentio's (and even Climacus's views) are mediated through Anti-Climacus's conception.

Faith¹⁵⁵ is the highest passion possible for human existence, and specifically it is passion oriented toward God in which an individual (including her will, desires, emotions, and understanding) dies to herself and finds new life in the risen Christ. This new life is the telos of human existence that we can also describe as 'finding our true self' or 'becoming oneself.' Faith is an admission of sin—of weakness before God, and the utter inability to find true meaning without God. It is a response of constant clinging to Christ, the savior, in whom one can finally rest from the life-long task of striving—on one's own—to become the individual one was created to be. The person of faith responds to God's goodness with a life lived in obedience to Christ's commandments to love God, neighbor, and self—whatever this should entail. Thus, faith is a 'gifted virtue'—something we receive as a gift (of grace) and something we practice and develop (through grace).

¹⁵⁴Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 81.

¹⁵⁵I have concluded with a 'positive definition' of faith, and so 'offense' and 'sin' are missing for that reason alone, although their imprint should be apparent.

CHAPTER FIVE

Kierkegaard and Contemporary Moral Philosophy

Introduction

I have defended a number of claims along the way that it might be useful to review. First, I have argued that the primary aim of Kierkegaard's authorship is the moral and religious edification of his reader, whom he called the 'single individual.' With a few exceptions,¹ every work Kierkegaard published (plus some posthumous works like *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* and *The Book on Adler*) is best read in light of this thesis of edification. This thesis does not ignore or trivialize Kierkegaard's unorthodox methods of doing philosophy—his irony, for example. Rather, this view makes the best sense of these methods, *and* it corroborates Kierkegaard's testimony in published and unpublished places that his authorship was devoted to reintroducing Christianity into Christendom. In a moment I will consider the important question of how, given this *Christian* aim, his methods might be useful to philosophers today.

I have also argued alongside scholars like Roberts, Mooney, Davenport, and Gouwens that Kierkegaard can be read beneficially as a member of the virtue tradition broadly construed. Kierkegaard's authorship demonstrates a commitment to the elucidation of virtues and other concepts of moral psychology similar to that of Socrates in Plato's dialogues or Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* or Aquinas's writings on the virtues. Placing Kierkegaard as a thinker can be difficult and problematic for many reasons; there is the diversity of styles he employs in his writing (e.g. the use of many

¹See chapter one, footnote two.

different genres), the various disciplines he speaks from and about (theology, philosophy, psychology, literature), and the confusion (as this dissertation has addressed) over how to understand Kierkegaard's grander authorial intentions given the mixture of signed and pseudonymous writings. The trouble that accompanies our attempts to label Kierkegaard as this or that sort of thinker may in fact be a mark of his unusual genius—his ability to speak with great insight and style on so many different fronts. Thus, while I do not believe that defending Kierkegaard as a virtue thinker is necessary to the primary argument of the dissertation,² it strongly supports my argument and provides contemporary readers of Kierkegaard another way to interpret him than as 'father of existentialism'³ or proto-Derridean.⁴ Insofar as the virtue reading seeks to account for the entire authorship including the signed, religious writings that existentialist and postmodern interpreters tend to ignore,⁵ it offers a much more holistic and balanced interpretation of Kierkegaard's dialectical production.

A natural response to the claim that Kierkegaard devotes his authorship to the project of reintroducing Christianity into Christendom and that his virtue clarification, theory of stages, etc. all serve this end is an objection of parochialism. If Kierkegaard's interests are primarily Christian interests, what use have non-Christians—scholars and

²This is not to say that my thesis does not commit me to other possibly controversial claims about Kierkegaard, e.g. that he is a *Christian* philosopher/theologian/author/psychologist.

³I have in mind Sartrean existentialism or something similar. There are other ways to conceive of existentialism and thus to conceive of Kierkegaard in relation to existentialism (See John J. Davenport, "Towards an Existential Virtue Ethics: Kierkegaard and MacIntyre," in *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre*, ed. John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Chicago: Open Court, 2001), 265-323).

⁴John Caputo is one of the foremost postmodern interpreters of Kierkegaard.

⁵See my discussions of Roger Poole and Joakim Garff in chapters two and three respectively.

non-scholars alike—for Kierkegaard? The thesis of religiously-oriented edification would appear to rule out meaningful dialogue with Kierkegaard for those not sympathetic to or interested in his Christian concerns.

C. Stephen Evans argues that while Christian concerns are fundamental to Kierkegaard’s philosophical interests, his ethical thought *invites* discussion with non-Christian views rather than precludes it. After arguing for a reading of Kierkegaard as a divine command theorist, Evans considers how Kierkegaard’s view of moral obligation lines up beside various non-Christian theories of moral obligation such as those present in evolutionary naturalism, humanistic naturalism, relativism and nihilism.⁶ He claims that Kierkegaard’s view of moral obligation in *Works of Love* offers clear advantages over its secular counterparts and that it deserves a place in the conversation. For example, Evans argues that David Gauthier’s contractual ethic “cannot account for obligations to those who are seriously handicapped or who otherwise cannot be contributors to a ‘cooperative surplus’ that makes morality beneficial to the individual.”⁷ Kierkegaard’s ethic of neighbor love, by contrast, offers a view of the self that lends itself to ethical treatment of all humans, regardless of their ability to contribute in various ways to the common good. Though Evans concedes that many readers may not accept the theological underpinnings of a Kierkegaardian ethic, if his arguments about its relative strengths are convincing, it should at least be a part of the conversation.

⁶See C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard’s Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), chapters 10-12 respectively. Note that while Evans’s concerns are meta-ethical, they nonetheless suggest the relevance of Kierkegaard’s (Christian) ethics in secular discussions.

⁷Ibid., 280.

Aside from the content of Kierkegaard's views, his peculiar style or approach to philosophical ethics is worth taking seriously, especially for those sympathetic to certain approaches to virtue ethics.⁸ (Of course to praise his engaging style without admitting its serious function of edification puts one in danger of aestheticizing the ethical and religious, a distinct tendency of many philosophers of Kierkegaard's own age and, as I have argued in chapters two and three, of our own.) Thus, whether or not one assumes the same moral tradition as Kierkegaard, it is nevertheless instructive to consider the strengths of his communicative methods.

I believe that despite his Christian interests and focus, Kierkegaard offers a rich palate of both methodological and substantive insights for contemporary ethics.⁹ Following my general thesis that Kierkegaard's primary authorial aim involves the edification of his reader, I will argue that Kierkegaard's unique relevance to contemporary moral philosophy lies most importantly in this edifying sort of purpose.¹⁰ Roberts captures how this approach to ethics might look: "Were philosophers to follow his model, their work would consist in clarification of ethical concepts within one or another given tradition, with virtue-concepts perhaps at the center of their interest, the mood of the discourse would be ethical seriousness, and the *telos* of clarification would be to deepen moral self-understanding, to enhance understanding of moral concepts in such a way as to enhance the quality of moral living — in a word, to facilitate growth in

⁸I will say more on this in the final section of this chapter.

⁹One might also investigate his contributions to conversations in other areas like epistemology, metaphysics, and especially philosophy of religion.

¹⁰As I will address below, his criticisms of modern moral philosophy are relevant as well, though less unique.

wisdom.”¹¹ In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre leaves open the possibility of something like this edifying intention, particularly in his praise of Jane Austen, “the last great representative of the classical tradition of the virtues.”¹² Later I will consider how her literature (which MacIntyre calls “ironic comedy”) and Kierkegaard’s philosophy can be seen as directed toward similar ends. Kierkegaard, then, offers a philosophical model—albeit one that heavily incorporates the literary and the ironic—of how moral philosophers can “facilitate growth in wisdom.” This concern goes hand in hand with a resurgence of interest in “thick moral education,” and I will conclude the chapter by discussing how that and other themes that characterize ‘radical’ approaches to virtue ethics finally offer the best bridge between contemporary ethics and Kierkegaard.

It is not uncommon for philosophers to view edification as an inappropriate objective in ethics. In *The Methods of Ethics*, Henry Sidgwick writes, “I have thought that the predominance in the minds of moralists of a desire to edify has impeded the real progress of ethical science: and that this would be benefited by an application to it of the same disinterested curiosity to which we chiefly owe the great discoveries of physics.”¹³ Trying to make a person better is a task for parents or preachers, not philosophers. Bernard Williams believes that moral philosophy has a history of doing things it should not—of transgressing its bounds in a number of ways. Not only has moral philosophy assumed a role it does not deserve, it has, according to Williams, actually damaged ethical knowledge.

¹¹Robert C. Roberts, “Kierkegaard and Ethical Theory,” forthcoming, 27-28.

¹²Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 243.

¹³Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1874), microform, vi-vii.

Before placing Kierkegaard in dialogue with MacIntyre and Austen, I would like to consider Williams's objections to ethical theory and show how Kierkegaard shares many of these concerns and criticisms. Entailed in Williams's concerns, however, is the idea that philosophical ethics has no business practicing edification. On this issue, in particular, Kierkegaard is far less pessimistic than Williams about what ethics can accomplish. I will argue that if we wish to reconceive philosophical thinking in ethics as Williams would have us do—for example, if we are to avoid ethical reductionism and restrain the authority moral philosophers have assumed to determine how one should live an ethical life—then Kierkegaard, who not only takes these concerns seriously but embodies them in his actual practice of philosophy, offers a far richer conception of how philosophers might conduct ethics. He models for the ethicist a non-reductive, analytical approach to ethical concepts, yet one centered in the sorts of interests—the poetic, the rhetorical—that aim at the reader's own ethical maturation, or edification.

Kierkegaard and Williams

It might appear odd to place Kierkegaard and Williams in conversation with one another. Before attempting to synthesize some of their concerns let us admit a few distinctions. Most obviously, Kierkegaard writes as a Christian thinker and primarily directs his moral philosophy toward philosophical problems and questions that arise in relation to Christianity. For example, the pseudonymous explorations of the concept of sin in *The Concept of Anxiety* and *The Sickness Unto Death* examine the *Christian* doctrine of sin (though we should note that the analysis is philosophical and psychological). Kierkegaard's audience is the single individual in Christendom, at least superficially a religious audience, and while professional philosophers comprise a small

part of this audience, his work is not directed just to them. Williams, by contrast, takes up no particular religious position in his work in ethics.¹⁴ His intended audience *is* professional philosophers and more specifically, professional moral philosophers.¹⁵ Another notable difference is the respective proximity to modernity that informs their thinking, as Kierkegaard represents the beginning of modernity's end while Williams comes significantly later. This fact is particularly useful in reminding us that Williams inherits more than a century of commentary on modern philosophy and that he directs much of his work toward undermining twentieth-century instantiations of modern ethics.

Despite these differences in perspective, focus, and proximity to modernity, Kierkegaard and Williams share some important positions about ethical philosophy, philosophical thinking, and the limits of both. Let me be clear up front, however, that these positions are usually expressed quite differently in the two, given the different audiences they are targeting. I will say more on this later. Most significantly, both oppose a simplistic reduction of factors involved in the ethical life that was typical of modern moral philosophy.¹⁶ We might describe the sort of reduction Williams rejects as a reduction *downward*, where the rich and multifarious factors of the ethical life get boiled down to a single consideration, while Kierkegaard opposes a reduction *upward*, or

¹⁴In fact, he is rather critical of certain versions of Christianity and its ethical dimensions. See Williams's *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 77, 80, and *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 32-3.

¹⁵To clarify, this is his audience when he writes about anti-theory. Of course his work extends beyond moral philosophy. The distinction in audience brings light to the particular ways in which both philosophers are critical of Kant. It is unsurprising that Kierkegaard's criticisms extend to the theological implications of Kant's philosophy, unlike Williams's. (Williams's other chief target is utilitarianism, which is hardly on Kierkegaard's radar).

¹⁶Below I will briefly discuss Williams's distinction between the moral and the ethical; if 'ethical' seems forced here (i.e. if 'moral' would sound better), I have reasons for my word choice that should become clear shortly.

the reduction of the ethical by its being sucked up (along with its corresponding category, the individual) into the impersonal ‘system’ of world history. While their critiques are not identical—Williams mainly targets Kant and Mill, while Kierkegaard mainly targets Hegel—they are in certain ways complementary, and both represent responses to modern conceptions of ethics.

The shared critique of reduction suggests a second, positive point of agreement between Williams and Kierkegaard regarding how philosophers might best do ethics: pay attention to and clarify the rich ethical concepts we encounter in our own lives and social worlds. Williams does not develop very far his positive claims about ethics, and what he does say comes in the form of advice to professional philosophers. Conversely, Kierkegaard does not so much advise professional philosophers, but instead practices this point through the sort of conceptual clarification we explored in our look at faith in the previous chapter. Besides these two concerns, I wish to explore the distinct claims each philosopher makes about modernity’s high level of reflectiveness. While they mean two drastically different things by this, an analysis of their respective views will place in sharper contrast their respective philosophical emphases that ultimately determine the limits they wish to draw in philosophical ethics.

Williams’s Critique of Reductionism in Ethics

Williams argues against the reductionism characteristic of modern moral philosophy, when its description of the ethical life 1) reduces to a bare minimum the variety of ethical considerations that factor into a human life, and 2) places above these

ethical considerations moral obligation.¹⁷ What does Williams mean by reductionism and what exactly does modern moral philosophy reduce? In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams claims that moral philosophy's "prevailing fault, in all its styles, is to impose on ethical life some immensely simple model, whether it be of the concepts that we actually use or of moral rules by which we should be guided."¹⁸ Descriptively, it tends to ignore a wide range of what Williams calls ethical and nonethical "considerations" that factor into human lives and decision-making. While the notion of an ethical consideration (out of which he gets much mileage) does not entirely lack content, he admits it is a vague concept. Opposite the reductive tendencies of modern moral philosophy, Williams prefers to cast the net wide, even if he cannot provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for the concept.¹⁹ One distinction he makes clear about ethical considerations is the degree to which our understanding of them is bound to *our lives* as ethical agents. "However vague it may initially be, we have a conception of the ethical that understandably relates to us and our actions the demands, needs, claims, desires, and generally, the lives of other people, and it is helpful to preserve this conception in what we are prepared to call an ethical consideration."²⁰ Williams sees

¹⁷To best facilitate dialogue between Kierkegaard and Williams, I will not present Williams's argument for 2), but instead focus on the first point. For Williams's argument, see chapter ten, "Morality, the Peculiar Institution," of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*.

¹⁸Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 127.

¹⁹He contrasts the 'wide cast' of a view he calls critical reflection with the approach of ethical theory: "Theory looks characteristically for considerations that are very general and have as little distinctive content as possible, because it is trying to systematize and because it wants to represent as many reasons as possible as applications of other reasons. But critical reflection should seek for as much shared understanding as it can find on any issue, and use any ethical material that, in the context of reflective discussion, makes some sense and commands some loyalty" (Ibid., 116-7).

²⁰Ibid., 12.

little profit in whittling away some concise (and potentially narrow) definition and opts instead to explore these considerations inductively.

On the one hand, Williams means to include among ethical considerations a set of concerns that go beyond the (“moral”) considerations of moral obligation present in modern moral philosophy.²¹ He thus rejects the obligation-out, obligation-in principle, a “moral consideration” presupposed by much modern moral philosophy, which suggests that only an obligation can beat another obligation. Williams believes this principle is symptomatic of approaches to ethics that “try to make everything into obligations.”²² Instead, he views obligation as one member of the broader class of ethical considerations (and under obligation there are sub-categories like promises) as is the related deontic concept of duty. But there are many other ethical considerations that inform the ethical life. *Actions* of various sorts and *virtues* of various sorts are types of ethical considerations as well.

By nonethical considerations Williams has in mind, for example, “the considerations of egoism,²³ those that relate merely to the comfort, excitement, self-esteem, power, or other advantage of the agent.”²⁴ This example is helpful, though the vagueness that accompanies the notion of an ethical consideration follows its counterpart as well. Nonethical considerations appear to include any number of factors that affect our actions that we would *not* describe as ethical. Suppose, for example, that I have had a

²¹Ibid., 6.

²²Ibid., 180.

²³By egoism he means the basic idea of self-interest and *not* a particular ethical theory or conception.

²⁴Ibid., 11.

difficult day at work and to comfort and calm myself down, I put my favorite old movie in the VCR and grab my favorite snack out of the pantry. The consideration of comfort that bears on my action to relax on the couch is nonethical, it would seem. Presumably there are ways that my interests of comfort could become ethical considerations or, for that matter “counterethical” considerations. Williams views counterethical considerations as a species of nonethical considerations. Overindulgence counts as a counterethical consideration, and Williams cites malevolence as another example of a motivation that runs opposite to many ethical considerations of virtue.

In modern moral philosophy this variety of considerations—both ethical and nonethical—have been thought derivative from one basic notion, as for instance, in Kant all *nonethical* considerations are reduced to egoism. According to Williams, for Kant “every action not done from moral principle was done for the agent’s pleasure.”²⁵ With regard to *ethical* considerations, deontological ethics—then and now—tends to make duty or obligation basic, while consequentialist ethics makes some notion of the best state of affairs foundational.²⁶ And, with the revival of virtue ethics in the twentieth century, several moral philosophers have accordingly applied this reductive method by making some notion of virtue or the virtues basic.²⁷

Whether the foundational concept is one of these three more prevalent options or something else, Williams believes that reduction of these considerations is misguided in

²⁵Ibid., 15. Some contemporary Kantians would object to this interpretation of Kant.

²⁶Ibid., 16.

²⁷E.g. Michael Slote. Making virtue the foundational concept from which all other ethical concepts are derived exemplifies one way in which virtue ethics can be merely ‘routine.’ In a recent article David Solomon contrasts what he calls routine and radical approaches to virtue ethics, which I will discuss later in reference to Kierkegaard.

two primary ways. As *descriptive* of the ethical life these views just get it wrong. “If there is such a thing as the truth about the subject matter of ethics—the truth, we might say, about the ethical—why is there any expectation that it should be simple? In particular, why should it be conceptually simple, using only one or two ethical concepts, such as *duty* or *good state of affairs*, rather than many? Perhaps we need as many concepts to describe it as we find we need, and no fewer.”²⁸ Instead of a reductive description, “one’s initial responsibilities should be to moral phenomena, as grasped in one’s own experience and imagination.”²⁹ He suggests that when we think this way, we need many more concepts than the foundational projects allow *and* we need them in different ways than the foundational projects allow. But the further inference from *description* to *prescription* in ethical theory—“to tell us how we should think about it”—is even more problematic.³⁰ It is to base a solution on a misdiagnosis of the situation, and even more, it is to offer a solution without the authority to do so.³¹ Williams believes that moral philosophy has no business prescribing an ethic (though he does not think this entails the end of work for moral philosophers). Likewise, for Williams moral philosophy has no business edifying.

So far I have suggested that Williams opposes the reduction of considerations that factor into the ethical life in part because it simplifies something that is far more complex

²⁸Ibid., 17.

²⁹Williams, *Morality*, xxi. Williams advises that one way to overcome the prevailing, simplistic models of ethics is “to attend to the great diversity of things that people do say about how they and other people live their lives” (*Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 127).

³⁰Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 17. (See also p. 74).

³¹On ethical theories’ assuming authority not given them, see Ibid., 99.

in everyday existence. As a *description* of the way things are, it leaves a whole lot out of the story. Second, based upon this miscount of ethical considerations, moral philosophy oversteps its bounds *prescriptively*. It is not surprising that the rules it prescribes are quite simple-sounding since the host of ethical considerations have been boiled down so effectively. There is a further reason why Williams thinks reduction will not work in ethics, and his thought here bears some similarity to Kierkegaard's own concern that we be very clear about how ethical (and religious) truth *as essential truth* is rather unlike any other sort of truth. Given modern moral philosophy's penchant for reduction, its tendency to expect the same of ethical and scientific truth, Williams goes to great lengths to distinguish what we can expect of ethical truth from what we can expect of scientific truth, in opposition to the general tendency of reductionistic moral philosophy. The result is a measure of skepticism regarding the sort of convergence ethical theory can hope to find and to provide.

The basic idea behind the distinction between the scientific and the ethical, expressed in terms of convergence, is very simple. In a scientific inquiry there should ideally be convergence on an answer, where the best explanation of the convergence involves the idea that the answer represents how things are: in the area of the ethical, at least at a high level of generality, there is no such coherent hope. ... It might well turn out that there will be convergence in ethical outlook, at least among human beings. The point of the contrast is that, even if this happens, it will not be correct to think it has come about because convergence has been guided by how things actually are, whereas convergence in the sciences might be explained in that way if it does happen.³²

There is something unique about the hard sciences that tracks the world and is guided by the world that does not obtain in the same way for the ethical. For example, the concept of gravity seems to track what is going on in the world and the world guides us in our

³²Ibid., 136. Williams discusses and rejects Richard Rorty's view that there is no salient difference between scientific and ethical 'truths' (Ibid., 137-38).

conception of gravity. It follows that we could explain the notion of gravity to an alien whose world lacked that feature, and while our explanation would assume a perspective—namely, our own—we could nevertheless expect the alien to understand the concept. Williams thinks this is possible because in the hard sciences we can imagine developing an ‘absolute conception’ of the world—a picture of the world “that might be arrived at by any investigators, even if they were very different from us.”³³ He does not have in mind a view of the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, one that pretends the investigator has no particular, local perspective. Rather, the absolute conception of the world “could nonvacuously explain how it itself, and the various perspectival views of the world, are possible.”³⁴ One can then envision how convergence of our scientific beliefs with the world informs convergence of our scientific beliefs with the scientific beliefs of others.

But the same sort of convergence is not available in ethics, because “in imaginatively anticipating the use of the [ethical] concept, the observer also has to grasp imaginatively its evaluative point. He cannot stand outside the evaluative interests of the community he is observing, and pick up the concept simply as a device for dividing up in a rather strange way certain neutral features of the world.”³⁵ To understand how an ethical concept works in another society involves a great deal more than is required in the alien’s understanding of how gravity works. One cannot easily ‘grasp imaginatively’ an ethical concept’s value vis a vis that particular society and context, and Kierkegaard’s

³³Ibid., 139.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., 142.

conception of essential truth, which presupposes a similar idea, takes the insight a step further. To grasp genuinely a virtue like humility, it is true that one must be able to evaluate that concept within a particular moral community—a task that may or may not be possible depending on one's proximity to that community. But even more, to (begin to) grasp truly the concept of humility involves developing an interest in becoming a humble person oneself. (To awaken this interest in his reader and then to develop it through poetic-pathetic communication is the very challenge facing Kierkegaard). This categorical difference between ethical and scientific truth precludes assumptions that convergence in ethics and science will come about similarly.

If convergence in the ethical is possible, and Williams thinks it may be, then the strongest candidates are the thick ethical concepts like humility or, as he offers, cowardice, lying, brutality, gratitude.³⁶ These sorts of concepts do seem to track the world and guide human action. Importantly, however, they necessarily perform these functions within specific contexts, particular communities (this apparent narrowness of scope is, in fact, what modern ethics wanted to overcome). Problems arise when, confronted by other cultures and their respective ethical concepts, we attempt to understand their thick concepts in light of our own thin concepts.³⁷ (As we will see below, this confrontation is heightened by the peculiarly reflective nature of modern society, which has experienced a loss of thick concepts.) Williams points out that such confrontations can be real—between two present day cultures that are, in some sense, live

³⁶*Ibid.*, 140.

³⁷E.g. good or right.

options—or notional, as when we are confronted with, for instance, ancient views of justice that we now have reason to think are inadequate.

What can philosophy do in these kinds of situations? Can it tell us how to think, one way or the other? The answer is yes *and* no (though mostly ‘no’). Williams claims that ethical theory tends to circumvent understanding ethical confrontations and instead moves directly toward their resolution, where it tries to “give some compelling reason to accept one intuition rather than another. The question we have to consider is: How can any ethical theory have the authority to do that?”³⁸ He is not suggesting that philosophical ethics has nothing to do in these situations: “an ethically idiosyncratic outlook will not simply be left alone, inasmuch as it touches on any matters of importance or on the interests of others.”³⁹ If philosophical ethics is to avoid reduction—that is, if philosophical thinking is to head the opposite direction as ethical theory—its role will be largely diminished by comparison to its modern counterparts. Part of the reason for this involves recognition of the need to defer to other fields (for example, sociology, biology, history) in coming to understand such confrontations. Even though they are *ethical* confrontations, there are, as we saw above, numerous nonethical considerations that factor into ethical confrontations. Positively, philosophy’s focus will be on the thicker sorts of ethical concepts, yet as we have seen, consideration of these concepts makes the ethical picture muddier, not clearer (though, no muddier than it really is). Williams warns that nonreductive ethics should not expect to achieve the sort of

³⁸Ibid., 99.

³⁹Ibid., 98-99.

certainty that scientific truths often enjoy. Further, it must account for the unusual level of reflectiveness that Williams thinks characterizes the modern world.

Reflectiveness as a Problem for Ethics

Williams believes “that the urge to reflective understanding of society and our activities goes deeper and is more widely spread in modern society than it has ever been before; and that the thicker kinds of ethical concept have less currency in modern society than they did in more traditional societies....”⁴⁰ What does he mean by reflectiveness and what has caused this general propensity toward it? What is the connection between reflectiveness and the loss of thick ethical concepts? While he never states definitively what gets included in the concept of reflectiveness, he does not simply mean thinking ‘outside one’s self,’ as we might commonly understand the term. In saying the modern world can be described as highly reflective Williams is moving toward a conception of reflectiveness as a component of the modern world that unseats traditional ethical knowledge. As mentioned above, confrontation with other cultures (whether real or notional) where one party attempts to relate to or understand another’s thick concepts in light of its own thin ones exemplifies how, according to Williams, ethical knowledge gets unseated in the modern world. What at times can be noble attempts to understand a different tradition tend to result in reductive explanations of that tradition’s ethical claims.⁴¹

⁴⁰Ibid., 163.

⁴¹See the case of the hypertraditional society below.

Besides confrontation with other cultures, reflectiveness in the form of ‘progress’ has contributed to the loss of ethical knowledge.⁴² The quest for greater understanding of the world and nature (the hard sciences), of God (theology and metaphysics), of social relationships, (sociology and anthropology) and of what it means to be human (history, philosophy, psychology)—all of these undertakings where great progress was made in modernity and continues to be made can beget the sort of reflection that unseats ethical knowledge. How has this occurred? Williams believes there are many ‘myths of the Fall,’⁴³ many explanations of what ‘did in’ God or a particular belief in human nature, etc., though he does not commit himself to any one of them. Regardless, the religious or metaphysical presuppositions that characterized civilizations in the past and that supported, among other things, their ethical beliefs—these underpinnings have been greatly upset.⁴⁴ And Williams suggests, forebodingly, “There is no route back from

⁴²There is a third, related way reflection can destroy ethical knowledge, though this point is not made by Williams but instead by Roberts and Wood (though it is an interpretation of Williams). It is best explained by way of an illustration they make about a young college student whose ethical knowledge gets unseated in his college ethics course. The student, who by all accounts is a fairly virtuous individual, has been reared with particular moral convictions that fail to gain support, substantiation, or justification in the modern ethical theories he has learned in this course. The student leaves dejected, questioning the convictions that he, at one point, held quite firmly. Speaking of the particular moral conviction that has been undermined, Roberts and Wood conclude: “The result of the semester’s reflection about “ethics” is a weakened repugnance for actions in which one person deceives another for gain and convenience. Reflection has destroyed (or at least weakened) knowledge” (*Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology*, forthcoming). As stated, Williams does not (at least explicitly) have this sort of scenario in mind, though it is obviously instructive as an extension of the idea that reflection/reflectiveness can destroy ethical knowledge.

⁴³For example, the first great World War, the Industrial Revolution, Galileo, or the Protestant Reformation (Ibid., 163).

⁴⁴Though he never states this explicitly, Williams thinks they have been entirely upset for those of us reading moral philosophy in the west or those of us educated in higher liberal education. However, I am inclined to think that discoveries in the sciences, etc. have not upset as much as he thinks for as many people (educated liberally in the west) as he thinks, and I will expand on this later.

reflectiveness.”⁴⁵ This claim seems obviously true in scientific cases, where certain cosmological conceptions of the past, for instance, have been overturned by a high level of reflection and development in the sciences, and surely there is no way back to those earlier presuppositions (nor would we hope there to be). But the same holds true for social and ethical beliefs like, for example, those of hierarchical civilizations of the past. In most cases the religious (or metaphysical) support for such views of society has now been undermined, and thus, we cannot return to such conceptions from where we are now. It is very important to note that *we* cannot return to such conceptions, but Williams acknowledges the obvious fact that such hierarchical societies still exist today.⁴⁶

To return to the problem raised above, how do we whose lives are characterized by a high level of reflectiveness respond when confronted with such societies that are not reflective in this way? Williams claims there are two ways we can conceive of the activities of ‘hypertraditional’ societies. On an objectivist model, one that interprets their ethical claims as claims that have implications for the larger world, “they do not have knowledge, or at least it is most unlikely that they do, since their judgments have extensive implications, which they have never considered, at a reflective level, and we have every reason to believe that, when those implications are considered, the traditional use of ethical concepts will be seriously affected.”⁴⁷ By contrast, if we construe their activities on a nonobjectivist model, where their judgments are viewed as “a cultural

⁴⁵Ibid., 163.

⁴⁶“Some version of modern technological life has become a real option for members of surviving traditional societies, but their life is not a real option for us, despite the passionate nostalgia of many” (Ibid., 161).

⁴⁷Ibid., 148.

artifact they have come to inhabit,” then the members of that society can be understood as having ethical knowledge; that is, their ethical concepts can be world-guided and action guiding.⁴⁸ Of course this sort of ethical knowledge has not been subjected to the reflection that characterizes the modern world.

This odd predicament leads Williams to “the notably un-Socratic conclusion that, in ethics, *reflection can destroy knowledge*.”⁴⁹ One may hold out hope that on an objectivist view that *does* take into account reflectiveness (i.e. *not* a hypertraditional society), we might still attain some ethical knowledge. Williams offers a minimal concession: “No doubt there are some ethical beliefs, universally held and usually vague (“one has to have a special reason to kill someone”), that we can be sure will survive at the reflective level. But they fall far short of any adequate, still less systematic, body of ethical knowledge at that level....”⁵⁰

Thus, if someone in a hypertraditional society leaves that setting and attends a liberal university in the northeastern United States, it is possible and perhaps probable that her subsequent reflection upon the society in which she was reared will unseat, or as Williams puts it, “destroy” much of what she understood (and what her relatives and neighbors still understand) as ethical knowledge. Williams clarifies:

To say that knowledge is destroyed in such a case is not to say that particular beliefs that once were true now cease to be true. Nor is it to say that people turn out never to have known the things they thought they knew. What it means is that these people once had beliefs of a certain kind, which were in many cases pieces of knowledge; but now, because after reflection they can no longer use concepts essential to those beliefs, they can no longer form beliefs of that kind. A certain

⁴⁸Ibid., 147.

⁴⁹Ibid., 148.

⁵⁰Ibid., 148.

kind of knowledge with regard to particular situations, which used to guide them round their social world and helped to form it, is no longer available to them. Knowledge is destroyed because a potentiality for a certain kind of knowledge has been destroyed; moreover, if they think about their earlier beliefs, they will now see them as the observer saw them, as knowledge they do not share.⁵¹

Such is the predicament of the hypertraditional émigré. Williams concludes that perhaps ethical knowledge as understood above is *not* the best ethical state, and that instead it is better to have grown in our reflectiveness, to have made advancements in human nature, history, and the sciences, as we in fact have. (One wonders how else to respond besides throwing one's hands in the air). As stated above, *certainty* about ethical truths (like that enjoyed by the sciences) will not follow in a society and age characterized by a high level of reflectiveness. But Williams believes that such a model misunderstands the nature of ethical truth anyhow. A better model, according to Williams, conceives of one's ethical beliefs in terms of *confidence* in those beliefs—a posture toward the ethical that is open to ongoing critical reflection.

To summarize, *our* world is marked by such a high degree of reflection that we cannot believe most things (e.g. certain religious and metaphysical propositions) that undergird traditional ethical beliefs. Because thick ethical concepts tend to accompany the sorts of beliefs we can no longer have, we are left with a small supply of them plus a number of thin concepts (e.g. good and right) that, unlike their thick counterparts, fail to track the world or guide action. Williams believes that one remedy for reductionistic moral philosophy requires that we “attend to the great diversity of things that people do say about how they and other people live their lives,” and presumably, this set includes thick ethical concepts. Yet, we are more and more closed to them because of our high

⁵¹Ibid., 167.

level of reflectiveness. This dilemma—that arguably the best approach to ethics includes exploration of thick ethical concepts, yet such concepts are likely to be destroyed by further reflection—lies at the center of Williams’s anti-theoretical approach to ethics and his skepticism about the possibility for convergence.

Let us tie together the phenomenon of reflectiveness and Williams’s earlier criticism of reductionism. Modern moral philosophy and its contemporary counterparts tend to reduce ethics to a narrow description of what counts in an ethical life and, consequently, it offers simplistic answers about how agents should act.⁵² Much of the error lies in a misunderstanding of the sort of thing ethical truth is—downplaying its being a kind of practical reasoning and its involving the passions and emotions. But this approach that abstracts from the individual in terms of her context, her particular desires, her emotions, etc. is to be expected in modernity if Williams is correct that a high level of reflectiveness engulfs modernity. Something must give, and for Williams, this includes high expectations about what philosophical thinking in ethics can achieve. Thus, we can understand his opposition to the projects of ethical theories that “commit themselves to the view that philosophy can determine, either positively or negatively, how we should think in ethics.”⁵³ He rejects such theories and instead opts for an “outlook” that assumes much more modesty about what it can and should achieve. His view “is an outlook that

⁵²For example, in his well-known illustration of Jim and the Indians, this is precisely Williams’s argument against utilitarianism. Utilitarianism’s simplistic and reductive description of and prescription for the ethical life is apparent when it assumes that the ‘best state of affairs’ is one that is easily recognizable, that an agent is responsible to bring such a state about, and that acts of omission are equivalent to acts of commission—that one is just as culpable in letting an innocent be shot as he would be if he shot the innocent himself. See Williams’s “A Critique of Utilitarianism” republished in *20th Century Ethical Theory*, ed. Steven M. Cahn and Joram G. Haber (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995).

⁵³Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 74. That philosophy could tell us how to think *negatively* in ethics means that philosophy could determine the truth of moral skepticism or nihilism. Williams does not think philosophy can do this.

embodies a skepticism about philosophical ethics, but a skepticism that is more about philosophy than it is about ethics.”⁵⁴

So, what positive work can this “outlook approach” accomplish? What would Williams have moral philosophers do? I have already mentioned his suggestion that philosophers pay more attention to the rich phenomena that informs our ethical lives. Part of this seems to involve consideration of those thick ethical concepts to which we still have access, or at least thinking about how these thick concepts function in the ethical life. But again, we must bear in mind that with the growth of reflection runs the possibility that these thick concepts “might be driven from use,” that our knowledge of them may be “destroyed.”⁵⁵ Complementary to a focus on the multi-faceted ethical and nonethical considerations that color a human life, Williams believes philosophers need to be more open to the wisdom of other fields. Were ethicists to pay attention to the insights about human nature that continue to be made in the hard and social sciences, in history, and perhaps the arts, they might gain a more holistic conception of ethics and the ethical life. Williams’s “optimism” lies in the hope that in spite of the high level of reflectiveness constantly lurking around the corner (i.e. the prospect that these other fields might destroy ethical knowledge), individual humans and individual communities will not lose their distinctiveness, but instead, a human life will be “*somebody’s*.”⁵⁶ He believes that the outlook approach to ethics will not abstract from all the particularities of being human, as its modern counterparts did.

⁵⁴Ibid., 74.

⁵⁵Ibid., 167.

⁵⁶Ibid., 202.

While Williams's scant optimism is admirable, it is difficult to see how the continual erosion of thick concepts (given the persistence of reflectiveness) will not eventually dissolve what makes humans distinct from one another (not to mention thin out ethical beliefs generally).

Though we have not yet examined Kierkegaard on the related issues of reduction and reflectiveness, let us pause to consider two tensions that have surfaced. First, Williams states explicitly that philosophy cannot determine how we think about ethics, yet Kierkegaard uses philosophy to show how we should think about ethics. Second, the thick ethical concepts Kierkegaard considers are largely religious concepts whose basis includes religious (and metaphysical) beliefs which, if they are not hypertraditional in Williams's sense, are at best unpalatable in our reflective modern society.⁵⁷ Thus, if no thinker (or at least no reader of Williams) can commit to the religious or metaphysical underpinnings of Christianity,⁵⁸ then this person can not accept the ethical beliefs that follow either.

Getting clear about the first problem will begin to shed light on how radically different than that of most philosophers is Kierkegaard's practice of philosophy. He views philosophy as a tool to convey ethical truth in a particular way. That is, philosophy does not stand in any authoritative position for Kierkegaard (as, Williams suggests, it did for the moderns), but rather it is an instrument for reintroducing Christianity into Christendom. To put the point another way, Kierkegaard agrees with Williams that

⁵⁷He assumes Christianity to be false (Williams, *Morality*, 80).

⁵⁸Of course the issue extends beyond Christian belief to include other religious or metaphysical beliefs that ground ethical beliefs and that are undoubtedly problematic for a society at the peak of reflectiveness.

philosophy has no business prescribing an ethic or telling us how to think in ethics. The next question to ask, however, is whether that entails that philosophy cannot or should not edify? It seems to depend on what one expects from philosophy in the first place. While in the end Williams comes to expect little of philosophy, his pessimism or disappointment seems to follow from critiques of philosophy where the expectations were too high from the start. Kierkegaard himself has little confidence that philosophy—especially as practiced by most of his immediate predecessors—could ever somehow ‘reveal’ or ‘deduce’ essential (ethical and religious) truth or truth essential to human existence. Why? For one thing, essential truth is not simply a matter of getting propositions right or arguments in line. Understanding the propositions that comprise essential truth necessarily requires more than cognitive assent; one comes to ‘know’ them through conviction and passion. This is why Kierkegaard’s communicative methods involve both the dialectical and pathetic. For Kierkegaard, philosophy is a tool or instrument he uses in the service of an authority on essential truth—for him, Christianity. This is not to suggest that essential truth eludes non-Christians. As we have seen above, Socrates exemplifies the pagan philosopher who has some grasp on essential truth. However, the reason Kierkegaard praises him is because he is fundamentally aware that examination of essential truth is always redirected back to himself, his own existence or life. This is a view of philosophy that was, for the most part, absent in modernity, which explains why it is not a live option for Williams.

So Williams is correct that Socrates, Aristotle, Kant, and Mill have no authority telling us how to live the good life (though of course they can help us with asking the question and formulating an answer; they cannot give the answer). But Kierkegaard never thought philosophy could do this anyway. If we then conceive of philosophy in

this Kierkegaardian sense—if we dethrone it or deprive it of authority to tell us how to live—then it certainly can be used *in the service of* that which *can* tell us how to think about ethics, whether *that* is Christianity or some other religion or no religion at all. Thus, in this sense philosophy can edify.

But if we restrain philosophy in this way, why think that it has the ability or authority to overturn ethical beliefs grounded in religious beliefs? As a philosopher *and* a Christian, Kierkegaard would be the first to say that philosophical thinking and critical reflection can help to refine or hone religious beliefs (and ethical beliefs grounded in religious beliefs).⁵⁹ However, for Kierkegaard the Christian revelation represents the authority from which he works to expound and convey ethical concepts. And while there have been many attempts to accommodate the ethical insights of Christianity without the corresponding metaphysical claims (e.g. miracles), Williams and Kierkegaard would agree that this is untruthful. This is not the place to engage in the exhausted questions of whether belief in God and miracles, etc. is reasonable. We can leave these questions open, however, if philosophy is not given more credit and power than it is due.

Looking ahead, MacIntyre will be a helpful interlocutor for Kierkegaard. First, he represents a key figure in philosophy who does not dismiss religious truth claims, and second, he provides us with greater positive advice about *where* to investigate the thick ethical concepts—namely within and for our particular communities. Williams's skepticism about ethics is tied to his skepticism about convergence in the ethical, but perhaps if we reconceive ethics in the way described above, then—with MacIntyre—we will come to see convergence as a project that is and always will be ongoing, and thus we

⁵⁹ For Kierkegaard's view of the relationship between faith and reason, see C. Stephen Evans's *Faith Beyond Reason*.

should expect no more than ‘local clarification,’ or ethical work *within* and *for* a particular tradition.

Before turning to MacIntyre, I want to consider Kierkegaard’s analogous critique of ethical reductionism as well as his own take on the issue of philosophical reflection and ethics. As stated above, there is little overlap with Williams on the latter point, but our consideration of it will supplement my argument for reading Kierkegaard alongside certain ‘radical’ virtue thinkers, including Jane Austen.

Kierkegaard and ‘the Loss of the Individual’

Kierkegaard’s opposition to reduction of the ethical life takes as its primary target Hegel and, more generally, speculative philosophy.⁶⁰ As stated above, the reduction Kierkegaard rejects is related to, though not identical with Williams’s. While Williams opposes the forced sifting of many considerations down to one, Kierkegaard argues against a reduction of the ethical life into nothing at all. He puts it tersely: “Hegelian philosophy has no ethics.”⁶¹ What can he mean by this claim? After all, Hegel speaks voluminously about ethics throughout his writings. Kierkegaard thinks that speculative preoccupation and obsession with world history has left no room for living an actual ethical life, and this follows because Hegel has left no place for it in his system.

⁶⁰One often gets the sense in Kierkegaard’s writings that by ‘Hegel’ he means speculative philosophy generally speaking, and that at other times when he says ‘speculative philosophy’ he has in mind Hegel.

⁶¹Søren Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 129. (*The Book on Adler* was published posthumously, and Kierkegaard went back and forth over the issue of pseudonymity. There is no compelling reason not to ascribe its authorship to Kierkegaard.) See also Kierkegaard’s *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 119, and *Stages on Life’s Way*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 231.

Hegelian philosophy looks at the past, at the six thousand years of world history, and now is busy with showing each individual development to be an element in the world-historical process. Charming! But when he was living, the late Prof. Hegel had, and every living person has or at least ought to have, an ethical relation to the future. Hegelian philosophy knows nothing about this. From this it follows quite simply that every living person who with the help of Hegelian philosophy wants to understand himself in his own personal life falls into the most foolish confusion. In Hegelian fashion, he will be able to understand it only when it is past, when it has been traversed, when he is dead—but now, unfortunately, he is living. With what, then, is he actually to fill his life while he is living? With nothing...⁶²

There are two ways in which ethics is “absent” or reduced to the extreme in Hegelian philosophy. First, in drawing so much attention to the past, such philosophy orients people in the wrong direction. Recall Kierkegaard’s well-known claim: “Philosophy is perfectly right in saying that life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other clause—that it must be lived forwards.”⁶³ The proper orientation of ethics is the future.⁶⁴ “Only ethics can place a living person in the proper position; it says: the main thing is to strive, to work, to act...”⁶⁵ When one’s focus is backwards, the notion of learning from the past to improve in the future has little import. The Christian categories of repentance and hope for forgiveness, for example, lose their currency because one’s reflection on past action becomes trivial and speculative, not, one might say, existential. One can dangerously adopt a ‘no regrets’ attitude by justifying every past event as

⁶²Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, 129.

⁶³Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 7 vols. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1967-78), 1:450 (#1030).

⁶⁴Alasdair MacIntyre writes that one of the steps in becoming a flourishing and independent practical reasoner is growing in awareness of “an imagined future” (*Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1999), 74-6.). This is not to suggest that one thinks about one’s future in the explicit terms of the virtues or practical reason, but that one’s life—commitments, dreams, desires, etc.—are not simply driven by momentary considerations (as for Kierkegaard’s ‘aesthete’).

⁶⁵Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, 131.

playing some role or another in world history. Second, this backward orientation removes the individual from the possibility of experiencing serious ethical conviction because of the level of reflection it involves. The individual as ethical agent or, as Kierkegaard might say, an actual existing person, gets replaced by the individual as spectator of world history. We will return to *this* problem of reflection below.

In *Two Ages* Kierkegaard expounds the loss of the category of individuality that corresponds to the absence of ethics in Hegel. There he distinguishes between a revolutionary age—an age of passion and commitment to an idea—and the ‘present age,’ “a sensibly, reflecting age, devoid of passion, flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence.”⁶⁶ While Kierkegaard does not mention the existence spheres in *Two Ages*, the present age clearly shares similarities with the aesthetic, which gets dominated by short-lived interests⁶⁷ and lacks any sense of duty or commitment to a higher, eternal ideal, religious or otherwise.⁶⁸ As passionless, the present age has undergone what Kierkegaard calls leveling, the process whereby distinctions among humans—both their accidental features and their moral lives—get eliminated. Thus, “whereas a passionate age *accelerates, raises up and overthrows, elevates and debases*, a reflective apathetic age does the opposite, it *stifles and impedes*,

⁶⁶Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 68.

⁶⁷Below we will discuss MacIntyre, Austen, and Kierkegaard on the notion of constancy.

⁶⁸Herein lies another support for a consistent intention in the authorship. *Two Ages*, a signed writing, spills much ink on the aesthetic aspects of Kierkegaard’s contemporaries, and *The Point of View* explains the early aesthetic writings as tools to lure his contemporaries away from the aesthetic and toward the ethical and religious.

it levels.”⁶⁹ If Kierkegaard’s conception of leveling sounds abstract, this follows from its nature. Leveling is “an abstract power,” “abstraction’s victory over individuals,” “a reflection-game in the hand of an abstract power,” a “spontaneous combustion of the human race.”⁷⁰ Just as the concept of abstraction implies the elimination of the concrete, leveling implies the elimination of the category of individuality. In its place we find the categories ‘generation,’ ‘public,’ and ‘age,’ behind which the individuals that make up the age, according to Kierkegaard, hide.⁷¹

Leveling does not precede reflectiveness but results from it and from the corresponding absence of passion. Kierkegaard describes the reflection of his age as a web, a seductress, and a prison.⁷² It traps individuals in never-ending reflection and thus, inaction. A few factors contribute to the difficulty of escaping such reflection. First, reflection is *prima facie* a good practice. Thus, the idea of tempering or stopping reflection can appear wrongheaded. Second, if reflection becomes excessive it is quite difficult to realize this because reflection subjects that possibility to further reflection, and that one to further reflection, etc. As Kierkegaard says, “the fact that reflection is holding the individual and the age in a prison, the fact that it is reflection that does it and not tyrants and secret police, not the clergy and the aristocracy—reflection does everything in its power to thwart this discernment and maintains the flattering notion that

⁶⁹Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 84.

⁷⁰Ibid., 84, 86, 87.

⁷¹Above we discussed an example from Kierkegaard’s own experience of individuals hiding behind the abstraction of the press (i.e. the *Corsair*). The press represents one of the most evil instantiations of the public or the crowd (Ibid., 90-3).

⁷²Ibid., 69, 81.

the possibilities which reflection offers are much more magnificent than a paltry decision.”⁷³ The ‘paltry decision’ reflection prevents turns out not to be paltry at all, but the sort of resolution involved in the ethical and religious stages of existence, where one commits oneself to an eternal ideal (whatever form that might take) and to place trust in God. Reflection puts these decisions off by more reflection.⁷⁴ As I argued in chapter four, Kierkegaard’s condemnation of one kind of reflection should not be understood as irrationalism or opposition to all forms of philosophical reflection, or even to all philosophical reflection about ethical and religious truth. After all, he exhaustively engages in philosophical reflection—*especially* about ethical and religious truth.⁷⁵ “Reflection is not the evil, but the state of reflection, stagnation in reflection, is the abuse and the corruption that occasion retrogression by transforming the prerequisites into evasions.”⁷⁶ Un-Socratic or un-Aristotelian reflection—that which does not aim at cultivating the requisite pathos characteristic of the concept under consideration—

⁷³Ibid., 81-2. See also Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, 127.

⁷⁴In his consideration of sin in *The Concept of Anxiety*, the pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis writes, “It is not in the interest of ethics to make all men except Adam into concerned and interested spectators of guiltiness but not participants in guiltiness” (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 36).

⁷⁵In *On My Work as an Author*, Kierkegaard discusses how the aim of his authorship, which “has been decisively marked by *reflection*,” is ultimately to lead one toward the simplicity of the Christian life. He believes the “insightful person” will see that his focus has been on “the religious completely cast into reflection, yet in such a way that it is completely taken back out of reflection into simplicity—that is, he will see that the traversed path is: to *reach*, to *arrive at* simplicity. And this is also (in *reflection*, as it in fact was originally) the **Christian movement**. Christianly, one does not proceed from the simple in order then to become interesting, witty, profound, a poet, a philosopher, etc. No, it is just the opposite; *here* one begins and then becomes more and more simple, arrives at the simple. This, in “Christendom,” is *Christianly* the movement of reflection; one does not reflect oneself into Christianity but reflects oneself out of something else and becomes more and more simple, a Christian” (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 6-7).

⁷⁶Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 96.

represents the sort of reflection Kierkegaard attacks here. What makes such reflection harmful is its penchant for breeding ethical evasion. In certain contexts like nineteenth-century educated Denmark or like many academic communities in our own day, it can be easier to speculate about ethical matters *ad infinitum* than to incorporate ethical truth into one's life.

As I stated above, while Kierkegaard claims ethics is absent in Hegelian philosophy, this of course is not strictly true. Yet Kierkegaard believes that even in Hegel's primary ethical category, ironically, the ethical is absent. Critiques of *Sittlichkeit*, the idea of societal customs as determinative of ethical practices and norms, can be found throughout the authorship both in the signed and pseudonymous writings.⁷⁷ For Kierkegaard, *Sittlichkeit* perfectly embodies the phenomenon of leveling, which is to take not just our social cues but ethical ones from an immanent source—namely the public. “The idolized positive principle of sociality in our age is the consuming, demoralizing principle that in the thralldom of reflection transforms even virtues into *vitia splendida* [glittering vices]. And what is the basis of this other than a disregard for the separation of the religious individual before God in the responsibility of eternity.”⁷⁸ For Kierkegaard as for de silentio, the individual gets leveled and lost in *Sittlichkeit* because the primary relationship to God has been trumped by immanence.⁷⁹

⁷⁷The most notable example is *Fear and Trembling*.

⁷⁸Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, 86.

⁷⁹The basic category of the individual before God, *coram deo*, can be found throughout the authorship and is especially important in *The Sickness Unto Death*.

Kierkegaard's rejection of Hegelian ethics finds its ultimate basis in theology.⁸⁰

“Christianity proclaims itself to be a transcendent point of departure, to be a revelation in such a way that in all eternity immanence cannot assimilate this point of departure and make it an element.”⁸¹ The problem is that in the present age Hegelianism (and what it involves, including *Sittlichkeit*) and Christianity have been mixed, or as Kierkegaard understands it, Hegelianism has contaminated Christianity. Even worse, many Christians—especially those who are philosophers and have read Hegel—think they are good Christians *because* they are Hegelians.

Kierkegaard argues that Hegelianism (and its followers) should 1) break with Christianity entirely (i.e. stop subsuming it in the system) and 2) quit referring to itself as ‘Christian philosophy.’ Unfortunately, it “does neither of the two; it invents mediation and volatilizes the concept of revelation.”⁸² Ultimately, then, the reduction of ethics and the corresponding loss of the individual can be traced to the conceptual confusion that characterizes Kierkegaard's Christendom. The fundamental concept that gets confused, the one that takes a hit whenever others get jumbled, is what it means to become a Christian. Hegelianism, in its ethical content, its mixing with Christianity, its focus backward, and its call to a particular kind of reflection, is the primary culprit of this confused state.

⁸⁰One can certainly reject Hegel's ethics without resort to Christianity (as de silentio does in *Fear and Trembling*). However, Kierkegaard thinks Hegel's ethic is diametrically opposed to Christianity, yet Hegel refers to his philosophy as Christian. Thus, it is in Kierkegaard's interest to show how *Sittlichkeit* is *not* a Christian view.

⁸¹Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, 120.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 120.

To summarize, Kierkegaard opposes the reduction of the ethical that is characteristic of speculative thought, which in its dismissal of the category of individuality minimizes ethics to a point of unimportance. He also objects to the high level of speculation and reflection that accompanies specifically Hegelian ethical reduction, yet as I pointed out, his communication “has been decisively marked by *reflection*.”⁸³ Clearly Kierkegaard engages in a different sort of philosophical reflection, one that seeks to edify by straightening out ethical and religious concepts that have been jumbled, and by doing so in such a way as to assist readers in becoming persons of ethical and religious character. Seen in this way, Kierkegaard employs philosophy to offer a corrective, and in particular, an ethical and religious corrective Roberts likens to “therapy.”⁸⁴ Williams’s critique of ethical reductionism and his call toward greater consideration of ethical phenomena and thick concepts is also a corrective; however, it aims to correct how philosophers do ethics, not ethical agents themselves. Yet, if we conceive of philosophy as Kierkegaard does, if it is not itself an authority yet can be used in the service of some other authority about ethical truth, then philosophy can serve as a corrective not just for its own practice but for ethical agents themselves. Let us turn to MacIntyre as perhaps the most important contemporary figure sympathetic to a concern of edification.

MacIntyre, Austen, and Kierkegaard

⁸³Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 7.

⁸⁴Robert C. Roberts, “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and a Method of ‘Virtue Ethics’,” in *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, ed. Martin J. Matušík and Merold Westphal (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 146.

Besides his own distaste for Christianity, Williams leaves us with the more general sense that doing ethics within a religious context is bound to fail given the likelihood that the mythic underpinnings that support such ethical beliefs will not survive our reflection upon them.⁸⁵ Above I suggested that MacIntyre might further a conversation to which Kierkegaard could beneficially contribute. MacIntyre's recognition of the contextual nature of ethics⁸⁶—the centrality of a set of social practices, the narrative structure and unity of a human life, and a particular moral tradition—suggests that one way to allow Kierkegaard into contemporary discussions of ethics is to understand him as concerned with a particular moral tradition, yet this is how I have presented him above, and this is how he understands his own intention of reintroducing Christianity into Christendom. Again, even if contemporary interlocutors are uninterested in the *Christian* aspect of his work, Kierkegaard's method of doing ethics can illuminate current approaches, as can his rich analyses of the concepts of moral psychology. If ethicists think that much good work can and should be done *within* particular ethical contexts (if they drop the project that seeks an Archimedean point), then Kierkegaard offers numerous insights on how one might go about such a project.

⁸⁵Williams allows for religious discussion of ethical truth under the non-objectivist model, though—from the outside—he of course thinks such a community is mistaken and unreflective, and one cannot leave reflection (and all that entails) to return (or go for the first time) to such a community. I will not devote space or energy to arguing against Williams's assumptions and claims about religion and religious truth, nor will I defend the possibility that non-naturalistic religious truth is a live option. It is not at all clear that theists need to view further reflection or progress in various fields as a threat to their religion (and subsequently, the related ethical claims). Such reflection is not a threat for them 1) if they do not view their religious claims as necessarily in wholesale competition with the claims of, e.g. psychology (there are, of course, some religious claims that are incompatible with certain claims of psychology, etc.), 2) if they hold their beliefs with the appropriate balance of modesty and conviction, and 3) if they do not view reason as able to unseat faith.

⁸⁶Note that this is not a claim that *truth* is contextual. That is a different, though relevant question I do not have the time to consider. We can leave the question of absolute truth in ethics open and yet be committed to the notion that agreement on ethical truth is the kind of project that will be ongoing—that, as argued above, convergence in ethical truth differs from convergence in scientific truth.

In his call for a return to the virtues, MacIntyre directs our attention to Jane Austen. What makes a comparison between Austen and Kierkegaard particularly useful is their respective commitment to both Christianity and the virtues. MacIntyre writes of Austen, “Gilbert Ryle believed that her Aristotelianism—which he saw as the clue to the moral temper of her novels—may have derived from a reading of Shaftesbury. C.S. Lewis with equal justice saw in her an essentially Christian writer. It is her uniting of Christian and Aristotelian themes in a determinate social context that makes Jane Austen the last great effective imaginative voice of the tradition of thought about, and practice of, the virtues which I have tried to identify.”⁸⁷ MacIntyre then claims that not only does Austen “reproduce” the Aristotelian-Christian tradition, but she “extends” it in three significant ways.⁸⁸ I will note each of these ways and argue that Kierkegaard’s concerns are, if not identical, barely distinguishable from hers. I want to build upon a claim MacIntyre makes himself: that Austen was largely concerned with the ethical and religious edification of her readers. He writes, “Her irony resides in the way that she makes her characters and her readers see and say more and other than they intended to, **so that they and we correct ourselves.**”⁸⁹ If I am right in claiming that Austen’s aims are similar to Kierkegaard’s, though executed in novel-writing instead of philosophy, then perhaps she is not “the last great representative of the classical tradition of the virtues,” but rather Kierkegaard (who was born the year *Pride and Prejudice* was published) is.⁹⁰ More

⁸⁷MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 240.

⁸⁸Ibid., 241.

⁸⁹Ibid., 243 (emphasis mine).

⁹⁰Based upon their interest in the virtues as traits that involve the passions, emotions, and rationality, there are others who might count in this group: Dickens, Trollope, Eliot, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky.

importantly, if we can read them in this way, then we have all the more reason to think that Kierkegaard's edifying approach to ethics (and in particular the virtues) is in fact relevant for contemporary philosophers, at least those sympathetic with MacIntyrean virtue ethics.

Austen's first "preoccupation" involves her exposing counterfeit virtues.⁹¹ Her view of morality, according to MacIntyre, "is never the mere inhibition and regulation of the passions," but "is rather meant to educate the passions."⁹² While their passions manifest themselves in opposite directions, both Lydia and Mary of *Pride and Prejudice* suffer a lack of 'morality's education' of them. Lydia has not only given in to her passions but has cultivated them: "She has been doing everything in her power by thinking or talking on the subject [i.e. romantic pursuits] to give greater—what shall I call it?—susceptibility to her feelings, which are naturally lively enough."⁹³ But Mary is just as guilty of succumbing to improper passions, and in her own reaction to her sister's disappearance with Wickham, Austen exposes a counterfeit Victorian virtue of propriety. Looking for approval from Elizabeth, Mary judges:

"Unhappy as the event must be for Lydia, we may draw from it this useful lesson: that loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable—that one false step involves her in endless ruin—and that she cannot be too much guarded in her behaviour towards the undeserving of the other sex."

⁹¹The notion of counterfeit virtues seems to imply there are genuine virtues, and this in turn raises the question of whether genuine virtues can only be understood as such within a particular context or community, or whether there are objectively genuine virtues. In his consideration of Austen, MacIntyre seems to have in mind the contextual determination of virtues and their counterfeits. In *Dependent Rational Animals* it seems as though the virtues of acknowledged dependence hold without consideration of context. For our current purposes I will withhold concerns about the objectivity of ethics and assume that speaking of virtues *in particular contexts* does not entail moral relativism.

⁹²Ibid., 241.

⁹³Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (New York: Bantam, 1981), 214.

Elizabeth lifted up her eyes in amazement, but was too much oppressed to make any reply. Mary, however, continued to console herself with such kind of moral extractions from the evil before them.⁹⁴

Mary's general rationalistic way disguises the degree to which she is controlled by her own set of passions, which themselves are 'uneducated' by morality, by love's grace and compassion, and instead dominated by judgmental contempt, arrogance, and unforgiveness. That her cold, studious manner has deeper roots than meet the eye is clear from the narrator's description of her in relation to her four sisters: "Mary, who having, in consequence of being the only plain one in the family, worked hard for knowledge and accomplishments, was always impatient for display."⁹⁵ And just as with Lydia, "vanity had given her application, it had given her likewise a pedantic air and conceited manner."⁹⁶

Another counterfeit virtue Austen examines in *Pride and Prejudice* is love. There are countless instances of love that seem to lack any notably Aristotelian or Christian component. There is the lusty love of Wickham and Lydia, Collins's professed love for Elizabeth that dissipates almost immediately (after a dozen proposals), and the twisted parental love of both Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. The characters that strike us as genuinely loving, for example, the Gardiners, exemplify the virtue in both obvious and subtle ways. As an instance of the latter, after Mrs. Bennet publicly chided Elizabeth for turning down Collins's marriage proposal, Mrs. Gardiner "made her sister a slight answer, and in

⁹⁴Ibid., 214.

⁹⁵Ibid., 17.

⁹⁶Ibid.

compassion to her nieces turned the conversation.”⁹⁷ Her genuine understanding of love comes to the surface shortly thereafter when she asks Elizabeth to clarify a description of Bingley’s ‘love’ for Jane. “But that expression of ‘violently in love’ is so hackneyed, so doubtful, so indefinite, that it gives me very little idea. It is as often applied to feelings which arise from an half-hour’s acquaintance as to a real, strong attachment.”⁹⁸ Most of the time Austen’s clarification of virtues—her attempt to distinguish the counterfeit from the genuine—is not so direct, but instead takes place in the lives and events of her characters.

I have already argued that Kierkegaard’s objective in clarifying numerous ethical and religious concepts (including the virtues) has as part of its intention the related interest of exposing counterfeits as well. Certainly his endless criticism of Hegelianism exemplifies this, as does his specific treatment throughout the authorship of different notions of love that get mistaken for Christian love. *The Book on Adler* offers another straightforward example of Kierkegaard’s interest in debunking counterfeits. The concept under consideration there is not a virtue, but rather the religious concept of revelation. Adler is a highly educated country pastor who claims to have had a direct revelation from Christ, but like the state church, Kierkegaard believes this experience is not genuine, and part of the explanation for this mishap is that Adler has a counterfeit (specifically an Hegelian) conception of revelation.⁹⁹ *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

⁹⁷Ibid., 105.

⁹⁸Ibid., 106.

⁹⁹Part of Adler’s experience involved a recognition of how Hegel had come to dominate and contaminate his own view of Christianity, so that to demonstrate his break with Hegel he burns his copies of Hegel’s works. Kierkegaard believes that because Adler’s upbringing in Christianity was deficient, he never fully leaves behind his Hegelianism and that the revelation claim demonstrates this in various ways.

emphasizes that to become a Christian one must have the proper pathos that gets expressed in resignation, suffering, and guilt. But that pathos must be informed by the content of Christianity (its dialectic), which in turns leads to a new pathos (e.g. the consciousness of sin), a genuinely Christian pathos. In the charismatic experience of his alleged revelation Adler obtains a measure of religious pathos, but Kierkegaard argues it is just that: religious. Its generic quality fails to differentiate it from the sort of religious experience possible by members of other faiths. I will not explore Kierkegaard's (or the state church's) arguments for why Adler's revelation is inauthentic, but suffice it to say, Adler lacked the Christian dialectic. Kierkegaard summarizes: "*The fundamental defect is that Magister Adler's theological, Christian-theological education and schooling are deficient and confused and have no relation to his lyrical emotion, while he nevertheless, presumably misled by the idea of being a theological graduate, pastor, philosopher, believes himself able to explain something and is carried away in productivity instead of seeking quiet and education and discipline in the language of Christian concepts.*"¹⁰⁰

Kierkegaard rewrote this book many times and never published it, undoubtedly because he did not wish to embarrass Adler. He makes it clear that Adler's case is not one-of-a-kind, but rather a helpful and accessible example for exposing counterfeit conceptions of Christianity.

The specifically Christian pathos expressed in the consciousness of sin provides a helpful transition to a second preoccupation in Austen's novels. "The counterpart to Jane Austen's preoccupation with the counterfeit is the central place she assigns to self-knowledge, a Christian rather than a Socratic self-knowledge which can only be achieved

¹⁰⁰Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, 111.

through a kind of repentance.”¹⁰¹ Recall Elizabeth Bennet’s stark realization halfway through *Pride and Prejudice*, when she sees her vicious attitude toward Darcy for what it is: “Till this moment I never knew myself.”¹⁰² Kierkegaard’s concern with assisting readers toward self-knowledge is as obvious as the title of one work, *For Self-Examination*, and the similar subtitle of another, *Judge for Yourself! For Self-Examination Recommended to the Present Age*. There and elsewhere Kierkegaard writes scriptural devotions based on a verse in I Peter, “Therefore be sober.” While Kierkegaard expresses his admiration for Socrates who, he notes, “did not know for certain whether he was a human being” and thus devoted his life to self-knowledge and examination, he too transforms the Socratic insight into a Christian one by directing his contemporaries toward a better understanding of and commitment to the ideals of Christian existence.

That a comparison of Kierkegaard to Austen is not far-fetched becomes even clearer in MacIntyre’s third example of how Austen extends the classical virtue tradition. In a few novels (especially *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*) Austen writes about the virtue of constancy, hoping to convey as MacIntyre describes it “that unity can no longer be treated as a mere presupposition or context for a virtuous life.”¹⁰³ For Austen constancy is a virtue that orders a life as *one* life. It involves a depth of character that includes steadfastness and ongoing commitment to one’s ideals both when those ideals are tested and when they are untested. MacIntyre notes constancy’s close, though distinct

¹⁰¹MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 241.

¹⁰²Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 156.

¹⁰³MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 242.

place beside other virtues like patience and courage.¹⁰⁴ In placing an emphasis on a life's having a narrative structure and unity, MacIntyre borrows this notion of constancy from Austen. Interestingly, though, he credits Kierkegaard with having poignantly distinguished between the kind of existence that is fragmented and lacks unity (i.e. the aesthetic) and that which, conversely, can be characterized by unity (i.e. the ethical) grounded in one's "commitments and responsibilities to the future."¹⁰⁵

MacIntyre describes Austen's conception of constancy as "a recognition of a particular kind of threat to the integrity of the personality in the peculiarly modern social world."¹⁰⁶ As we just saw above, Kierkegaard likewise views the penchant for a certain kind of modern reflection as a threat to the integrity of the personality. This threat begins to take shape in speculative philosophy's backward orientation, which turns out to be a kind of aestheticizing of life—both in the sense that it takes up a disinterested spectator's perspective on world history and in the sense (of the existence spheres) that it fragments existence and fails to see it in terms of its unity. The threat to the integrity of the personality funnels down into the leveling of the populace, and Kierkegaard believes this occurs largely through Hegelianism coming from the pulpit. He writes, "an erroneous scholarship has confused Christianity, and from the scholarship the confusion has in turn sneaked into the religious address, so that one not infrequently hears pastors who in all scholarly naïveté *bona fide* prostitute Christianity."¹⁰⁷ The threat gets carried on in the

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

¹⁰⁵Ibid. The theme of the fragmented self drives *The Sickness Unto Death*, which considers the numerous ways in which humans experience despair.

¹⁰⁶Ibid..

¹⁰⁷Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, 174.

rearing of children, so that they are brought up to think that by virtue of being born they are Christians. Kierkegaard explains this common occurrence:

the person who, without having received the slightest decisive impression of the essentially Christian, who from the very beginning is strengthened in the notion that he is a Christian—he is deceived. How in all the world will it occur to him to be concerned about whether he is, or about becoming, what he in his earliest recollection has been convinced that he is as a matter of course? Everything has strengthened him in this conviction. Nothing has brought him to a halt. The parents have never spoken about the essentially Christian; they have thought: The pastor must do that. And the pastor has thought: Instruct the lad in religion, that I can surely do, but actually convey to him the decisive impression, that must be the parents' affair.¹⁰⁸

Here the threat to the integrity of the personality arrives at a very young age, so that, according to Kierkegaard, the essential question to a grown-up Dane, “are you a Christian?” sounds as foolish as if one were to ask “are you a human?” The unified moral tradition of Christianity that, as MacIntyre says, is characterized by a unique set of practices and norms has been contaminated, and the result is the *disintegration* of the personality instead. The disintegration is not apparent given the illusion “that people are Christians—people whose vocabulary is Christian but whose concepts are roughly Hegelian, who discuss Christianity volubly but whose passions, emotions, and practice are left unshaped by Christian thoughts, who subtly defend themselves against the inroads of God’s spirit by evaluating themselves solely with reference to the social herd in which they dwell.”¹⁰⁹ What the illusion hides is precisely the absence of integration of one’s Christian beliefs and commitments with one’s life. And, the illusion precludes the possibility of acquiring the virtue of constancy.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 138.

¹⁰⁹Robert C. Roberts, *Faith, Reason, and History: Rethinking Kierkegaard’s Philosophical Fragments* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 3.

The threat to the personality of which MacIntyre speaks can be understood as an analogue to the threat to the category of individuality discussed above, which coextends with the realized, though subtle threat to Christianity *itself* borne in speculative philosophy. Roberts offers a helpful summary that captures Kierkegaard's Austenian aims of helping readers grow in virtue: "So two things need to be understood: where the reader stands in human existence — what his or her character is — and what Christianity is. Kierkegaard devotes his writings to increasing both self-understanding and understanding of Christianity, because this combination of epistemic accomplishments constitutes the crisis that Kierkegaard seeks to precipitate in the individual lives of his contemporaries."¹¹⁰ MacIntyre describes Austen's style as ironic comedy, where her moral perspective and narrative genre coincide.¹¹¹ For Kierkegaard, this combination represents the very integrity that he finds lacking not just generally in the leveled public, but especially in the authors of his day whose literature and lives coexisted disharmoniously.

Conclusion: "Radical Virtue Ethics" and the Possibility of Edification

Let us conclude by recapitulating *how* Kierkegaard uses philosophy in the service of edification. I have argued that those generally sympathetic to MacIntyre's interest in the virtues—both their clarification and communication—can find in Kierkegaard an example of someone who does both things well. Let me strengthen this argument by considering Kierkegaard in light of radical virtue ethics.

¹¹⁰Robert C. Roberts, "Søren Kierkegaard as a Philosopher of Religion," in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Paul Copan and Chad V. Meister, forthcoming, 5.

¹¹¹MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 243.

We saw above that there can be different instantiations of ethical reductionism and that virtue can play this role just as duty or some beneficial state of affairs can. In “Virtue Ethics: Radical or Routine?”, David Solomon performs some much-needed conceptual clarification by distinguishing between a reductive approach to the virtues, “routine virtue ethics,” and a nonreductive approach, “radical virtue ethics.”¹¹² He lists ten themes unique to radical approaches to virtue thought, and I will mention a few as jumping off points for my conclusions about Kierkegaard.

3. A turn for an understanding of the ethical life to **concrete terms** like the virtue terms in preference to more abstract terms like ‘good,’ ‘right,’ and ‘ought.’
4. A **critique of modernity** and especially the models of practical rationality that underlie such Enlightenment theories as Kantian deontology and Benthamite consequentialism....
5. An emphasis on the **importance of community**, especially local communities, both in introducing human beings to the ethical life and sustaining their practice of central features of that life....
6. A focus on the importance of **the whole life** as the primary object of ethical evaluation in contrast to the tendency of Kantian and consequentialist theorists to give primacy to the evaluation of actions or more fragmented features of human lives.
7. An emphasis on **the narrative structure of human life** as opposed to the more episodic picture of human life found in neo-Kantian and consequentialist approaches to ethics....
10. A special emphasis on **thick moral education** understood as involving training in the virtues as opposed to models of moral education frequently associated with neo-Kantian and consequentialist moral theories which tend to emphasize growth in autonomy or in detached instrumental rationality.¹¹³

One could write at length about how Kierkegaard performatively endorses each of these themes. Let us briefly consider the first and last points.

¹¹²David Solomon, “Virtue Ethics: Radical or Routine?” in *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, ed. Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski (New York : Oxford University Press, 2003), 57-80. According to Solomon, Michael Slote offers a routine virtue ethics, while MacIntyre, Anscombe, Nussbaum, and Foot are cited in the radical camp. Let me distinguish up front Solomon’s radical virtue ethic from Slote’s agent-based virtue ethic, which denies any independent bases for the virtues (opposite MacIntyre’s account of practices and traditions).

¹¹³Ibid., 68-9.

Roberts has compared Kierkegaard's writing on virtue and other concepts to a "microscopic travelogue" that carefully charts a diamond's intricacies and facets from countless different angles. This metaphor points to Kierkegaard's nonreductive approach to ethics. Just as a diamond has multiple facets and each facet looks a certain way from a certain angle, so do concepts have multiple facets that appear in unique ways from unique angles of other concepts. We can understand each concept within an ethical or ethical-religious tradition as its own diamond (say in a jewelry box) worthy of its own exploration. By exploring the richness of the individual concepts of a particular ethical tradition *philosophically*, one not only subjects the beliefs of that tradition to rigorous reflection, but one enables the possibility for correction and strengthening of that community through some sort of moral education.

In a distinction he makes between 'upbringing' and 'instruction' as two methods of rearing children, Kierkegaard exemplifies the radical virtue ethicist's concern for thick moral education. Just as many contemporary virtue thinkers tend to think that more can be learned from classical ethics and pedagogy than its modern counterparts, so too does Kierkegaard view the deficiency of modern (moral) education as absent in ancient Greece.

On the whole it is certainly characteristic of our age that the concept of *upbringing*, at least in the understanding of antiquity, is disappearing more and more from the speech and lives of people. In antiquity the importance of a person's upbringing was valued very highly, and it was understood as a harmonious development of that which will carry the various gifts and talents and the disposition of the personality ethically in the direction of character. In our day there seems to be an impatient desire to do away with this upbringing and on the other hand to emphasize *instruction*.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴Kierkegaard, *The Book on Adler*, 133.

The replacement of holistic education that has as a significant aim the cultivation of virtues by a model that presumes a rationalistic conception of human nature and education rings eerily true in our age as it does for Kierkegaard's. It is, in fact, the lack of care for the soul, plus the general absence of passion and presence of religious confusion that causes Kierkegaard to see the need for such an upbringing—both his own and his contemporaries'. And, these factors contribute to the important question of *how* he aims to accomplish these ends,¹¹⁵ a question we largely discussed in chapters three and four.

Because Kierkegaard's educational aims are not merely instructive but holistically oriented, his philosophy is not just informative but edifying, and thus intended as transformative. The balance of the pathetic-dialectic that characterizes his conception of becoming a Christian also characterizes his practice of *communicating* becoming a Christian. His writing is equal parts substance and style, content and method, where the former involves careful, analytical rigor and the latter uses the poetic to call forth personal interest, conviction, and the corresponding pathos of the concept under consideration. We should especially take note of the importance of 'mood' in his work. In *The Concept of Anxiety* Vigilius Haufniensis shows how mood informs conceptual analysis, so "when sin is brought into esthetics, the mood becomes either light-minded or melancholy;" "in metaphysics, the mood becomes that of dialectical uniformity and disinterestedness;" "in psychology, the mood becomes that of persistent observation, like the fearlessness of a secret agent."¹¹⁶ Even this pseudonym who carries out a

¹¹⁵That is, Kierkegaard's work aims to care for the soul, instigate passion, and mitigate confusion.

¹¹⁶Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 14-15.

“psychologically orienting deliberation” admits that the proper mood for discussions of sin “is earnestness expressed in courageous resistance,” an existential approach to the concept that employs reflection **to get closer, not further** from its appropriation in life.¹¹⁷ Kierkegaard’s work steadily exudes the mood of earnestness, which is confirmed by his referring to the authorship as his own upbringing by Governance.¹¹⁸ This fact lends further support to an earlier claim made about the purpose of Kierkegaard’s use of pseudonyms, whose moods often seem far from earnest. He employs them, in part, to separate his own personal mood of ethical seriousness or earnestness from a whimsical or otherwise unserious mode of presentation that he hopes will appeal to the aesthetic reader (think again of the concurrent publication of upbuilding discourses with pseudonymous writings and the notion that to be in control of irony you must have an ethical position¹¹⁹).

In the preface to *Morality*, Williams suggests that one of the reasons contemporary moral philosophy is boring is that it fails to pay sufficient attention to style, where “to discover the right style is to discover what you are really trying to do.”¹²⁰ Kierkegaard’s style, one he believed necessary given his audience and message, may perhaps be the most relevant and yet difficult facet of his work for contemporary philosophers to adopt. Nonetheless, if with Kierkegaard we view philosophy not as the authority on ethical truth but instead as a tool to clarify and communicate ethical truth, and if with MacIntyre we

¹¹⁷Ibid., 15.

¹¹⁸See part two, chapter three of *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*.

¹¹⁹See the final section of Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Irony*, “Irony as a Controlled Element, the Truth of Irony,” and chapter eight of John Lippitt’s *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard’s Thought*.

¹²⁰Williams, *Morality*, xix.

view convergence¹²¹ in ethics as an ongoing project, one whose primary locus is a particular moral community,¹²² then we can affirm the Socratic (and Austenian and MacIntyrean) concern for persuading *our own* Athenes to care for virtue and, likewise, view edification as a legitimate end for philosophical ethics. *Then* we may appreciate Kierkegaard—at least, for his captivating and engaging way of communicating ethical truth, and at most, for his substantive examinations of countless ethical concepts.

¹²¹Thus far I have avoided a discussion of moral relativism and how that might affect one's expectations of convergence. Williams rejects moral relativism yet remains pessimistic about convergence. I believe it is possible to maintain belief in the objectivity of ethics while also agreeing that convergence in ethics will not arise like it does in the hard sciences. Seeking to find convergence in one's own context as a way of moving forward to conversation with other moral communities is not an admission of moral relativism. The point of this way of thinking is to suggest that a priori approaches to ethical truth have not gotten us very far, and that it is more productive to explore the moral phenomena that accompany our everyday existence. Again, this does not preclude the possibility that a community's moral claims can be supported by beliefs about their objectivity or the objectivity of a metaphysical or religious backdrop. In fact, this is precisely my argument *against* Williams. Rather, it is a way of redirecting our approach to the project of philosophical ethics.

¹²²Kierkegaard himself doubted that genuine communities existed in his age. However, even though Christendom seemed to preclude genuine Christian community, its retention of Christian terminology was clearly enough for Kierkegaard to direct his work toward it. After all, his 'attack' of the Church comes from within, or to put it differently, his intention is to strengthen (i.e. edify) the Church—ultimately to facilitate genuine community (while, for example, Nietzsche's 'outside' attack aims to destroy Christian community). Thus, despite Kierkegaard's pessimism about genuine moral and religious communities, we should not view his attention to the individual or the individual reader as exclusive of the notion of community.

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